

MICHAEL P. JOHNSON



READING THE AMERICAN PAST

SELECTED HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS

VOLUME I • TO 1877

READING THE AMERICAN PAST

*Selected Historical Documents
Volume I to 1877*

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PREFACE FOR INSTRUCTORS

Designed specifically to accompany *The American Promise: A History of the United States, Reading the American Past* aims to help instructors make history come alive for students in the survey course. The documents in this collection give students compelling first-hand accounts that provide depth and breadth to the discussion of important events, ideas, and experiences found in *The American Promise* and other comprehensive United States history textbooks. Organized chapter by chapter to parallel *The American Promise*, these sources offer teachers many educational options. Above all, *Reading the American Past* seeks to ignite the sparks of historical imagination that every teacher hopes to see in students' eyes.

Reading a textbook discussion of Columbus's arrival in the New World, for example, gives students basic, up-to-date information that has been collected, sorted out, and synthesized over the last 500 years. But reading the words Columbus wrote in his log shortly after he stepped ashore in the western hemisphere (see Volume I, Chapter 2, page 14) recaptures as no textbook can that moment of immense, mutual surprise when fifteenth-century Europeans and the people they called Indians first encountered each other. As every historian knows, primary sources bridge from the present, when they are read, to the past, when they were written. They encourage students to venture across that span connecting present and past and to risk discovering a captivating and unexpected world.

Three basic principles guided the selection of documents. First and foremost, the sources highlight major events and significant perspectives of a given historical era. Second, documents were chosen and carefully edited to be accessible, interesting, and often surprising to survey course students. Third, I have sought sources that lend themselves to analysis in

classroom discussion and writing assignments, sources that vividly portray controversies that marked a particular historical moment and that offer multiple avenues of interpretation.

FEATURES OF THE DOCUMENTS SELECTION

A wide variety. The documents assembled here provide students a generous cross-section of the diverse experiences that comprise the American past. The reflections of women and men, politicians and thieves, generals and privates, reformers and reprobates can be found here, along with those of the nation's countless ethnic and religious minorities. Classic sources such as John Winthrop's *Arbella* sermon, George Kennan's "Long Telegram," and Ronald Reagan's "Evil Empire" speech disclose the perspectives of influential leaders. Bottom-up views of common people are revealed by such documents as seventeenth-century witchcraft depositions, testimony by slaves accused of conspiring to rebel, and letters from working people to New Dealers. Diaries and court cases convey the immediacy of history as lived experience. Reminiscences and oral histories illuminate the past with memories of participants. Speeches, manifestos, congressional testimony, and White House tape recordings spotlight the ends and means of political power. Essays, addresses, poems, and passages from books offer the considered opinions of cultural leaders, whether captains of industry, novelists, poets or social critics.

Allows instructors flexibility in the classroom. The selections in *Reading the American Past* allow instructors to choose documents that best serve their teaching needs. Teachers might, for example, ask students to read documents in preparation for lectures, then refer to the assigned selections as they explain, say, Puritanism or the Civil War. An instructor might devote a class to explicating a single source, such as a Mexican account of Spanish Conquest (see Volume I, Chapter 2, page 17) or Reinhold Niebuhr's probing reflections about the meaning of Christianity in Detroit of the 1920s (see Volume II, Chapter 23, page 134). The documents are ideally suited for provoking discussions in section meetings. Students can be asked to adopt and defend the viewpoint of a given source, to attack it from the perspective of an historical contemporary, to dissect its assumptions and evasions, or to compare and contrast it with other sources. Selections might also be used for brief writing assignments, longer papers, or examinations. The documents open these and many other possibilities for inspiring students to investigate the American past.

EDITORIAL FEATURES

Consistently user-friendly editorial features will help students read and interpret the sources. These features have been kept brief, providing just enough information to allow students to explore the sources and make their own discoveries. By minimizing editorial interventions, I hope to

encourage students to focus on the documents and to experience the excitement of being astonished and perplexed by what they read.

An Introduction for Students. A short introduction at the outset explains the significance of documents for understanding history and suggests key questions that students should ask themselves in order to decipher any primary source.

