

Activity – Reading Primary Sources: Letters

Objective: Students will read transcriptions of letters from Caroline Quarles and her husband, to Lyman Goodnow of Waukesha. Student will look for key details and facts that support historic events.

Materials:

Letters (below)

Backstory:

Caroline Quarles was an enslaved person, who was able to escape to Canada with the help of Lyman Goodnow, a Waukesha abolitionist. After settling in Sandwich, Canada she married and raised a family. The letters transcribed below are used by historians to confirm her experience as a runaway slave, and her relationship with Lyman Goodnow.

Straight lines in the typed letters indicate words or letters that could not be made out by the historian making the transcription.

The original letters are held in the collection of the Kenosha Civil War Museum, Kenosha Wisconsin.

The following letter was written either by Caroline or someone else as Caroline dictated to them. At the time of the letter Caroline would have been approximately 54 years old. The letter is not signed.

1880

Sandwich, April 17th

Dearest friend pen and ink could hardly express my joy when I heard from you once more.

I am living and have to work very hard but I have never forgotten you nor your kindness. I am still in Sandwich the same place where you left me.

Just as soon as the postmaster read the name to me your name my heart __ filled with joy and gladness and I should like (rest of page is turned up and cannot read the last line on that page). Before I die to return your kindness toward me.

I would like for you to send me one of those books that you was speaking about.

Answer this as soon as you get it and let me know how you are and your address.

Direct your letter to Caroline __ Watkins, Sandwich.

__ I hope you will send me one of those books you spoke of to the post master.

The following letter was signed by Caroline's husband, Allen Watkins. Accounts show that Watkins was born in/around Richmond, Virginia, but lived predominately in Kentucky.

April 24, 1880

Mr. Goodnow allow me to present myself to you Mr. Watkins. Excuse me for taking these liberties but according to your request and my wishes I shall endeavor to give you a short narrative of my life as far as I can remember and believe me as a stranger that you cannot imagine how much pleasure it affords me to be able to answer a few for a friend who has been such a deliverer to the poor fugitive slaves who was oppressed in the bitter pangs of slavery and may the Lord ever bless you and __ in your household __ my prayers. I was born in __ Virginia raised in Kentucky. The first thing that started me from slavery I married and had (3-8) children and they sold my wife after the sold her I became very much dissatisfied going to church one Sunday the minister told me that I was sold also his name was Nathan Riggs a baptist minister. I then resolved to go away that night I stole a boat and manage to get across the Ohio River that night after I crossed I went and stopped in __ creek bridge the bridge has 2 storys and my pursuers passed right under me and I was lying on the top part and could hear every word they said. They went straight up to Cincinnati expecting we was up there but it so happen that we did not go we went up the hill into a field and stopped there for one week during the week we got in with abolitioner friends and they brought us 60 miles we traveled on foot shuning all towns and villagers until we got to __ and from there we got with friends again who carried us to Sandusky City and thank god from Sandusky City our good friends put us on a boat and took me clean through to Detroit and from there to Canada and I am able to say that I had no trouble in getting into Canada not as my wife had and I will be __ be ready and willing to speak a good word for those glorious abolitioners.

No more at present I should be very much pleased to hear from you at any time and if any of your family ever comes here I should be happy to have you call as I own my homestead where I live I remain

*Your well wishes
Allen Watkins
Sandwich, Ont*

I hope if you get that paper printed you will send __ one write often as you can if you please.

Critical Thinking Questions:

Letter 1:

- 1.) Caroline writes about “your kindness,” what is she talking about?
- 2.) Caroline asks for “you to send me one of those books.” What does this tell us about her?
- 3.) What is Caroline’s last name at the end of the letter? Why is it not Quarles?

Letter 2:

- 1.) What was Allen’s life like as an enslaved person? What happened to his first wife and children?
- 2.) Why is crossing the Ohio river important in Allen’s life?
- 3.) Allan write about “abolitioners.” Who are abolitioner or abolitionists?