

Lesson Title: Wisconsin Pioneer Experience

Lesson Grade Level: 8-12

DPI Theme Area: Transition from Territory to Statehood; Mining, Lumber, and Agriculture; Abolition and Reform Movements

Standards: History: B.8.1, B.8.2, B.8.4, B.8.10, B.12.1, B.12.2, D12.3; Behavioral Sciences: E.8.2, E.8.3, E.8.5, E.8.6, E.8.7, E.8.9, E.12.2, E.12.4, E12.6, E.12.8. E.12.14.

Introduction/Background

The Wisconsin Pioneer Experience is a digital collection of diaries, letters, reminiscences, speeches and other writings of people who settled and built Wisconsin during the nineteenth century. Through these documents students can learn about life in the early days of the Badger State from the words of those who lived it.

This lesson plan presents many different activities from which you can select and refine to suit the needs of your students. This collection is particularly rich in letters from women. Often women are overlooked in history and these documents provide firsthand accounts by the early women who came to Wisconsin as pioneers and record their impressions, experiences, responsibilities, successes, loves, losses, and everything in between. The collection is also strong in sources produced by men and students can compare men's and women's experiences as pioneers.

Lesson objective(s):

Students will be able to:

1. Compare and contrast women's experiences in early Wisconsin
2. Analyze a primary source for information about life in early Wisconsin
3. Compare women's to men's experiences in early Wisconsin
4. Describe what life was like for men, women, and children as pioneers in Wisconsin

Suggested Activities:

1. Select the letters you want to use. This will depend on which objectives and activities you choose. The following will provide different activities for different letters.
2. Choose a variety of documents or just one and have students read it. Using the questions for analyzing primary sources from American Memory (site listed above), have students examine the source and answer the questions. For example, Ingeborg Holdahl Alvstad reminisced about her family's emigration from Norway and their early life in Wisconsin long after the fact. You can compare this account to Enoch Chase's and Nathan Myrick's reminiscences or the letters of Mary Pease Brainerd.
 - a. Who created the source and why? Was it created through a spur-of-the-moment act, a routine transaction, or a thoughtful, deliberate process?
 - b. Did the recorder have firsthand knowledge of the event? Or, did the recorder report what others saw and heard?
 - c. Was the recorder a neutral party, or did the creator have opinions or interests that might have influenced what was recorded?

- d. Did the recorder produce the source for personal use, for one or more individuals, or for a large audience?
 - e. Was the source meant to be public or private?
 - f. Was the information recorded during the event, immediately after the event, or after some lapse of time? How large a lapse of time?
 - g. Enoch Chase claims to have met the famous chief, Black Hawk. What did he think of him?
 - h. What did early settlers think of the local Indians? See Lucy Hastings.
3. If you are looking at letters—After students have read several letters to get a sense of the topics people wrote about, ask them why letters were so important to early settlers and immigrants. How has technology changed the way we communicate with people far away?
 - a. You can expand this discussion by asking questions about students' own lives.
 - b. Do any of you have friends or relatives that live far away?
 - c. Do you ever write letters or cards to them? Why or why not?
 - d. When is the last time you got a letter in the regular mail?
 - e. Then direct the discussion toward the letters students have read from the collection. What sort of topics did people write about? Why were these topics important to people?
 - f. Ellen Spaulding Miller writes often about getting seeds and cuttings from her mother. Why do you think this important to her?
 - g. They also exchange newspapers. Why?
4. These documents can also be used to discuss the different reform movements in the nineteenth century such as abolition, temperance, women's suffrage, Spiritualism, Free love, etc.
 - a. Ellen Spaulding Miller writes about Spiritualism, Free Love, and water cure in the August 2, 1876 letter. Have older students research these topics to understand what she is writing about.
 - b. Students can research Victoria Claflin Woodhull as a place to start with Spiritualism and Free Love.
 - c. James and Margaret Douglas describe the temperance movement in a letter from May 1842.
 - d. Lyman Goodnow writes a great narrative about the Underground Railroad and helping a slave reach Canada. This account can be combined with the Wisconsin Pioneer letters about the anti-slavery movement.
 - e. Lucy Hastings's letters are full of potential for interesting discussion about women's roles, attitudes toward Indians, the early Wisconsin experience, and feminism (of sorts). For example, in a letter from Jan. 25, 1856 Lucy seems so anguished about someone's death and describes the lack of power for women.
 - f. In the same letter, Lucy explains how her husband bought more land. Have students research the Homestead Act that encouraged westward migration.
5. For younger students, you can use Ellen Spaulding Miller's letters to identify some of her concerns. Ask students to try to identify the people in her family,

such as her husband Jeff. Try to figure out the relationships among all the people Ellen mentions in her letters. You can have students answer one of her letters.

Assessment:

Depending on which activity you choose, you can have students complete a worksheet with some questions on it. Class discussion of the questions will also indicate student understanding. You can have students write a letter in answer to one of the letters or write a short history of early Wisconsin using the documents as evidence.