Useful chapter apparatus. A brief paragraph begins each chapter, setting the documents in the larger historical context detailed in the corresponding chapter of the textbook. A headnote precedes every document, identifying the source, explaining when it was produced, by whom, and why it presents a revealing point of view. Rather than cluttering documents with numerous explanatory notes, I have assumed that students will—and should—refer to a textbook for basic information about the people and events that appear in the sources.

Questions that help students get the most out of the sources. To guide students toward crucial passages and central ideas, a few questions follow each document. They are intended to help students identify fundamental points, consider what a document says, and think about its larger historical significance. Comparative questions at the end of each chapter direct students toward important similarities and differences among the ideas, observations, and viewpoints expressed in the chapter's documents.

To see more clearly along the many angles of historical vision offered by the documents, students rely on the guidance, insight, and wisdom of their teachers. Ideally, *Reading the American Past* will give instructors numerous opportunities to entice students to become active collaborators in the study of American history. Perhaps these documents will help persuade students that the American past is neither frozen in time nor entombed in books, but instead shapes their present and prefigures their future. Perhaps they will come to see that they do not simply read American history; they live it.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am indebted to my fellow coauthors of *The American Promise*—James L. Roark, Patricia Cline Cohen, Sarah Stage, Alan Lawson, and Susan M. Hartmann—for invaluable suggestions of pertinent and provocative documents. Motivated by their idea and by the enthusiasm of Chuck Christensen and Joan Feinberg for a documents collection that aspired to the high standards readers have come to expect from Bedford, I combed the stacks of the Milton S. Eisenhower Library of The Johns Hopkins University where I soon located many more excellent documents than could possibly be included here. After repeated consultation, particularly with Jim Roark, I winnowed the list, regretting all the great ones left in the

chaff, but prizing the keepers still more. The beneficiary of the advice and support of my colleagues, I am nonetheless solely responsible for the final selection of the documents and the edited passages in this anthology.

Many others contributed their energy and creativity to bring this project to completion. Sarah Elizabeth Johnson compiled a small mountain of copies from unwieldy volumes to allow thorough checking and proof-reading. Louise Townsend pored over the manuscript with the sympathies of an historian and the instincts of an experienced editor. At Bedford, Patty Bergin, supervised by Assistant Managing Editor John Amburg, shepherded the book throughout the production process; Barbara Sutton expertly copyedited the manuscript, attentive to the documents' numerous idiosyncracies of spelling and phrasing; and DeNee Reiton Skipper designed the volumes, transforming typescript into book pages. Arrangements that made all this possible were put in place by Gerry McCauley. And Anne Johnson lovingly tolerated another of my disappearances into the company of books and bytes.

INTRODUCTION FOR STUDENTS

Documents allow us to peer into the past and learn what happened and what did not happen, crucial beginning points for understanding how and why the present came to be. It would be convenient if we did not need documents, if we could depend instead upon our memory to tell us what happened. Unfortunately, memory is far from perfect, as we are reminded every time we misplace our keys. Not only do we forget things that did happen, but we also remember things that never occurred, such as putting those keys right there on the shelf. Mark Twain once quipped, "When I was younger I could remember anything, whether it happened or not; but my faculties are decaying now, and soon I shall be so [old] I cannot remember any but the things that never happened."

Twain's witticism points to another important property of memory: it changes over time. Every good trial lawyer knows that memory is fragile, volatile, and subject to manipulation by our desires, intentions, and fears. Spin artists routinely perform not just on witness stands and at press conferences but whenever memory is reshaped to serve the needs of the present. Compounding the unreliability of memory are two stubborn realities: most of the people who might remember something about what happened are dead, their memories erased forever; and no person, no single memory, ever knew all of what there is to know about what happened.

These flaws of memory might cause us to shrug wearily and conclude that it is impossible to determine what happened. But that conclusion would be wrong. Documents make it possible to learn a great deal—although not every last thing—about what really happened. Since they are created by humans, documents are subject to all the frailties of memory, with one vital exception. Documents do not change. Unlike memory, documents freeze words at a moment in time. Ideas, perceptions, emotions,

and assumptions expressed in a document allow us to learn now about what happened then. In effect, documents are a kind of bridge from the present to the past. They allow us to cross over and to discover how we got from there to here.

