

## **Making Sense of Letters and Diaries**

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(From the Making Sense of Evidence series on *History Matters: The U.S. Survey on the Web* located at <http://historymatters.gmu.edu>)

In an attic or an online archive, coming across personal correspondence and diaries can open a tantalizing window into past lives. This guide offers an overview of letters and diaries as historical sources and how historians use them, tips on what questions to ask when reading these personal texts, an annotated bibliography, and a guide to finding and using letters and diaries online. Steven Stowe teaches history at Indiana University, Bloomington. He is the author of *Intimacy and Power in the Old South* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987) and, most recently, editor of *A Southern Practice: The Diary and Autobiography of Charles A. Hentz, M.D.* (University Press of Virginia, 2000).

### **Getting Started: What Kind Of Source Are Historical Letters and Diaries?**

Few historical texts seem as familiar – or as compelling to read – as personal letters and diaries. They are plain-spoken, lively, and full of details. Both letters and diaries seem to emerge *directly* from the writer, fresh and intimate, bringing us close to who that person was. Both satisfy us by showing how people in the past shared many of our hopes, worries, and common sense. At the same time, both fascinate us by revealing differences between times past and our own time. They make us curious to explore differences in language and expressive styles, in what people felt needed saying and what did not. These differences in turn point to historical changes and continuities in self, social relations, work, and values, which personal letters and diaries capture with special sharpness.

Although diaries and letters from the past are immediate, homely, and thus comfortable to read, they are not as simple as they might first seem. And although diaries and letters are similar in important ways, each form has its own purposes and possibilities. Compared to many other kinds of written sources, both letters and diaries seem at first to be strikingly "private" kinds of writing. They give us the past from individual points of view. And yet, on closer look, almost any individual diary or letter resembles others from the same time and place. All were created and exchanged by classes of literate people who had the time and means to reflect and correspond. Consequently, in any given era, diaries and letters tend to follow certain shared forms or styles of what was considered to be appropriate or satisfying to express. Thus, although "private" in one sense, letters and diaries also may be seen as following certain widespread, "public" cultural conventions of expression (for example, diarists addressing their diaries as persons) and topic (letter-writers talking about weather or health). For historians, then, it seems best to think of these writings as being *personal* rather *private* texts, inspiring us to look for commonalities among the individual examples.

The history of each form, especially since the seventeenth century, helps us sharpen a sense of how they are personal but not really private, and it helps us see how letters and diaries differ from each other as texts. The diary is a relatively recent form in the culture of western Europe and early America, arising in large part from a Christian desire to chart the story of individuals' spiritual progress toward God. Such religious diaries broadened over time into the nineteenth-century practice of using diaries to

record personal feelings and explore intellectual growth. Diaries thus were born of self-examination but expanded into a means of self-reflection and self-fashioning (experimenting with who one wants to be in the world). By the 1830s, diarists freely employed many of the literary devices of novels and other kinds of imaginative writing, especially writing by and for women. These aspects of diary-keeping continued into the twentieth century with an increasingly secular accent on psychological self-scrutiny and on using the diary as a means of emotional well-being and self-discovery.

In contrast, the letter, as a personal missive addressed to a particular recipient, is a much older form, dating from antiquity when ambassadors from one kingdom to another sent dispatches home, and, later, when travelers of various kinds reported on their journeys. Scholars have observed that many literary forms including official dispatches, newspapers, scientific studies, and even the modern novel arose from the letter's particularity and sharp attention to place and character. (Even a diary may resemble a letter to oneself.) By the eighteenth century, European and American political and social commentators often framed their published remarks as "letters" to the public. This became a lively way to tell others about one's interests or culture, and a flexible form for inscribing literate, bourgeois values in the education of youth, as publishers brought out instructive volumes of famous men's letters and schools taught young American women and men proper ways to put into writing the relations of courtship, family, and business.

Overall, then, letters and diaries have certain points of difference as personal texts. Letters are written to a certain particular other; they implore a dialogue. Diaries are written for oneself or an imagined other; they play on the satisfactions of monologue. Letters are shaped by the contingencies of distance and time between writer and recipient; they become over time scattered in various places and must be "collected" to form a single body of writing. Diaries are shaped by moments of inspiration but also by habit; they are woven together by a single voice and usually are contained between covers. At the same time, letters and diaries share certain features. Diarists wrote letters and many letter-writers kept or read diaries. Their voices mingled and mixed. Both forms play with the tension between concealing and revealing, between "telling all" and speaking obliquely or keeping silent. Both inscribe the risks and pleasures of expression and trust. We will consider all of these further as we look at how historians use diaries and letters, keeping in mind as we use them that neither we nor people in past times know all there is to know. We need to collaborate.

### **Getting Started: Why Do Historians Value Letters and Diaries?**

For historians who use letters and diaries, the pleasures of reading them translate into specific reasons for why they are valuable windows for looking into the past. Both kinds of personal texts rely on narrative, or storytelling, something which gives historians a useful, inspiring, and sometimes challenging threshold for the story they want to tell. Too, most personal texts have a certain open, candid quality which contrasts with the highly conceptualized and self-protective language of more "official" documents. Finally, although only literate people kept diaries and exchanged letters, both forms were important to a wide variety of people in the past – rich and not-so-rich, old and young, women and men – and thus diaries and letters are among the most democratic of historical sources.

With these things in mind, and before we consider particular strategies for reading personal letters and diaries, it is helpful to recall how both forms take their shape from

"public" or cultural conventions of expression, and from the aims of each individual diarist or letter writer. (We will be looking mostly at nineteenth century texts, as they set the tone for modern letters and diaries, and yet they also retained elements of earlier forms.) Each letter or diary is the result of how a particular writer modified or "bent" the conventions at hand. In this sense, the conventions might be likened to a script and each diary or letter to an actual performance. The historical richness of these texts is found precisely in the friction between the general form available to all writers and individuals' use of it for their own purposes. For example, lovers courting each other in the 1850s wrote love letters which tracked along certain expressive paths. They employed certain forms of address, wrote on certain topics, and flirted in certain ways. In a very real sense, they "fell in love" in part by inscribing identities for themselves as desirable lovers, showing that they knew the "rules" of the game. In fact, it was common for a lover to take pleasure in her beloved's letter (and to share it with her friends) simply because it followed good form. Parents did much the same thing with the dutiful letters their children wrote to them, and even business letters followed certain expected forms which smoothed the path for financial transactions. Many diarists, too, acknowledged the importance of form by expressing the hope that their attempts at journalizing would live up to the expressive potential of diary-keeping. In all these ways, the shared attention to form sheds light on shared historical experience.

Moreover, letters and diaries each are given common shape by widely shared life events. In family after family, letters tend to cluster around certain key events: births, separations over time and distance, sickness and health, courtships and marriages, and deaths. Diarists, too, are apt to take up their pen in the face of life transitions, mapping the course of the ordinary or, quite differently, reporting unusual events, such as a long journey or the coming of war. These latter "diaries of situation," as Steven Kagle calls them, sometimes end when the situation resolves. However, in other instances, the diarist extends her writing into a life-long practice, caught by the pleasure of recording her days. As people wrote about events – meeting someone new, the coming of a storm, a death in the family – they inevitably wrote about their relationships with others. And writing to or about others, they wrote themselves anew each time. Although they may not have thought about it this way as they wrote, they nonetheless were making for themselves a personal presence in the wider world of the written word typical of their time and place. [Steven E. Kagle, *Early Nineteenth-Century American Diary Literature* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986), p. 3.]

Thus, the historical value of reading diaries and letters involves understanding the significance of how individual writers employed, experimented with, or altered the conventional forms alive in their time. Perhaps more than any other kind of historical text, the personal writing we are considering reveals how people both embraced and resisted the time and place in which they lived. Their personal motives for employing either form – the emotional and intellectual energy infusing the form with life each time it is written with a new subjectivity – suggest much about how people in the past made their cultures, but made them from the materials at hand.

