



# Letters Through Time

## *Lesson Plan*



## Topic/Grade Level

- Cursive Writing
- Secondary (6-12)

## ELA Standards

- 3-5.F.H.3: Read texts written in cursive.
- 3-5.F.H.4: Use fine motor skills to form legible letters and words in cursive.

## SS Standards

- SS8H5.b: Explain Georgia's role in the Civil War; include the Union blockade of Georgia's coast, the Emancipation Proclamation, Chickamauga, Sherman's Atlanta Campaign, Sherman's March to the Sea, and Andersonville.
- SSUSH9.d: Explain the importance of Fort Sumter, Antietam, Vicksburg, Gettysburg, and Atlanta, as well as the impact of geography on these battles.
- L9-10RHSS1: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.
- L11-12RHSS1: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

## Materials Needed:

- The Atlanta Campaign Primary Source Set (GHS 2841)
- GHS Cursive Alphabet Chart
- Pen and Paper
- Primary Source Analysis Tool
- Projector or photocopies



## Lesson Summary

“Letters Through Time” invites students to respond to a letter written in the past. Correspondence can be a great window into the past, allowing readers today to gain a firsthand perspective of an event or place. In this lesson, students will read and respond to letters written by United States soldiers during the Atlanta Campaign.

As primary sources are an eyewitness to the past, they serve as an integral part of understanding. Before typewritten letters became common in the late 19th century, correspondence was written in cursive or script with a pen and paper. One important skill when using handwritten letters is how to read and learn from them. In this lesson, students will read two letters from the Georgia Historical Society collection of Antebellum, American Civil War, and Reconstruction era documents ([GHS 2481](#)). Gaining eyewitness context from a U.S. soldier during the days leading up to the Battle of Atlanta, students will write a response in cursive and gain a broader understanding of the Atlanta Campaign.

Students will learn how to read cursive, analyze a primary source, and write a response in cursive. This lesson is part of Decoding Histories, the education program of the Community Archives Initiative, which helps students build literacy, critical thinking, and historical inquiry skills while engaging directly with Georgia’s past.

### Introduction

**(part of the lesson that you excite/engage about what is being introduced)**

Working in pairs or small groups, start by asking students to read the July 13 letters from Captain Don Carlos Newton of the 52nd Illinois Infantry Regiment provided in the Atlanta Campaign Primary Source Set. Encourage students to use the GHS Cursive Chart to aid in identifying tricky words.

Using the Library of Congress’s Analyzing Primary Sources Teacher Guide, invite your students to discuss aloud what they observed and what they think about the events written in the letter. Ask your students to work individually to write a response using cursive, asking students to focus on asking questions and what they wonder about the events described in the letter. Ask for volunteers to read their responses aloud. Complete the activity by asking students to read Cpt. Newton’s July 16 response to see if any of their questions were answered.

## Direct Instruction

(part of the lesson where you are teaching the new skill)

Begin with providing students with photocopies or digital copies of the July 13, 1864, letter from Captain Don Carlos Newton to his wife Mary Prindle Newton (a transcript of this letter can be accessed [here](#)). Review or introduce the GHS cursive alphabet chart to help students recognize the letters. As a class, ask students to read the letter aloud, and work together to identify words that might be hard to read.

After students read the July 13 letter, introduce the primary source analysis tool highlighted in the Analyzing Primary Sources Teacher Guide. Make sure students understand the three steps:

- Observe
- Reflect
- Question

## Guided Practice

(part of the lesson where students practice the skill they just learned)

Ask students to split into small groups or pairs to discuss the first two steps of primary source analysis—what they observed in the letter and what they think about the experiences written in the letter. Guiding questions to help get the discussion started include: who wrote the letter, what the letter is about, when it was written, and what was happening during this time? Allow discussion to take place for five to ten minutes.

*Dear Mary*  
*Yours of June 30<sup>th</sup> was reced Yesterday  
at 1/2 from - Pickett, I am very glad to hear of  
receiving my letters written direct I did not*

## **Independent Practice**

**(part of the lesson where students independently practice the skill)**

Following the brief discussion, ask students to independently complete the final step of the primary analysis tool—questioning and wondering—by writing a response to Cpt. Newton in cursive. Have students refer to the GHS Cursive Chart to aid with writing in cursive.

## **Closure**

**(part of the lesson where you complete a quick review of the lesson)**

Ask for volunteers to read their responses. Finish the activity by reading Cpt. Newton's letter to Mary Prindle Newton on July 16, 1864, as a class (a transcription of this letter is available [here](#)). Discuss whether this letter answers the questions posed in the student responses or creates a better understanding of a soldier's experience during the Atlanta Campaign. Ask what was challenging and which strategies helped them read and write cursive.

Primary Source:

Captain Don Carlos Newton to his wife Mary Prindle Newton, July 13, 1864,  
page 1 (GHS 0361)

you + all the camp miss you have 3 miles out to the Pickett-Appomattox  
Crossing for miles & gave him here when he got back 8:30 pm  
Come see the most very best. I don't think the matter is as bad  
from and is over as we have not suffered for food.