Today you can stand where the audience stood in 1863 to listen to Abraham Lincoln's famous speech at the dedication of the cemetery for the Union soldiers killed at the battle of Gettysburg. Of course you can't hear Lincoln's voice, but you can read his words because the Gettysburg Address exists as an historical document; you can literally read this portion of the American past. The Address transports the reader back to that crisp November day more than a century ago, the outcome of the war very much in doubt, when the president and commander in chief of more than a million men in blue uniforms explained in a few words his view of the meaning of the war for the nation and the world. Lincoln spoke of the immense sacrifice made by the soldiers at Gettysburg and evoked the nation's highest ideals in words that continue to inspire Americans long after the Civil War was over: "Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. . . . [W]e here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." Because the Gettysburg Address survives in Lincoln's handwriting, we know not only what Lincoln said, but also what he did not say: for instance, that the thousands of dead soldiers at Gettysburg proved that the price of war was too high and it was time to negotiate a peace settlement. The Address captured Lincoln's thoughts at that moment and preserved them, much like an historical snapshot. All documents have this property of stopping time, of indelibly recording the views of somebody in the past.

Documents record far more than the ideas of presidents. They disclose, for instance, Mexicans' views of conquering Spaniards in the sixteenth century, accusations New Englanders made against witches in the seventeenth century, the testimony of slaves on trial for conspiring to rebel against their masters in the nineteenth century, the reminiscences of Vietnamese immigrants in the twentieth century, and much, much more. These views and many others are recorded by the documents in this collection. They permit you to read the American past from the diversity of perspectives that contributed to the making of America: women and men, workers and bosses, newcomers and natives, slaves and masters, voters and politicians, moderates and radicals, activists and reactionaries, westerners and easterners, northerners and southerners, farmers and urbanites, the famous and the forgotten. These people created historical documents when they stole a spare moment to write a letter or record thoughts in a diary, when they talked to a scribbling friend or stranger, when they

appeared in court or made a will, and when they delivered a sermon, gave a speech, or penned a manifesto. Examples of all these kinds of documents are included in *Reading the American Past*. Together, they make it possible for you to learn a great deal about what really happened.

From the almost limitless historical record I chose documents that clearly and vividly express an important perspective about a major event or a widespread point of view during a certain historical era. I selected documents that are not only revealing but also often surprising, controversial, or troubling. My goal is to bring you face to face with the past through the eyes of the people who lived it.

Reading the American Past is designed specifically to accompany *The American Promise: A History of the United States*. Each chapter in this volume parallels a chapter in *The American Promise*. The documents provide eyewitness accounts that broaden and deepen the textbook narrative. Chapter 16, for example, supplements the textbook discussion of Reconstruction with selections from the 1865 Mississippi Black Code, resolutions of a black convention in Alabama in 1867, testimony of an African American Republican before the congressional committee investigating the Ku Klux Klan in 1871, and the report of a prominent white Republican about conditions in the South in 1875. As a rule, each chapter contains four documents; occasionally there are more shorter ones or fewer longer ones. To help you read and understand the documents, a brief paragraph at the beginning of each chapter sketches the larger historical context explained in more detail in your textbook; a headnote precedes each document identifying its source, explaining when it was produced, by whom, and why it is revealing; and questions follow each selection, pointing you toward key passages and fundamental ideas and asking you to consider both what a document says and what it means.

Making the most of these documents requires reading with care and imagination. Historians are interested in both what a document says and what it suggests about the historical reality that is only partly disclosed by the document itself. A document might be likened to a window through which we may glimpse features of the past. A document challenges us to read and understand the words on the page as a way to look through the window and learn about the larger historical context of the time.

Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, for example, hints that he believed many loyal Americans wondered whether the war was worth the effort, whether all those soldiers, as he said, "have died in vain." Lincoln's words do not explicitly say that many people thought the human tragedy of the war was too great, but that seems to be one of their meanings. His Address attempted to answer such doubts by proclaiming the larger meaning of the war and the soldiers' deaths. Behind his public statement of the noble ideals of the Union war effort lay his private perception that many Americans had come to doubt whether the war had any meaning beyond the maiming or death of their loved ones.

To see such unstated historical reality in and through a document, readers must remain alert to exactly what the document says. The first step is to learn something about the era in which the document was written by reading *The American Promise* or another textbook of American history.