Thus, John Mack Faragher has shown how American women moving West in the nineteenth century wrote conventional letters home, filled with good wishes and narrative descriptions of travel, but also infused them with longing and loss beyond what we might expect. Judy Litoff and David Smith similarly have shown the range of feeling and depth of commitment in the letters of World War II families, and Elizabeth Hampsten has sounded the depths of midwestern farm women's personal writing, rich with the desire to tell, yet paradoxically inscribed "read this only to yourself." Particular

letters and diaries have changed or added to our way of looking at aspects of the past. Publication of the letters of Abigail and John Adams, for instance, helped us to understand Abigail's importance as an intellectual influence on her better-known President husband, as well as revealing that domestic life was a thoroughly political realm in Revolutionary America. The diary of an "ordinary" midwife, Martha Ballard, permitted Laurel Thatcher Ulrich to argue for the importance of women's medical work in colonial American communities, and how this world helped shape ideas about – and the practice of – care-giving, science, and community values among New Englanders.

### **Questions to Ask: What Are the Characteristics of Personal Texts?**

The best overall strategy in reading personal texts is to have patience for their homely and fragmentary nature, to be sympathetic but critical of the writers, and to be ready to be surprised. There are particular strategies, though, which help structure this journey. Before you begin reading closely, size up the basic, objective characteristics of the texts in front of you. Consider, first, their materiality — that is, the characteristics of diaries and letters as objects. When we hold them in our hands, personal texts from the past make an impression even before we see what they have to say — by the texture, condition, and heft of the paper, by the style of the handwriting (akin to a tone of voice), and by the way these things suggest the writer's care or haste, depth and surface, and what has happened to the folded sheets of a letter or the bound volume of a diary in the time between the last inscription and now. The materiality of letters and diaries thus suggests questions not only about the circumstances of their creation, but also about social class (is the paper the ordinary lined, "blue" sheets of common mid-nineteenth century use or is it embossed and edged?), gender (women and men were schooled to have very different handwriting) and about the presence or absence of an array of nibs, papers, envelopes, letter cases, letter clips, writing desks, and other objects associated with writing among well-to-do Americans of the era.

Considering the materiality of personal texts leads us to think not only about the commercialization of writing and its varied social settings, but also about how Americans cherished letters and diaries as objects, secreting diaries away in hidden places (or leaving them out to be "discovered"), keeping letters, with "the bodily trace of a correspondent" clinging to the handwriting, in William Decker's words, in one's pocket or under one's pillow. The physical object itself came to represent the absent person's touch and nearness. Nathaniel Hawthorne became a famous author, but he spoke like countless other correspondents when he wrote to his sweetheart Sophia Peabody in 1840 that "the only ray of light" in his dreary day "was when [I] opened thy letter....I have folded it to my heart, and ever and anon it sends a thrill through me....It seems as if thy head were leaning against my breast." [William Merrill Decker, *Epistolary Practices: Letter Writing in America before Telecommunications* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), p. 40; Nathaniel Hawthorne to Sophia Peabody, April 21, 1840, in Thomas Woodson, L. Neal Smith, and Norman Holmes Pearson, eds., *Nathaniel Hawthorne/The Letters, 1804-1864*, 4 vols. (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1984-1987), vol. I, p. 449.]

These aspects of personal texts open up the key distinction between an original manuscript and a published form of the text. Of course, if the text in front of you is not an original manuscript, you cannot personally size up its materiality, although sometimes editors of texts will tell you about the size and shape of the original, or include images of

sample pages. Many Web presentations of letters and diaries include digital representations of manuscripts as well as typed transcriptions, giving users a useful sense of handwriting and pagination. If the text in front of you is in manuscript, there is a greater chance (though no guarantee) that it exists as the author left it. If published, whether on paper or electronically, then we have to consider that portions of it may have been altered, amended, or left out completely, either by the author or by an editor.

In short, it is important to ask who, including the author, has been involved in creating this text now in front of us. What can we know of their motives and intentions? Family members, for instance, are well known for removing embarrassing or unflattering portions of diaries and letters before they agree to have them published. But other editors, too, make judgments about readability or relevance which lead them to change the original text. There are many excellent published diaries and letter collections, of course, which have been edited with faithfulness to the original and — very important — with candor about what has been omitted or changed, and why. But, as historian C. Vann Woodward discovered when he edited the manuscript of Mary Boykin Chesnut's Civil War diary, some editors of published diaries have greatly altered the texts. Woodward found that the editors of two previous, much-used editions of the Chesnut diary had changed many of her words, moved entire passages from one place to another, and even wholly made up other passages. Reputable editors in print or on the Web do not do this, of course, and they are clear about changes generally considered appropriate: correcting spelling, "modernizing" capitalization and punctuation, and, more invasively, cutting out "repetitive" passages for reasons of space. Such carefully (and openly) edited published texts can be relied upon in a general way, but if a certain diary or collection of letters is a centerpiece of your project, you should look at the original if possible.

A related way to initially size up the basic dimensions of the collection of letters or a diary, particularly if you are working with the original manuscript, is to ask questions about its completeness and inclusiveness. Some of these questions can be answered by a quick scan of the pages; others must wait for further research on your part. Ask, is this volume the complete diary or are there other volumes or entries elsewhere? Is this letter a draft or "practice" letter, or is it the one actually mailed? Who saved the diary and why? Who collected the letters and why? As Janet Altman observes, letters may have been collected for opposite reasons, "either to prevent further reading, or to extend the circle of readers." Is there evidence of other readers (family members, archivists) handling or marking the text? Has the diarist herself added retrospective marginal notes (many diarists look back and criticize their younger selves or annotate their observations), scratched out passages or cut out pages? [Janet Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982), p. 108.]

A sense of basic chronology is important, too: what is the period of time covered by the text? It helps you to plan your reading to quickly scan the pages ahead to see if the number of diary entries or letters changes because of major historical events. For instance, if an American text includes the years 1861-1865 it is likely that the number of letters will increase and the diary entries cluster around the events of the Civil War. Does the diarist clearly distinguish one day from another? How frequent are the entries? Collections of letters, even if they are complete or nearly so, differ in terms of their timing and sequence. One collection of 100 family letters, for example, might cover only six months, with letters flying fast and thick; another family's 100 letters, though, might stretch over 10 years, imparting a very different sense of what we can expect to know about the immediacy and texture of the correspondents' lives. It is worth a quick look ahead, too, to see if one correspondent's letters dominate the collection, or if the letters are more like a dialogue or

even a full conversation among many people. Along the same lines, if the writer regularly notes the place from which he is writing ("Provincetown, Rhode Island") it is useful to scout in advance any upcoming changes ("Athens, Greece"). And it is worth leafing quickly through a set of manuscript letters (or, if possible, page through electronic facsimiles) looking for markers of important events: letters acknowledging a death in the family, for instance, often were written on black-edged paper in the nineteenth century; letters announcing a marriage tend to be embossed or differently sized – both easy to spot in a sheaf of papers.

### **Questions to Ask: Who Are the Characters and What Is the Plot?**

As you get acquainted with the general characteristics of the personal texts in front of you, begin to get a sense of what we can think of as the cast of characters and the main "plot" that inspired the writing. In a diary, we must depend on the diarist to introduce us to the people in his life. It often is a useful measure of his approach to diary-keeping to see whether family and friends are introduced or whether it is left to us to figure out who they are. Letter-writers seldom introduce themselves and others, because, unlike most diarists who at least imagine an "outside" reader, few correspondents thought we would be reading their mail. Nonetheless, it helps to try at the outset to get a sense of who friends and family members are and how they address each other, especially if you are using unedited manuscript or facsimile letters. Some families rarely use given names in either salutation or signature. Your reading of these letters will go slowly until you learn, by context and handwriting, to determine the identity of "Dear Son" or "Your loving daughter." Similarly, many upper class families employed odd nicknames ("Knobby" or "Bootsie"), and often adolescent girls in the nineteenth century addressed each other as characters from literature or classical mythology ("Rowena" or "Athena"), making it a challenge sometimes to figure out who is who.

In terms of "plot," a quick, broad survey of a collection of letters or a diary can be helpful in revealing whether a particular circumstance inspired the writing, and thus whether there is a large-scale, dramatic "story" holding the pages and the correspondents together. Many Civil War diaries, for instance, like those of Virginians Lucy Breckinridge and Lucy Buck, begin and end with the war, thus introducing us to a writer who inscribes her life as a story in neat parallel with the national conflict and then exits. Similarly, letters from African American soldiers fighting against the Confederacy in Edward Redkey's collection, or those from New England mill women in Thomas Dublin's volume, clearly are inspired by the writers' desire to map the huge changes in their lives. Quite differently, other diaries – and even more letters – are plotted around the sheer ordinariness of the writer's life, such as the journals of Maine midwife Martha Ballard in the early nineteenth-century and of North Carolina farmer Basil Thomasson at mid-century. In either case, though, surveying the text for a sense of the main narrative thread is a good way to prompt questions about the text as you begin to read more closely.