Roswell Georgia July 13<sup>th</sup> 1864

Dear Mary

Yours of June 30<sup>th</sup> was reced yesterday just as we came  
off from Pickett. I am very glad to hear you have commenced  
receiving my letters written direct. I did not commence writing  
until I was satisfied you had gone out then as I did not  
know but something might happen that you would not go &  
then you would be awfully disappointed to get your letters at Ba-  
ley the way of St-Jo as you have been to receive them at St-Jo by the  
way of R- Your account of the way you felt at reading the acc-  
-ount of Gen Dodges Battle is amusing. We who were on the ground did  
not know there was a battle going on at all on the 16<sup>th</sup> & only learned it  
when we read it in the papers. There was very heavy Skirmishing but no  
General engagement we advanced our lines but had not the slightest  
Idea that it was a battle. There has not been a fight in this whole  
Campaign any more to be compared to Shiloh or Corinth than a  
Paddy row would be to a heavy Skirmish. We are perfectly  
astounded every few days to read of the tremendous battles that  
The northern papers fight for us & very much surprised to  
think that we know nothing of it at the time. Before you get this  
you will have seen another account of a tremendous Charge of Gen  
Dodge & the 16<sup>th</sup> Corps of which we knew nothing at all we saw none  
of it as it was all done by a Skirmish line of 2 Regiments Cover  
a front of over a mile & the Artillery which Blazed away right  
merrily & we stood back & howled bully to see the Rebs burn their  
holes. You wish old Johnson was dead we dont as we know  
him to be a Coward & one who will run every time before he  
will fight & if he was killed we might get some one who  
would give us fits. Rather Pray that he may be spared

## Primary Source:

Captain Don Carlos Newton to his wife Mary Prindle Newton, July 13, 1864,  
page 2 (GHS 0361)

through this Campaign "we want it so". We are camped on the roughest ground you ever saw. The ravines are tremendous. The hills & "Hay backs" awful. Where I was on Picket I went down down & then I went up up until every cord in my legs cracked. I had a great notion to stay then for fear I would never get any higher. Roswell is a very fine town. I am going over the river to day to look at it. The Rebels have fallen back from the river & our Army is all across & at some points cant be more than 4 miles from Atlanta we are 20 & I am afraid will never see it. For a great wonder for 4 days we have not seen a reb nor heard the crack of a musket. Our picket duty was like going out on a picnic in the woods nothing to smelt or make us afraid. Our boys have been out 4 miles to the front black berrying & saw many a Reb. I am sorry Mary & you feel the heat so. If you think best to go home you can do so at any time I would have preferred to have you stay until my time is out. If you & she should gain in health you had better stay until I write you to come home as I may be compelled to stay until November although I do not intend to if there is any way to get out. I shall try hard. Tell Lucy she must prove her assertion that I promised to come out there & I that I always knew that to be one of the finest business points west of Chicago & have always prophesied a very prosperous future for the town when Rebels & Rebels are no more. Love to all. KISS all the Babies for me. Take all news paper Tales of tremendous battles & fierce charges with a great deal of allowance especially as connected with the 16<sup>th</sup> Corps who are all cowards & believe me your affectionate husband. D C Newton.

Primary Source:

Captain Don Carlos Newton to his wife Mary Prindle Newton, July 16, 1864,  
page 1 (GHS 0361)

Roswell Geo July 16<sup>th</sup> 1864

Dear Mary

Yours of July 3<sup>d</sup> is just Received. I see you are in better health & that May appears to feel better than she did. I want you to stop taking the papers or reading them at all. Nearly all the tremendous battles yet fought have been fought on paper & all your great Scare have been without the slightest foundation. Your imagining me wounded perhaps dying is all "booby" you better imagine it as it is. The 3<sup>d</sup> of July when you were imagining all such things we were 30 miles in the rear laying in the shade eating Apple Dumplings & playing pegs & Whist with Doct Marsh Capt Barts &c. We could occasionally hear Cannonading way in the distance but no for danger we were in about as much as the bird that floats the air. The 14<sup>th</sup> we charged & took a line of works but had only 2 men slightly wounded out of nearly 400. So you see my chance is as 1 to 200 which is as good as it is at home. Since that time to the present the 16<sup>th</sup> we have hardly heard a gun fired. our boys go wandering over the Country for 4 or 5 miles in our front after berries & forage just as they are a mind to. Melcott & 3 or 4 other boys went out yesterday & got as many as 20 <sup>lbs</sup> of fine berries & gave me about 5 <sup>lbs</sup> for which I took off my hat & very Politely thanked them & we had Blackberry Dumplings for Supper & Blackberries @ La Sugar & water for Breakfast & are

Primary Source:

Captain Don Carlos Newton to his wife Mary Prindle Newton, July 16, 1864, page 1 (GHS 0361)

Blackberry Dumplings for Dinner. This is a bully way to be  
in constant danger & may be wounded, wouldn't you like to change  
places with me. Jason & 2 men are going out in the County after  
things. Oh what a dangerous time we are having here we can't see it  
but we think it is fun. I have read one extract from the Chicago paper  
that says they will kill us & that the Handkerchief will  
but we get nearly all the papers I had read them all before. About  
I don't see into it I have examined every envelope very carefully  
This letter had 4 in it & one attached had 5 in it 3 or 4 other had  
more at all or at least I could find none. I have 10 or 15 on  
hand now & am floating easy. The bridge the Rebels built here  
was about 1000 ft long & Gen Dodge rebuilt it in less than  
3 days a feat in bridge building rarely ever equalled & Critics  
say it is better than it was before. The 7th Corps came up & joined  
us & have fortified on our left. We have been here 12 days &  
don't know how long we may remain. The Town has been a very  
fine one built on a succession of ridges & valleys & thick covered  
with grand old forest trees. (You can scarcely see at a distance  
of 1/2 a mile that there is any town there at all. Just now  
it has the largest population it ever had, some about 20,000  
I can't write this morning & am going to Quit 12<sup>th</sup> we have just  
come from a dinner of Warm Biscuit & Reppies & am as full as a tick  
We have an news from other portions of the Army but we are lying  
quietly by & trying to keep cool. We have very fine bathing places  
Cold Spring water & are enjoying all the luxuries we can get. Just now