The next step is to read the document, keeping in mind three important questions: Who wrote the document? When was it written? Who was the intended audience? To help answer these questions, you will find useful information in the brief headnote and the questions that accompany each document, as well as in the concluding comparative questions that draw attention to similarities and differences among the documents in the chapter. But these editorial features are merely beginning points for your investigation of the documents. You should always take the next step by asking who wrote a document, when, and for what audience.

Obviously, a document expresses the viewpoint of its author. Different people had different views about the same event. At Gettysburg, for example, the Confederacy suffered a painful defeat that weakened their ability to maintain their independence and to defend slavery. If Jefferson Davis, the President of the Confederacy, had delivered a Gettysburg Address, it would have been very different from Lincoln's. Documents also often convey their authors' opinions of the viewpoints of other people, including those who agree with them and those who don't. You should always ask, then: What does a document say about the viewpoint of the author? What does it say about the author's opinion about the views of other people? Does the document suggest the author's point of view was confined to a few people, shared by a substantial minority, or embraced by a great many Americans?

A document conveys valuable information about the time when it was written as well as about the author's point of view. Frequently, a person's point of view changes, making it critical to know exactly when a document was written in order to understand its meaning. When Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg Address, the outcome of the Civil War remained in doubt; seventeen months later, in April 1865, he was certain of northern victory. The Address expresses the urgency and uncertainty of the wartime crisis of 1863 rather than the relief and confidence of 1865. As you read every document, you should ask: How does the document reflect the time when it was written? What does it say about the events underway at the time? What does it suggest about how that particular time was perceived by the author and by other people?

In addition to considering who wrote a document and when, one must think about the intended audience. A politician may say one thing in a campaign speech and something quite different in a private letter to a friend. An immigrant might send a rosy account of life in America to family members in the Old Country, one at odds with many features of life in the New World. The intended audience shapes the message an author seeks to send. The author's expectations of what the audience wants

to hear contribute to what a document says, how it is said, and what is left unsaid. Lincoln knew that his audience at Gettysburg included thousands of family members mourning the death of loved ones who “gave the last full measure of devotion” on the battlefield; he hoped his remarks would soothe the heartache of the survivors by ennobling the Union and those who died in its defense. To decipher any document, you should always ask: Who is the intended audience? How did the audience shape what the author says? Did consideration of the audience lead the author to emphasize some things and downplay or ignore others? How would the intended audience be likely to read the document? How would people who were not among the intended audience be likely to read it?

The meanings of words, like the viewpoints of individuals, also reflect their historical moment. For the most part, the documents in this collection were written in English; several have been translated into English from Spanish, Latin, German, Swedish, or one of several Native American languages. But even documents originally written in English require you to translate the meaning of English words at the time the document was written into the meaning of English words today. Readers must guard against imputing today’s meanings to yesterday’s words. When Lincoln said “this nation” in the Gettysburg Address, he referred to the United States in 1863, a vastly different nation from the one founded four score and seven years earlier and from the one that developed a century later. The word is the same but the meaning varies greatly.

Although the meaning of many words remains relatively constant, if you are on the lookout for key words whose meanings have changed, you will discover otherwise hidden insights in the documents. You can benefit simply from exercising your historical imagination about the changing meaning of words. To Lincoln, the phrase “all men are created equal” did not have the same meaning that it did for women’s rights leaders at the time, or for slaves, or slaveowners. You should always pay attention to the words used in a document and ask a final set of questions: How do the words in the document reflect the author, the time, and the intended audience? Would the same words have different meanings to other people at that time? Does the author’s choice of words reveal covert assumptions and blindspots along with an overt message?

Historical documents provide readers not only with indelible markers of historical changes that have occurred. They also illuminate the role that human beings played in making those changes. Documents instruct us about the achievements and limitations of the past as they inspire and caution us for the future. Documents also instill in us a strong sense of historical humility. Americans in the past were no less good and no more evil, no less right and no more wrong, than we are today. Their ideas, their experiences, and their times were different from ours in many respects. But they made the nation we inhabit. Ideally, the documents in *Reading the American Past* will give you an appreciation of what it took, and will continue to take, to make American history happen.

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