And while you are at it, keep an eye out for language that puzzles you. When first looking at nineteenth-century letters, for instance, many modern readers are puzzled by some correspondents' interjection of "D.V." in the midst of certain sentences expressing hope ("by now, D.V., you are safely at home") when these letters are not the recipient's initials. Then, finally, one writer solves the puzzle for us by spelling it out: *Deo Volente*, God willing. Such puzzles will help you to be alert to the fact that the meaning of certain words or phrases is coded (to say in the mid-nineteenth-century that a woman had "taken

a cold" almost always meant that she was pregnant) or has changed over time ("to have conversation with" a man or a woman in the early nineteenth century was a phrase which usually meant "to have sex with," whereas the word "intercourse" did not have a sexual connotation until the end of the century).

## **Questions to Ask: How Does the Writer Portray Events, Relationships, and Self?**

Developing a sense of the plot, cast of characters, and language of a given diary or collection of letters is the surest way to begin reading in greater depth. Now we can think further about strategies for moving into the pages of a personal text, entry by entry, letter by letter, looking for how this writer gives us a particular lens through which to see the past by creating herself as a writer at the same time she portrays others and the world around her. Consider again the observation, made earlier, that personal texts are fueled by accounts of key events that occur over time, events which the writer feels are important enough to express: a marriage, a disastrous storm, a daughter leaving home, the routine of work. But events are only a starting point. The tale of events inevitably reveals a pattern of key *relationships* – the writer's friendships, kinships, acquaintances and strangers. These relationships, in turn, shape our understanding (just as they shaped the writer's) of which events are important to tell. A central strategy for us as readers of a text, then, is to understand how the writer joins events and relationships together, each giving the other substance. We can see events and relationships as a kind of dynamic logic – a dialectic – of personal texts which, over time, reveals patterns of choice and characterization by writers, giving each writer a certain style or voice, a distinct way of representing self and others. It also shows that the meaning of events is not static, but changes as correspondents change over time.

In certain ways, personal letters reveal the dialectic of events and relationships more clearly than do diaries. Most family letters are driven by "news," and so they are rich with events which most writers try to characterize in detail. Because there is a distinct "other" being addressed – the recipient of the letter – the writer openly adapts his account of events to the differences among his various correspondents, thus giving us different interpretations of the same event as well as a different sense of the writer's own intellect and feeling. For example, medical student Joseph Jones responded quite differently in 1853 to letters from his father and mother. Each of his parents had written to express anxiety over the fact that Joseph was cutting up cadavers as part of his anatomy course; each feared he would injure himself morally by disrespecting the human body. Jones defended his study of anatomy (and at the same time inscribed gendered differences in his relationship with his parents) by arguing substantial points of science and religion with his father, while assuring his mother that nothing substantial was at stake. Moreover, letters are especially sensitive to the absence of the other, and to the distance between correspondents which letters are meant to bridge. Although all writers aim to bridge the gap, some emphasize the gap while others emphasize the bridge. This often made the exchange of letters itself an event worth remarking upon, as lovers or parents and children blamed each other for neglect or praised each other for timely and satisfying letters. [For Joseph Jones' account of his anatomy studies, see several letters to his parents Charles Colcock Jones and Mary Sharpe Jones between December 10

and 18, 1853, in the Jones collection, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University, New Orleans, La.]

Although the number of letters we have in front of us, and their spacing in time, obviously determine what we can know of both events and relationships, you can develop a set of questions for any group of correspondents: which events – trivial or monumental – do correspondents choose to share with each other? Are any events or topics ignored or skirted? Who among the correspondents seem the most intimate and who seem most at odds? How does each writer seem to value formal respect and careful language, on the one hand, and humor, exaggeration, and slang, on the other? Does one individual seem to be the central person in the correspondence, and, conversely, is there an individual everyone seems to regard as shy or silent? Which relationships seem most stable over the course of the correspondence, which most volatile, and how do events in their lives reveal these qualities? How do all of these relate to the identities of the various correspondents, in terms of gender, class, age?

Many of these questions can be asked as well of a diarist's account of events and relationships. Diarists who begin writing because of dramatic changes in their lives often write in a way as informative and clear as any letter-writer penning a letter to friends or family. On the other hand, the diary is a more introspective form than the letter. This sometimes means that events and relationships are more difficult to figure out. But once we do, a diary, compared to a set of letters, often permits close attention to mental as well as social events and allows for more examination of the quality of the writer's relationships with others. Moreover, a diary is more likely to turn into an extended narrative akin to a work of fiction or a memoir. Because the diarist herself is her only immediate audience, she can freely explore different expressive possibilities, as Steven Kagle and Lorenza Gramegna point out, recombining events and relationships into a full, satisfying story where "the frightening can be made to seem exciting or comical and the improbable hope, possible." For instance, Sarah Morgan, a young Louisiana woman who admitted being terrified by an encounter with enemy Yankee troops during the Civil War, nonetheless wrote in a spirited, offhand way about her adventures – even her flirtations with U.S. soldiers – when she turned to her diary. New York civic figure George Templeton Strong, also during the Civil War, publically expressed his assurance that the Union would stay united, but wrote bigoted passages in his diary about Irish immigrants whose loyalty he doubted. The point here is not that diarists fabricate things (though some might) but rather that a diary is a "safer" place than a letter in which to write one's innermost thoughts, with the diarist more likely to experiment with ideas and views (and writerly identities) he would not risk in a letter. [Steven E. Kagle and Lorenza Gramegna, "Rewriting Her Life: Fictionalization and the Use of Fictional Models in Early American Women's Diaries," in Suzanne L. Bunkers and Cynthia A. Huff, eds., *Inscribing the Daily: Critical Essays on Women's Diaries* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), p. 41. For Strong, see his *Diary, 1835-1875* ed. Allan Nevins and Milton Henry Thomas, 4 vols. (New York: MacMillan, 1952); his anti-Irish sentiment appears throughout, but especially in light of the 1863 New York City draft riots. For Sarah Morgan, see Charles East, ed., *Sarah Morgan: the Civil War Diary of a Southern Woman* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), especially the entries for 1863.]

Most diarists and correspondents at least allude to ways that events and relationships either change or keep their continuity over time. Although writers of letters usually mark time in obvious ways (one letter calls for another, and most correspondents tally letters sent and received) diaries have a more elastic relation to time, stretching one event over several pages, disposing of another in a single sentence. One diarist might



write to give an even texture to all that happens to her, fitting events and relationships into a sort of emotional and temporal "middle ground" throughout the diary. Another diarist, though, might write in a perpetual state of excitement, making the ordinary seem a tale of drastic change. Although some diaries may seem like autobiographies in their approach to time, contextualizing everything in terms of "I," it is well to remember that for all of their expressiveness, diaries do not, like autobiographies, look back on the past. Diaries draw their energy from the way the writer searches for meaning while in the thick of changing events and relationships which no one completely grasps. The diarist searches to give the mass of associations and trail of events meaning by finding a consistent voice, whereas the letter writer seeks continuity in the flow of letters, in the personal ties they represent as well as for the news they bear.

Because diaries more than letters privilege experiments in subjectivity, key questions to ask of a diarist are those that help us understand not only the events and relationships captured in the diary's pages, but also the diarist's relative eagerness to explore the possibilities of diary-keeping. Who is the "other" the diarist seems to be writing to: a friend, a wiser self, a future self? What other literary forms does a given diary most resemble, e.g., a letter, a novel, a ledger? What kinds of events, times of the day or week, and emotional states seem to motivate the diarist to write? Does the diarist always write in the first person or does he sometimes distance himself by avoiding the "I?" Which people in the diarist's life appear most frequently in her pages, and why? Do any or all of these features of a given diary change over its course, and if so, in what way?

