INTRODUCTION FOR STUDENTS

Historical documents allow us to peer into the past and learn what happened and what did not happen — crucial beginning points for understanding how and why the present came to be. They record bits of history and preserve the momentary ideas and experiences of individuals and groups. But how can you, a twenty-first-century student, read and truly comprehend a letter from a seventeenth-century indentured servant or a nineteenth-century woman on the frontier, full of irregular spelling and contemporary references? How can you determine the historical value and accuracy of documents recorded years or even centuries ago? How can you read documents to figure out what *really* happened in the past?

Flaws of Memory

It would be convenient if we did not need documents, if we could depend instead on our memory to tell us what happened. Unfortunately, memory is far from perfect, as we are reminded every time we misplace our keys. We not only forget things that did happen, but we also remember things that never occurred, such as erroneously thinking we put those keys right there on that 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. But memory is constantly 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 there is to know about what happened.

Documents as Historical Snapshots

These flaws of memory might cause us to shrug wearily and conclude that it is impossible to determine what happened. But documents make it possible to learn a great deal — although not every last thing — about what really happened. Because documents are created by humans, they 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 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 a 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: "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 a historical snapshot. All documents have this property of stopping time, of indelibly recording somebody's views at a specific moment in the past.

Documents Capture Diverse Voices and Experiences

Documents record far more than the ideas of presidents. They disclose, for instance, Pueblo Indians' views of conquering Spaniards in the six-

teenth century, accusations New Englanders made against suspected witches in the seventeenth century, the confessions of slave insurrectionists in the nineteenth century, the experiences of American soldiers 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.

Documents Bring You Face to Face with the Past

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 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 a report on the attitudes of whites in the former Confederacy in the summer of 1865, the Mississippi Black Code, advertisements of former slaves seeking lost family members, resolutions of a black convention in Alabama, and testimony of an African American Republican before the congressional committee investigating the Ku Klux Klan in 1871. Generally, each chapter contains five documents of a similar length.

Reading and Understanding Documents

To help you read and understand the documents, a brief paragraph at the beginning of each chapter sketches the larger historical context, which your textbook explains in more detail. Each document is also preceded by a headnote that identifies its source, explains when it was produced and by whom, and suggests why it is revealing. Questions follow each selection and point you toward key passages and fundamental ideas and

ask you to consider both what a document says and what it means. More questions at the end of each chapter encourage you to compare the different documents.

While reading the documents in this book, it's important to keep in mind the historical context; the author, date, and audience; and the meanings of the words themselves. Below are some guidelines and questions to consider while reading any primary document.

ESTABLISH THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Making the most of these documents requires reading with care and imagination. Historians are interested in what a document says and what it reveals 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.

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. His public statement of the noble ideals of the Union war effort hint at 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.

IDENTIFY AUTHOR, DATE, AND AUDIENCE

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? These questions will help you understand the 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 proceed by asking who wrote a document, when, and for what audience.

Author. 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 weak-

ened 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 others, shared by a substantial minority, or embraced by a great many people? What motivated the author to express his or her point of view in the first place? If the document has been translated or transcribed by another person, what relationship did that person have with the author, and can we trust that the document accurately represents the author's thoughts?

Date. A document conveys valuable information about the period in which it was composed 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 under way at the time? What does it suggest about how that particular time was perceived by the author and by other people? How did the period in which the person lived shape her or his thoughts and actions?

Audience. 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 that is at odds with the many features of life in the New World he or she describes in a diary. 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?

It's particularly important to consider the audience when reading interviews, since both the interviewer and interviewee can have different expectations of the same audience. If the interviewer's questions are provided, how do they guide and shape the responses of the interviewee? What is their motivation for conducting the interview, and what is the interviewee's motivation for giving it?

DECIPHER THE LANGUAGE

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 and the authors' original spelling has been preserved (unless stated otherwise), even if it fails to conform to common usage today. Numerous documents have been translated into English from Spanish, Portuguese, 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 exists today, almost a century and a half 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 slave owners.

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 blind spots along with an overt message?

THE VALUE OF DOCUMENTS

Historical documents provide readers not only with indelible markers of historical changes that have occurred. They also illuminate the role 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.