

Learning from Letters: 19th-Century Letter Writing Activity

Background

When was the last time you mailed a handwritten letter to someone? Or have you ever? Through much of the 20th century, writing and sending letters were the primary means of communicating over long distances. Letters are **primary sources**, or first-hand accounts of an event. They act as time capsules, giving historians a little insight into what life was like at the time they were written. In addition to providing glimpses of everyday life, letters can help us piece together significant historic events and even give us an idea of the author's thoughts, feelings, and beliefs.

For example, at the time it was written, the **Travis Letter** was a desperate call for reinforcements. With a few thousand Mexican soldiers surrounding the fortified compound, Alamo defenders were significantly outnumbered. **William B. Travis** likely intended his words to reach the largest possible audience and to communicate the utmost urgency. While the letter represents the characteristic defiance of the **Texas Revolution**, it also reveals much about the siege. Because so few survived the **Battle of the Alamo**, historians must use artifacts like the Travis Letter to piece together the events. An important piece of information is included in the letter's postscript, where Travis indicates how people in the Alamo compound sustained themselves throughout the siege: with "80 or 90 bushels [of corn] and ... 20 or 30 head of Beeves."

In another example, **David Crockett** writes to his brother in October 1835, informing his brother that he intends to explore Texas and explains the route he intends to take. Interestingly, he also expresses intentions to return to Tennessee after exploring Texas. Because of this letter, historians know some of Crockett's motivations for coming to Texas that perhaps without it, we would not know. Correspondence like this and other primary sources from the time are vital to gaining insight into the perspectives of Alamo defenders and piecing together a cohesive Alamo history.

Procedure

In this activity, you will learn how to write a letter in the style of the 1800s. Before starting, roll the dice for each letter element to decide what to include and write about. Once you have identified the content of your letter, compose it following the rules and etiquette outlined in the Letter Writing Template. And who knows? In three hundred years, maybe people will be reading your letter, too.