### **Questions to Ask: How Does the Writer Use Literary Conventions?**

Considering events and relationships as the substance of both diaries and letters thus helps us explore more specifically how both kinds of texts are built from a kind of writerly tension between the chosen form (letter or diary) and the way each individual writer is able to "bend" the form to serve his purposes. The form adopted by the writer allows him to draw on tradition and inventiveness both — to speak not as an isolated individual but as a dutiful or loving correspondent, as a perceptive or incisive or ironic diarist. Using the form, then, the writer takes on a social identity and speaks with the particular authority or emotional intensity conferred by embracing the form as his own. Consider the way Abream Scriven, an African American man living in bondage in Georgia, began a letter to his wife in 1858: "Dinah Jones My Dear wife I take the pleasure of writing you these few [lines] with much regret to inform you that I have been sold....I am here yet but I expect to go before long." At first, Scriven's "pleasure" at telling his wife such bad news seems paradoxical. On second look, though, it is clear that Scriven was not voicing his personal happiness, but relying on a letter's conventional opening phrase to give appropriate substance to what he had to say. The phrase "I take the pleasure" cushions the bad news, but just as importantly it gives the news the weight it deserves. [Abream Scriven to Dinah Jones, September 19, 1858, in Robert S. Starobin, ed., *Blacks in Bondage: Letters of American Slaves* (New York, New Viewpoints, 1974), p. 58.]

At the same time, most writers have an irrepressible urge to express themselves beyond the limits of any given form, fitting the form to their own intentions, arguments, or mood as they struggle to give expression to the relationships and events of their lives. A young man named Campbell Bryce, courting Sarah Henry in 1840, after writing many classic courtship letters to her filled with "elevated" thoughts and verse, at last attempted to break out of the form, which he began to see as forcing him to "labour too much in

attempting to write faultlessly." He urged them both to find instead "an easy style [which] can only be attained by ease and freedom of thought." Diarists, too, pushed the limits of the diary form, though not without worries. Beatrice Webb experimented with giving her thoughts free rein in her diary in the 1880s, and yet she backed away from saying certain things, comparing unwelcome thoughts to a "ruffianly-looking vagrant" who should not be allowed into her pages. To "dwell on" certain kinds of thoughts, "even with disapproval," she decided, "might give [them] an ugly significance." In any case, the historian's strategy in reading is to keep in mind that writers constantly bend the expressive forms which both entitle them to speak and think, but also impose subtle limits. [Campbell R. Bryce to Sarah M. Henry, October 1, 1840, Bryce papers, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, S.C. (hereafter SCL); Beatrice Webb diary, 1882, quoted in Harriet Blodgett, "Preserving the Moment in the Diary of Margaret Fountaine," in Bunkers and Huff, *Inscribing the Daily*, p. 157.]

In the main, then, letters may generally be seen as a less elastic form of expression than diaries because more open to judgment from readers; letter-writers often apologize for a "poor letter," whereas diarists are not so tied to acknowledging "good" form (though many become frustrated the limits of all written language to express what "really" needs saying). By the same token, because diaries permit writers to go more deeply into events and relationships, they have a greater potential than letters both to reveal and conceal more about the writer's self and world. There is more potential for insight, but also more potential for puzzlement and obscurity — theirs and ours. With these things in mind, the historian's task is to follow the interpretive path opened up by the creative tension between form and using the form.

### **Questions to Ask: How Can We Widen the Context of Letters and Diaries?**

A final strategy remains in our reading of diaries and letters. This strategy seeks corroboration and context for personal texts by stepping back from them and asking broader questions of time and place. Sometimes this is difficult to do. It is easy to grow accustomed to living "inside" the world created by people's letters and dairies, inside the events and relationships which you have worked to take as seriously as your own. But now the goal is the important historical one of understanding how the passage of time mattered to them and to us, and to explore how our understanding of their lives might be deepened by seeing them in a wider historical frame. Indeed, as Marilyn Motz observes of women diarists of the nineteenth-century who read widely and shared ideas, "Far from being provincial, these women used that most private form, the diary, to establish themselves as citizens of the world." First, ask in what ways the writers themselves seem most aware of a larger context and of time passing, not only in terms of days and weeks but also in larger spans. Do they characterize their own time as an era or a turning point in historical time? If so, how? If not, what might this suggest about their sense of their place in history? Certainly diarists during war time often reflect on momentous changes they anticipate will happen. Does the writer show an interest in possible future readers? Does she speculate about the future in any way that sheds light on her sense of being "from" a given time and yet having a grasp on change? [Marilyn Ferris Motz, "The Private Alibi: Literacy and Community in the Diaries of Two Nineteenth-Century American Women," in Bunkers and Huff, *Inscribing the Daily*, p. 191.]

Along these same lines, you will want to corroborate whatever you can of writers' assertions of fact, depending on how deeply your research takes you. If a correspondent

mentions seeing President Wilson on a train in Baltimore, Maryland, on a certain day in October, 1917, it is important to see if you can find other sources which corroborate Wilson's presence there on that day. Or, if a diarist makes a claim about urban violence in New York City in the summer of 1863, it is useful to consult other sources — official documents, newspapers, other observers — to give perspective to what the diarist says. Again, depending on how substantial you want to make your study, these sources can expand outward indefinitely — to such varied sources as census reports, government documents, photographs, maps, oral histories — and other diaries and letters. Two important things happen when you seek corroboration and context. You widen the angle of historical vision, creating not only a more complete picture of "what happened," but also deepening the interpretation of all similar happenings. And you get a sharper sense of how observant or reliable (or not) is your diarist or letter-writer, and thus a clearer idea of her as a historical observer and actor.

As you do these things, of course, read the texts with specific reference to *your* knowledge of a larger or different context. Read "from the future," so to speak. Although you have spent time entering into people's personal worlds in the past — understanding their language, concerns, relationships, and events — it is now important to re-assert your own time-bound perspective as a complementary but critical check on the view from the past. Emily Dickinson's much-quoted remark that "a Letter always feels to me like immortality because it is the mind alone without the corporeal friend" wonderfully evokes a certain timeless quality of letters. But it is up to us to interpret letters and their writers as fully as we can in term of their own era, even if they did not. Do the diarists and letter-writers know about and respond to what you know were the far-reaching issues of their day? If your diarist is a non-southerner traveling through the South of the 1850s, for instance, does he mention slaves and slavery? If your letter-writers are well-to-do, urban women corresponding in 1920, do they mention the new women's suffrage? If they live in St. Louis during the cholera epidemic of 1849, do they mention it? Ask "how" they talk about it, as well: curiously? empirically? dismissively? And if the writers are silent about such "big" events known to you, it is useful to ask why this might be, what it might mean, and how you can go on to deepen your own knowledge through further research. The object, of course, is not to condescend to them but to use your own particular historical context and skills to give further shape to theirs. [Emily Dickinson, quoted in Decker, *Epistolary Practices*, p. 41.]

### **Resources to Use: Model Interpretation: Letters of Emily Cumming and Henry Hammond, 1859**

Reading particular, "sample" letters will show how our strategies can be put to use. Emily Cumming and Harry Hammond were young, well-to-do Georgians who fell in love in 1859. Their letters to each other are an excellent way to see how two people employed the highly stylized correspondence of this century's courtship to speak about events and relationships in their lives, and to experiment with who they wished to be. In doing so, they eagerly used but also gradually broke free from the conventions of letter-writing form — with much commentary on it — and thus established a more intimate conversation. The writing is in this way typical of a great many courtships. The Hammond/Cumming letters number about two dozen, and there are references to others which now seem to have been lost. The letters date from April to November 1859 and include ones from both Emily and Harry, who lived about 100 miles apart, she in

Augusta, the daughter of a lawyer, he in Athens where he taught at Franklin College. Each came from a prominent family and both describe themselves (and each other) as introspective and socially shy. [The letters of Harry Hammond (1832-1916) and Emily Cumming (1834-1911) are in the Hammond-Bryan-Cumming papers, SCL. These letters also are available on microfilm, in Kenneth M. Stampf, gen. ed., *Records of Ante-Bellum Southern Plantations from the Revolution through the Civil War* (Bethesda, Md.: University Publications of America), Series A, part 2, reels 20-24, and several of them are included in whole or part in Carol Bleser, ed., *The Hammonds of Redcliffe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981). Emily and Harry's courtship moved quickly and they married at the end of 1859, survived the Civil War, and lived out their lives near Beech Island, S.C.]

An early letter from Harry to Emily echoes many similar letters from young men to the women they hope will become their sweethearts.

