

**Lesson Title:** Wisconsin Territorial Letters

**Grades:** 4-12

**Theme Area:** Transition from Territory to Statehood, 1787-1848; Immigration and Settlement; Wisconsin State History

**Standards:** History: B.4.1, B.4.3, B.4.9, B.8.1, B.8.4, B.8.10, B.8.11, B.12.1, B.12.2

### **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 19<sup>th</sup> century. The project has been made available through the partnership of the Council of University of Wisconsin Libraries (CUWL) and the Wisconsin Historical Society (WHS).

The collection consists of diaries, letters, speeches and much more. Students can learn from carefully selected documents representing different geographic areas in Wisconsin and its pioneer past. Students will read about women's and men's experiences, economic conditions, agricultural products and conditions, immigration, religion and many other topics. They will learn about life in the early days of Wisconsin history from the words of those that lived it. Students can read the actual letters and diaries and experience how historians work with primary sources.

These lesson ideas correspond with the Wisconsin Territorial Letters, not the entire Wisconsin Pioneer Experience collection. Take note that the obsolete character "long S," which looks like an f, was often used in written script in these letters.

### **Lesson Objective(s):**

Students will be able to:

1. Describe conditions in Wisconsin for the early settlers of the territory in the 1840s and 1850s.
2. Compare the observations to life in early Wisconsin made by men and women.
3. Compare the experiences of immigrants from Europe to Wisconsin to those of migrants from the eastern US.
4. Analyze primary sources for evidence about conditions, experiences, and observations of the early pioneer settlers in Wisconsin.
5. Identify attitudes about and characteristics of the anti-slavery movement in Wisconsin.

### **Information Sources/Resources:**

<http://digicol.library.wisc.edu/wipionexp/> Wisconsin Pioneer Experience

Start here and then look through the Wisconsin Territorial Letters. Select and bookmark the letters you want to use for the lesson. In "Suggested Activities" below, you will find some suggestions about selecting letters. If you make handouts to give to students, just copy and paste the URL onto the handout.

<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/sia/letter.htm> This is a great site overall, but this link gives some ideas about the process of analyzing letters.

### **Materials**

Map of the US and Wisconsin

Computers with Internet connection. Group students with no more than 3 students per computer because some of the documents are hard to read.

US history textbook

Maps and atlases

### **Suggested Activities**

1. Because this collection is so rich with possibility, the following is a list of activities rather than a step-by-step lesson plan.
2. Look over the letters to see which ones are appropriate for the grade level and reading level of your students.
  - a. Some suggestions include: choose letters that also have the “page text” available so students can try to read the handwriting or look at a typed version. (Note: not all the letters have page text available. See the “About” page for more details:  
<http://digicol.library.wisc.edu/wipionexp/About.html>)
  - b. Some examples of letters with page: Prairie du Chien, 20 June 1837; P. Fonda, April 26, 1838; the letters from 1840.
  - c. The letters in 1842 have no accompanying page text.
3. Choose letters from women and men (most of the letters are from men)
4. Decide which of the objectives are appropriate for your students. For example, fourth to eighth graders could read some letters and describe the living conditions in Wisconsin in winter, spring, summer, and fall. If you browse the descriptions of the letters you can find what letters and topics would be appropriate.
  - a. You can also have younger students locate on a map where the letter writers lived in Wisconsin and from where in the United States the letters came.
5. To compare women’s to men’s experiences use the following letters: May 27, 1840 from Mrs. Julia Griffing (this is a difficult letter to decipher); Mrs. Rebecca M. Byington, June 27, 1841; Oct. 15, 1843; Rosina Clark, July 27, 1845; Mary Roger, Dec. 11, 1847; Amy Foster, July 17, 1847; Olive \_\_\_\_\_, July 17, 1847.
6. In the Dec. 8, 1845 letter from George Laughton, he talks about Oregon and England. Students can research the “Oregon question” to put his letter in the context of the time. This was a year before Oregon became a territory of the United States and a year after the presidential election in which one of the campaign slogans was, “fifty-four forty or fight” challenging Britain’s claim to the northwest. “John Bull” is the personification of England in literature and political cartoons, similar to Uncle Sam in the US>
7. Aug. 24, 1845 letter to Edward Symmes is written by a new Wisconsin resident from the east with some particular ideas about “westerners.” The letter is funny in places.

- a. It can be used to discuss biases and old customs such as mourning rites and dueling.
8. Questions for discussion:
  - a. Why do you suppose most of the letters are from men and not women?
  - b. In the Feb. 27, 1847 letter, what constitution is Smith referring to?
  - c. What kinds of jobs did early Wisconsinites have?
  - d. What were conditions like in early Wisconsin?
  - e. What crops did farmers grow? Is it different from today?
9. Direct students to the letters about forming the state government like the one mentioned above (Feb. 27, 1847) and June 26, 1847 from Edward Ellwell.
10. Have high school students research the anti-slavery movement. (At least one letter discusses it, L. Mills, Aug. 1851).

### Glossary

Students will need help with some of the language in the letters such as iniquity, antinomian, vicissitudes, etc. It is best to preview the letters in order to identify words needing definition.

Geography: Prairieville (Waukesha); Racine county; Milwaukee; Plattville (sic); Prairie du Chien; Southport (Kenosha); East Troy; Sun Prairie; Wisconsin River; Grand Rapids; Providence; Rhode Island; Indianapolis; St. Louis; New York; Fort Winnebago; Manitowoc; Racine; Portage Prairie; Waushara; Janesville; Green Bay; Geneva; Hadley MA; New Haven (probably CT); South Richland, NY; East Granby, CT; Whitewater; Sheboygan; White Oak Springs; Crawfordville, IN; Spring Prairie (Franklin); Pleasant Prairie; Lafayette; New Diggings (?); Sherburne, NY; Walpole, MA

### Conclusion

The conclusion depends on what activities you chose to do with the letters. Conduct a class discussion about what questions the letters raise and how students can find the answers to their questions.

### Assessment

The activities you chose from above will determine what types of assessment you choose. Here are some examples:

1. Have students select a letter and write a response to it. This might require some research and discussion in order to achieve historical authenticity.
2. Younger students can hand in the completed map from activity 4a.
3. Class discussion of how experiences differed between genders or age groups will indicate understanding of the letters as primary sources for history.