My Dear Miss Cumming:

Ever since I came back from Augusta, I have been taking all the holiday I could to think over and congratulate myself upon the pleasant hours which your charity allowed me to spend in your company while I was there. I have been eating your candy. And I have been reading the novel (Kingsley's) you lent me. Besides this nothing but work and ennui have filled up the last ten days. You will pardon me then for expressing the overflowingness of my gratitude to you. Indeed so much has this feeling taken possession of me, that I have more than once had a mind to turn down this page of my heart keeping there what was already written on it, and filling the other side with altogether new characters. So that some day, when I looked back in review, I might find one which contained nothing but what was pleasant. However, I could not keep my resolution, for when I had read the novel, and when I found the candy was going fast, and when I discovered that my recollections were continually fluttering up and weaving themselves in the future, I was obliged to yield to the necessity of again approaching you to seek for alms, which I now most ungratefully but humbly do. [Harry Hammond to Emily Cumming, April 7, 1859; included in Bleser, *Hammonds of Redcliffe*, pp. 54-56.]

One sign that this letter was written early in a courtship (besides his calling her "Miss Cumming") is that, on a quick reading, it is not clear just what Harry is saying. This is because the most important events related here are not material, but emotional. He's been reading and eating candy; but the point is, he has been thinking of her. The daily events themselves are trivial. He writes them as a scaffold for his feelings, obliquely but deftly told. The letter thus lingers over "small" events in order to imply a much more significant, hoped-for relationship.

Harry does this, too, by portraying Emily and himself in a certain way. In the letter-writing style of would-be lovers in this time and place, Harry, as the man, initiates the correspondence, but in the character of a humble supplicant. She is portrayed as his benefactor, a kind of lofty philanthropist: she has "charity" to dispense, "alms" of an emotional kind. She is everywhere for him: in his recent past (their visit), his present (his thoughts) and his imagined future (in the way he is "obliged" to call on her again). She

will have the power if a courtship follows, the letter assures her. As so powerful a person, in fact, she is obliged to be magnanimous and hear him out. Although his prose is calm and his voice hushed, Harry reveals himself to be no passive beggar. He is full of gratitude and yet he is willing to risk acting "ungratefully" by asking for more. He seems to be needy, and yet he is self-possessed enough to "congratulate" himself on having spent time with her. He can be mildly but pointedly directive: "you will pardon me." On closer look, his level language is shot through with passionate words: "overflowingness," "possession," "fluttering up," "yield." Most revealingly of all, Harry compares his emotions, his "heart," to a letter. So openly are his feelings for her written on his heart's "page," he tells Emily, that he considered "turn[ing] down this page" and starting again. But it is too late. He already has written it.

If Emily had not responded, their courtship would have faltered. But she wrote back to him in a similar fashion; they saw each other occasionally, and their relationship grew from – was made by – the letters themselves. There are other letters like this one in which Harry declares he is a "poor" supplicant, Emily protests that she cannot be "worthy" of being his ideal, and the courtship stays within the nineteenth century's powerful script of women and men's essential difference. But, gradually, by the summer of 1859, a new way of writing opens up to Emily and Harry. They begin writing more about everyday events in a way which reveals to each other that they are not ideal lovers, but real people. For instance, she tells a self-deprecating tale of being forced to go "visiting" around the neighborhood with her "inexorable" mother when she actually despises such ladylike obligations. He gives comical accounts of himself at awkward dancing parties at the college, and he tells her his doubts about his teaching. They write of books, of mutual friends, of nature. Throughout, they write about writing. The act of writing, and of imagining the other's presence through the physical letter, grows stronger as the chief theme in a relationship never free from the physical distance between them. Letters and writing are a way to possess each other and to imagine losing each other, too.

So Harry reads one Emily's letters and writes of how he tries to "form a picture of you. I can just catch a glimpse of you standing by Maria, and opening that yellow envelope, then a moment more at your writing desk, and even then the representation becomes dim, for I have never seen that desk, and then a curtain a hundred miles thick falls between us." Writing of their relationship broke through the curtain, but did not make it vanish altogether. Emily replied in the same manner, at once obliquely erotic and yet safely screened by words and, in a way, by the material letters themselves. "My letters," she told Harry, "have two meanings to me and I can connect no other with them, first I write them because it is delightful to feel that the words which I am one day scratching away here, are the next [day] to bring to you, if not much meaning, and interest, at least a faint idea of how constantly I think of you, and love you, but most of all they mean that you will with this idea fresh in your mind, after reading them, sit down and with a few touches of that magic pen of yours, make me the most elated of little women."\*

As a means of making a relationship between the sexes, then, courtship letters demanded an imagination and effort beyond casual meetings and face-to-face talk. They became a lasting commentary on the lovers, on love, and on how letters entitled – and also limited – women and men to speak as worthy and passionate. In this way, letters add to our historical view of gender – of women and men and the differences thought to belong to their different "natures." Letters reveal how important it is to think about gender in the past not as a status, but as a process. Sometimes courting couples ran aground on their words: what they said to each other somehow did not bridge the

distance between them, or their words unraveled to reveal some incompatibility or misconnection. For others, courtship moved quickly to marriage, and, notably, there was no "marriage correspondence" which took the place of courtship's inscription of need and devotion. But, in any case, letters show relations between the sexes actually being shaped.

Emily and Harry went somewhat beyond the typical "script" of courtship correspondence, testing and bending the limits of letter-writing. Most striking is how they moved from writing about ordinary events to write about ordinary feelings, stripping away the poses of courtship and along with it the desire to appear flawless. They wrote instead a more candid dialogue about their fears and their flaws. Thus, such letters add to our historical understanding by showing us the power and the limitations of the Ideal Woman and the Ideal Man in this time and place. Emily risked admitting how difficult she found it to be an "ideal" woman and write proper letters. She wanted to be simply candid, she told him, but confessed that after writing a letter to him "it afterwards frightens me what may be the impression....Are you certain you did not say after reading my last letter, 'What bathos!'" She wanted to be, but feared being, "frank" and "unexpectedly open" in her letters. Harry admitted much the same thing. By writing to her, though, he discovered that love was not at all like it appeared in novels, not "climax;" rather "true love is like life...that unfolds and strengthens hour by hour."\*

There is more to these letters, of course, and more to Emily and Harry: a shared sense of humor, a shared wariness of their powerful fathers, much talk of enjoying nature and reading. We can step back a bit and ask some questions about the wider context of these lives, which imply where we can go for corroboration of the social and cultural picture painted by this correspondence. For instance, although Emily and Harry achieved trust in the face of cultural barriers between women and men, their letters suggest the possibility of the opposite. There was a considerable distance (of several kinds) between the sexes in the upper class, rural South in the nineteenth century. We might compare this southern context to the experience of other elites elsewhere in the United States, or to the experience of other southerners, black and white, who were not so well-to-do. Asking further questions suggest other ways of opening up the context. What do such letters imply about growing up male or female in this era? What family and childrearing experiences might we discover that would help explain the rituals of courtship? What do courtship letters suggest about how southerners of the slave-owning class shaped identities by relying on certain benefits that slavery gave to them: their literacy, their sense of class power, and (as Harry and Emily hint) the use of their human property to deliver letters and wait upon replies? How might other cultural forms which inscribed gender and class – novels, conversation, tableaux – have joined with letters to articulate the broad, literate power of the southern upper class? These and other specific questions concerning society and culture in mid-nineteenth-century Georgia further frame the letters of Harry Hammond and Emily Cumming so that their historical world becomes, for us, even more solid and real.

### **Resources to Use: Model Interpretation: The Diary of Ella Clanton Thomas, 1848 and 1865**

Reading two brief passages from a nineteenth-century diary will illustrate how a diary's account of events and relationships opens up a similar but not identical window on the past. Ella Clanton was 14 years old when she began keeping a journal in 1848, something which she would continue to do with a few breaks until 1889. Ella, from a

well-to-do, slave-owning Georgia family, was educated in a women's academy and in other ways brought up to be a feminine "ornament" to her class and its power, as well as an educated, practical partner to a man from a similar background. With her marriage to Jefferson Thomas in 1852, and with the birth of her first child which quickly followed, Ella launched herself into the comfortable, domestic life as a wife and mother that she had been prepared to expect.

But the Civil War, the end of slavery, and the economic and social upheaval which followed, utterly transformed Ella Thomas's world. Her diary thus maps the South's social upheavals during these years, as well as giving an account of a woman writing her way to a steady, self-possessed identity as an actor in a wider social world than that of home and farm. Thomas ultimately worked for women's suffrage and became active in civic affairs, especially temperance reform. Her diary, which she seems to have kept only semi-secret, was addressed both as a personal companion and as a record for her children. Over the years, Thomas re-visited the volumes at various times, annotating them with marginal notes but not changing the original text. Her entries show her becoming ever-more reflective and self-critical as she learns to see racial, political, and gendered aspects of her culture which her sunny, privileged girlhood had obscured. [Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas (1834-1907) was born and lived her entire life near Augusta, Georgia. Her 13-volume diary is in the William Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, N.C., and available on microfilm in Anne Firor Scott, ed., *Southern Women and their Families in the 19th Century* (Bethesda, Md.: University Publications of America), Series H, reels 27-29. Selections from her diary are in Virginia Ingraham Burr, ed., *The Secret Eye: the Journal of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, 1848-1889* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).]

First, the teen-aged Thomas, entries for September 28 and 29, 1848:

Yesterday after breakfast [sister] Mary and I went over to Mrs. Berry's to spend the day. We took Amanda [her slave] with us as a protectress. I gathered some Horse and whortle berrys on the road (sparkleberries I meant). I wore my eternal tissue silk and black silk cape. We had a lunch of cordial and cake ham and biscuit – and apples besides cheese. Mrs. Berry and I were weighing cotton (By the by I never done it before). While I was adding upp the weights Mrs. Griffin rode upp and took dinner.... [September 29] I have been busy writing and indulging in my usual day dreams. As I have no books to read I expect my time now will be spent rather lonely and dull but I hope Cousin Emily's and Eliza's presence and company will enliven us a little – this evening after dinner I dressed again and fixed my hair. I then walked in the garden a while and gathered some flowers to dress the pots. I see that I have passed this day occupied in writing this journal over. When I came home last Monday night I wrote on the leaf [i.e., page] that I had used at Grandma's. The next night I wrote in an old copy book which I use for scribbling. The next night the same and so on. As I wished it all connected I copied the writing off [in this volume]. [Burr, *Secret Eye*, pp. 72-73.]

Here teenaged Ella records daily events in a way that suggests both youthful self-absorption and the sense of security she felt in her world. Although she fears "lonely and

dull" days, her voice is not unhappy. Like other girls her age, she is concerned with clothes and day dreams. She engages in the feminine art of arranging flowers, but also notes (with a touch of pride) her first time assisting in the weighing of cotton – one of the many tasks undertaken by adult women who oversaw much of plantation management. In all, Ella's frank, descriptive account of her day's events suggests that her identity as a young, elite woman was something that her diary-keeping did not probe very far. Most of her early entries, like this one, simply accept the racial and social order as something natural and obviously benign. The rural countryside seems safe and easily traversed, populated by kin, familiar neighbors, and a "protectress" female slave whose guardianship seems unquestioned.

But if merely noting events, and not pausing to question or characterize relationships, seems wholly satisfying for Ella, diary-keeping itself is not so transparent. To some degree, this young woman realizes that she has the leisure ("I have passed this day") to write at length about her doings, and then to re-write. Reading this page of her manuscript diary, we realize that there were other, earlier versions – "the leaf that I had used at Grandma's" to jot down notes, and pages in "an old copy book" which she then re-copies. We hear about these layers of words because, even as a youth, Ella Thomas was concerned not only with recording events but with the act of writing itself. Still, we will never know if she altered her words in re-copying them, or if she added or left something out. In this sense, her diary, like her relations to others, simply is. It gave shape to her day and timing to her activities. It did not lead her to look inward very often. The cotton, the black silk cape, the slave Amanda, and the day dreams all existed on the same plane.

Seventeen years later, Ella Thomas, now 31 years old, inscribed her life in a notably different way amidst the wreck of the still-crumbling Confederacy. Still accomplished at writing about her daily routine with sharp immediacy, Thomas adds to this a much firmer grasp on the diary as a tool for her self-awareness, and for her sense of a wider social world. Less than a month after Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox, Thomas wrote:

[May 8, 1865] Hereafter I shall put my Journal in a safe place for I intend to express myself fearlessly and candidly upon all points. Last week was the turning point, the crisis with me. 'The flood which taken at the tide' would have led to feelings of union brotherhood and kindly feeling – Today I am more intensely opposed to the North than at any period of the war – We have been imposed upon – led to believe that terms of Treaty had been agreed upon which would secure to us a lasting and honourable peace....Mr. T. [her husband] appeared cast down, utterly spirit broken yesterday when the news [of emancipation] first reaching him and when I would hint at a brighter sky would mock at such anticipations...and was astonished at the buoyancy of temperament which would permit me to indulge in anticipations founded upon such a plan, but I cannot say 'Why art thou cast down oh my soul?' for indeed I am not cast down. On the contrary I am not the person to permit pecuniary loss to afflict me as long as I have health and energy. As to the emancipation of the Negroes, while there is of course a natural dislike to the loss of so much property in my inmost soul I cannot regret it – I always felt that there was a great responsibility – It is in some degree a great



relief to have this feeling removed. For the Negroes I know that I have the kindest possible feeling – For the Yankees who deprive us of them I have no use whatever. I only hope I shall see very little of them – Yesterday Mr. Thomas unfastened Turner's [their son] battle flag from the staff and I will put it away as a memento of the time when he was a marker in the Wheeler Dragoons. Who knows, perhaps someday it may be used again. [Burr, *Secret Eye*, pp. 264-265.]

Much has changed since all that Thomas had to worry about was a boring day, and signaling the change is her changing sense of her diary. Here the diary is no longer just a pastime, but an intellectual and emotional instrument touching "upon all points" of her views and her identity. It entitles her "fearlessly and candidly" to express herself in a way she apparently does not elsewhere. And yet these strengths of the diary are undercut by the volume's physical vulnerability to the world. Its sheer materiality gives it a kind of life apart from her will, and she resolves to keep it safe from others. A near-paradox thus appears which suggests the curious nature of diary-keeping: she aims through her diary to be exceptionally open and honest, and yet wants no one else to know about it. Her resolve to be candid before the world must be kept secret.

Important events and relationships in Ella Thomas's world have grown to include husband, property, and home, as we might expect of a mature woman. But the war has pushed her world's boundaries even farther. The events that matter now include national politics and a war-ending treaty which she feels the United States has rebuffed. Her opening expression of intense opposition to Yankees is not merely reflexive hatred, but relies on her wide-angled vision of the nation missing a "tide" of opportunity which would have carried the warring sections of the country to reconciliation. Even more strikingly, not only slaves but slavery now appears in Thomas's story of her days. Once there were only individual slaves in her pages, her "protectress" Amanda, for one, and a few others who appear regularly throughout the pre-war diary. Now, however, there is an institution whose demise needs to be grasped. Thomas acknowledges the monetary loss that emancipation will bring her and her husband. And yet she feels relief – though it is a relief hidden in her "inmost soul" – at the end of white women's particular, day-to-day "responsibility" for keeping the huge structure of human bondage serving slave owners' needs.

Thomas fits all of these observations into a passage whose main theme is the temperamental difference between herself and her husband upon the defeat of the Confederacy. Hers is the voice of an individual in possession of herself and, despite the war, in command of a moral energy locked up in the powerful inscriptions of her culture – she quotes Shakespeare and the Bible – which mend and inspire. The sharply contrasting image of her "spirit broken" husband underscores her sense of herself as full of determination. Indeed, there is evidence of tension in her marriage at the end of this great war. Her husband mocks her for her "buoyancy," and strikes their son's battle flag which flew in their yard. Ella saves the banner and "put[s] it away." The flag is a memento, but not only that; it "may be used again."

Taking both the youthful and mature passages of Ella Thomas's diary together, the Civil War emerges as the over-story of her life, shaping her accounts of home, family, society, self. Diaries such as Thomas's permit us to see huge events like war on the "ground level," as consisting not of battle strategy and capitol politics, but of local, homefront experiences that cut into the fabric of people's daily lives. Too, as we see

Thomas struggle to come to terms with her depressed husband and her financial losses, we can understand how many women of her social class and generation resolved to keep their view of the war alive – to "use again" their memories of the conflict.

So we might ask, moving from this diary to a wider historical context, what aspects of the war's great change seem most specific to Thomas's class, race, and region? That is, how differently do we suppose the "same" large-scale events of warfare affected a woman Thomas's age living in the North? How might we expect the same war's end to have shaped the life of someone like Amanda, once a slave, now free? One change that occurred in the lives of many women like Thomas was a greater involvement in political affairs after the war, along with changes in gender relations which gave women a greater social voice and, for many, greater independence from men's paternalism. What aspects of these marital and gender relations might we expect to see in legal sources, newspapers, or novels? Finally, just as a diary leads us to ask these social questions, it also leads us back to its personal realm – as a place where a writer fashions a self through her writing. Certain themes reappear in Thomas's nearly life-long diary: being female, a mother, a wife; being socially prominent, a Christian, a southerner. We can use the diary as a stepping-off point to ask about what Thomas and other women like her were reading and what they talked about in their letters, and how these texts might give us different angles of vision on her as a person. What elements of voice and language persist in their inscribed selves, and which ones fall away over time? And we can ask about silences: what events and relationships do not come to light in these texts, and what might be the reasons no one found a way to say them?

## **Resources to Use: Letters and Diaries Online**

### **Abraham Lincoln Papers**

Library of Congress, American Memory Project

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/alhtml/malhome.html>

This collaboration with Knox College Lincoln Studies Center offers approximately 54,000 digital images and 3,500 annotated transcriptions of documents relating to President Abraham Lincoln's life and career, including incoming and outgoing correspondence. This collection was originally gathered by Lincoln's son, Robert Todd Lincoln.

### **The African American Odyssey: A Quest for Full Citizenship**

Library of Congress, American Memory Project

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/aohtml/exhibit/aointro.html>

More than 240 items, including 20 letters and diaries presented as digital reproductions and transcribed excerpts, augment a concise narrative of African-American history. The site explores black America's quest for political, social, and economic equality from the early national period through the twentieth century. The exhibit is organized into nine chronological periods and documents contributions of African Americans of all classes, including political leaders, artists, writers, and soldiers.

### **Do History**

Film Study Center at Harvard University

<http://www.dohistory.org/>

This site explores the remarkable eighteenth-century diary of midwife Martha Ballard. The site offers two versions of the 1400-page diary, facsimile and transcribed full-text; the

latter is searchable by keyword and date. It also examines how historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich pieced together the diary to write the book *A Midwife's Tale*. Two "Doing History" exercises allow visitors to analyze Ballard's notes about two controversies.

### **First-Person Narratives of the American South**

University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, Libraries

<http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/fpn.html>

Features 100 texts relating to the culture of the American south in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Focusing on the voices of women, African Americans, laborers, and Native Americans, the site offers a variety of documents, including personal accounts, letters, and diaries. The materials are searchable by keyword and arranged into author, title, and document-type indexes.

### **Free Speech Movement: Student Protest, U.C. Berkeley, 1964-65**

University of California, Berkeley, Bancroft Library

<http://library.berkeley.edu/BANC/FSM/>

The Bancroft Library has put its entire archive of material on the Berkeley Free Speech Movement (FSM) online. Printed material includes 55 letters to and from FSM activists, as well as 400 letters from FSM activists to Judge Rupert Crittenden, who presided over their trials.

### **Prairie Settlement: Nebraska Photographs and Family Letters**

Library of Congress, American Memory Project

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/award98/nbhihtml/pshome.html>

This collaboration integrates two Nebraska State Historical Society collections that illustrate the story of settlement on the Great Plains from 1862 to 1912. The approximately 3,000 pages of family letters describe the trials of establishing a homestead in Nebraska and everyday life on the Great Plains as they follow the Uriah Oblinger family's sojourns in Indiana, Nebraska, Minnesota, Kansas, and Missouri. They discuss such topics as land, work, neighbors, crops, religious meetings, problems with grasshoppers, financial troubles, and Nebraska's Easter Blizzard of 1873. A 1000-word essay describes the letter collection and the lives of the principal correspondents and offers 12 images of family members and documents. Biographical notes of about 30-50 words are also available for more than 80 of the people who corresponded with the Oblingers or who were mentioned in the letters.

### **Surveyors of the West: William Henry Jackson and Robert Brewster Stanton**

New York Public Library Digital Collections

<http://digital.nypl.org/surveyors/>

This site presents the journals of two men who surveyed the western states in the second half of the nineteenth century. William Henry Jackson was a photographer, artist, and writer who traveled along the route of the Union Pacific Railway in 1869. Jackson's diary describes how he took and developed photographs during the expedition. Robert Brewster Stanton was a civil engineer who surveyed canyons in Colorado for the Colorado Canyon and Pacific Railroad Company between 1889 and 1890. Four volumes of his typed field notes are available as images.

### **Thomas Jefferson Papers**

Library of Congress, American Memory Project

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/mtjhtml/mtjhome.html>

Digitized images of approximately 27,000 documents in the Library of Congress, the largest collection of original Jefferson documents in the world. Includes correspondence, commonplace books, financial account books, and manuscript volumes—approximately 83,000 images. It is organized chronologically and is searchable by keyword. The documents are only presented as page images.

### **Valley of the Shadow**

Edward L. Ayers, University of Virginia

<http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/vshadow2/>

This searchable archive of thousands of pages relating to two communities – Staunton, Virginia, and Chambersburg, Pennsylvania – before, during, and after the Civil War includes more than 600 letters and diaries. These are divided into three separate time categories: Eve of War (<http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/vshadow2/letters.html>); War Years (<http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/vshadow2/cwletters.html>); and Aftermath (<http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/vshadow2/cwletters3.html>).

### **Women's Studies Manuscript Diaries**

Schoenberg Center, University of Pennsylvania Library

<http://www.library.upenn.edu/etext/collections/diaries/index.html>

This site contains digital images of six manuscript diaries written from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, primarily from the northeastern U.S.

## **Resources to Use: Annotated Bibliography**

### **Major Works Cited or Quoted**

[Adams, Abigail, and John Adams], *The Book of Abigail and John: Selected Letters of the Adams Family, 1762-1784* ed. L. H. Butterfield, Marc Friedlander, and Mary-Jo Kline (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975).

Selected correspondence of two accomplished letter writers of the Revolutionary years, with politics, domestic life, and gender perspectives stitching everything together.

[Breckinridge, Lucy], *Lucy Breckinridge of Grove Hill: the Journal of a Virginia Girl, 1862-1864* ed. Mary D. Robertson (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994).

The wartime journal of a young planter class woman in southwestern Virginia, especially telling of a woman's experience of waiting to hear war news from afar. Her entries blend a young woman's concern with friendships, reading, and gossip with a dawning sense of nationalism and southern distinctiveness.

Buck, Lucy Rebecca, *Sad Earth, Sweet Heaven: the Diary of Lucy Rebecca Buck during the War Between the States, Front Royal, Virginia, December 25, 1861 - April 15, 1865* (Birmingham, Ala.: Cornerstone, [1973]).

A Shenandoah Valley woman in her early 20s, whose diary records military action constantly spilling over into domestic life. Buck's diary-keeping almost exactly coincides with the duration of the war.

Altman, Janet Gurkin, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982).

A very useful guide to thinking about letters and letter-writing in general, raising issues of how the reader and writer interact through the letter, how letters both create and bridge gaps of distance and time, and how letters differ from related forms of writing.

Dickinson, Emily, *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958). The poet's collected letters, a good example of how such collections over a long period of time resemble a diary's account of the writer's changing perspective on her life.

Dublin, Thomas, ed., *Farm to Factory: Women's Letters, 1830-1860*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

Correspondence home from young New England women working in the textile mills. The letters are filled with youths' ambitions, accounts of hard work, hopes for family, and, sometimes, criticism of factory work routine.

Escott, Paul D., ed., *North Carolina Yeoman: the Diary of Basil Armstrong Thomasson, 1853-1862* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996).

One of the comparatively few nineteenth-century diaries – published or manuscript – written by a non-elite man. Thomasson records his views of his farming practices and economy, his neighbors, religion, and the coming of the Civil War.

Faragher, John Mack, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979).

A path-breaking historical analysis of settlers moving West, discussing distinctions between women's and men's immigrant experience based on the different ways they wrote letters about it.

Hampsten, Elizabeth, *Read This Only to Yourself: the Private Writings of Midwestern Women, 1880-1910* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).

Close and sensitive readings of the letters of ordinary North Dakota farm women, with generous examples from their correspondence, on topics ranging from cooking and the weather to sex and death.

Hawthorne, Nathaniel, *The Letters, 1804-1864*, ed. Thomas Woodson, L. Neal Smith, and Norman Holmes Pearson, 4 vols. (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1984-1987). Hawthorne's prodigious output of letters of all kinds, including ones in which he reflects on written correspondence as a literary form. Like Emily Dickinson's letters, this is a long-term collection which amounts to an extended self-portrait.

Litoff, Judy Barrett and David C. Smith, *Since You Went Away: World War II Letters from American Women on the Home Front* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

A lively interpretation of the war's home front and women's experience of war, work, and worry through a sampling of their letters, happy and sad.

Morgan, Sarah, *The Civil War Diary of a Southern Woman*, ed. Charles East (New York: Touchstone Books, 1992).

A young Louisiana woman whose diary of the war is a striking combination of objective description and subjective mood. Morgan's diary is an unusually compelling blend of

sharply seen personal details – conversations, flirtations, destructions – and vivid, sometimes panoramic visions of a society turned upside down.

Redkey, Edwin S., ed., *A Grand Army of Black Men: Letters from African-American Soldiers in the Union Army, 1861-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

Collected war-front letters from black Union soldiers originally published in African-American and abolitionist newspapers during the war, arranged by geographic place and by topic. Interesting for the overlap of letter form and journalism.

Starobin, Robert S., ed., *Blacks in Bondage: Letters of American Slaves* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1974).

Letters of all kinds from African Americans in bondage, to family, friends, and the people who owned them. Selections give a sense of the spectrum of slaves' response to their servitude, from means of adaptation to hints of outright rebellion.

Strong, George Templeton, *Diary, 1835-1875*, ed. Allan Nevins and Milton Henry Thomas, 4 vols. (New York: MacMillan, 1952).

The diary of an upper class New Yorker, one of the best-known journals of the Civil War era, who fervently supported a Union victory and criticized everyone from Lincoln to Lee.

Ulrich, Laurel Thatcher, *A Midwife's Tale: the Life of Martha Ballard, Based on her Diary, 1785-1812* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991).

An award-winning interpretation of a colonial American midwife's diary/log book, with many insights into the historical interpretation of diaries in general. Thatcher seamlessly joins her portrait of Ballard's work and social position to questions of diary-reading and historical method.

Woodward, C. Vann, ed., *Mary Chesnut's Civil War* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1981).

Woodward gives an interesting account in the introduction of his sleuthing work as editor of this complex text (written in part during the war and in part afterwards), including his discovery that earlier editions of this famous South Carolinian's diary had been greatly altered by editors.

### **On Personal Writing in General**

Fabian, Ann, *The Unvarnished Truth: Personal Narratives in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

A wide-ranging look at the nineteenth-century literary impulse to tell about one's own experiences, especially those thought to provoke amazement, pity, or deep concern. A thoughtful study generally of people's desire to write about their lives.

Folkenflik, Robert, ed., *The Culture of Autobiography: Constructions of Self-Representation* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1993).

Eleven essays on the broad and diverse act of self-invention through writing about one's life. Essays range from theoretical studies of autobiographical imagination to cross-cultural analyses of autobiographical writing.

Heilbrun, Carolyn G., *Writing a Woman's Life* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988).

A succinct, ground-breaking discussion of the way in which gender and personal writing intersect time and place, through a look at women's lives in English literature, nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

### **On Letters**

Barton, David, and Nigel Hall, eds., *Letter Writing as Social Practice* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Co., 2000).

In one of the most wide-ranging collections, thirteen essayists look at social settings for the writing of letters, from love letters to prison letters, eighteenth to twenty-first centuries.

Decker, William Merrill, *Epistolary Practices: Letter Writing in America Before Telecommunications* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

An interesting study of how the materiality as well as the intellectuality of letters shaped people's relationships and their sense of social bonds before "instant" communication. There is a usefully broad spectrum of correspondence which includes letters of ordinary Americans as well as those from Ralph Waldo Emerson, Emily Dickinson, and Henry Adams. An excellent bibliography.

Earle, Rebecca, ed., *Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter-Writers, 1600-1945* (Aldershot, Eng.: Ashgate, 1999).

Ten essays examining the letter form and letter writing, ranging from the "paper visits" of the eighteenth century to American mothers' World War II correspondence to sons, government, and each other. A very helpful bibliography.

Emerson, Everett, ed., *Letters from New England: the Massachusetts Bay Colony, 1629-1638* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1976).

Examples from early American history, with a suggestive introduction, bibliography, and note on sources.

Redford, Bruce, *The Converse of the Pen: Acts of Intimacy in the Eighteenth-Century Familiar Letter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

A literary critic's look at the social and intellectual beginnings of the "modern" personal letter. A good blend of historical setting and literary analysis of personal correspondence and its relation to other forms of writing.

### **On Diaries**

Bunkers, Suzanne L., and Cynthia A. Huff, eds., *Inscribing the Daily: Critical Essays on Women's Diaries* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996).

An excellent collection of 15 essays on the broad cultural significance of reading and writing diaries. The topics range from specific diaries to literary theory, with much commentary on historical context throughout. The editors have a lucid, useful introductory essay in which they relate the diary form to other kinds of women's literature and thus to the historical roots of gender. There is a useful, wide-ranging bibliography.

Culley, Margo, ed., *A Day at a Time: the Diary Literature of American Women from 1764 to the Present* (New York: Feminist Press, 1985).

A sampler of women's journal writing, with 29 excerpts covering three centuries. The pace is necessarily quick, but the volume has a thoughtful introduction on the historical significance the diary as a powerful literary form leading American women to become evermore personally and politically conscious. The bibliography is excellent.

Franklin, Penelope, ed., *Private Pages: Diaries of American Women, 1830s-1970s* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1986).

Excerpts from 13 lesser-known women's diaries, including ones written by a 70-year-old Pennsylvanian in the 1830s, a Minneapolis woman coming of age in the 1920s, and a young Japanese-American woman living in the Tule Lake relocation camp during World War II. Franklin has added brief, helpful introductions and "afterwards" sections to frame the women's experiences.

Gannett, Cynthia, *Gender and the Journal: Diaries and Academic Discourse* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

A literary and personal exploration of diaries as spanning popular and academic expression – or, more to the point, diaries are seen as a literary form which opens up specialized academic writing on language and feeling. An emphasis on both women's and men's writing is central to the book, and there is a useful bibliography.

Kagle, Steven E., *Early Nineteenth-Century American Diary Literature* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986).

A suggestive typology, with examples, of the century's diary literature, including diaries of spiritual quest, diaries of travel, diaries of situation, life-long diaries, and philosophical (Transcendentalist) journals. Includes a good bibliography of major nineteenth-century diaries.



Diary entry: Maintaining a diary for organizing your thoughts, emotions, and plans is a great habit. It not only organizes your thoughts and acts like your personal life document, it also acts as a therapeutic outlet. Let's see how a diary entry is made and see a sample of diary entry. A Diary is a journal organized by date where you express your thoughts, feelings, opinions, and plans. So, be as candid as you can. Because this journal is your safe place. (From the Making Sense of Evidence series on History Matters: The U.S. Survey on the Web located at <http://historymatters.gmu.edu>). In an attic or an online archive, coming across personal correspondence and diaries can open a tantalizing window into past lives. Letters and diaries have changed or added to our way of looking at aspects of the past. Publication of the letters of Abigail and John Adams, for instance, helped us to understand Abigail's importance as an intellectual influence on her better-known President husband, as well as revealing that domestic life was a thoroughly political realm in Revolutionary America. This guide offers an overview of letters and diaries as historical sources and how historians use them, tips on what questions to ask when reading these personal texts, an annotated bibliography, and a guide to finding and using letters and diaries online. Steven Stowe teaches history at Indiana University, Bloomington. He is the author of *Intimacy and Power in the Old South* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987) and, most recently, editor of *A Southern Practice: The Diary and Autobiography of Charles A. Hentz, M.D.* (University Press of Virginia, 2000). Published online July 2002. Cite as: Steven Stowe, "Making Sense of Letters and Diaries," History Matters: The U.S. Survey Course on the Web, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/letters/>, July 2002.