

Big and Famous is Not Always Best

Guidelines for selecting teachable documents — Daniel F. Rulli

Primary source documents are extremely effective in the classroom, and while many large, famous documents exist, small, lesser-known documents are just as valuable. For example, just fifteen days after his inauguration in 1853, President Franklin Pierce nominated Christopher “Kit” Carson to be the Indian Agent in New Mexico. While only one sentence in length, this hand-written nomination has amazing potential. It can easily be integrated into the curriculum, leads to larger issues, is relevant to students, has context that can be easily established, relates to other content areas, quickly covers a great deal of information, is legible, and allows investigating students to become historians. These eight criteria can be used to determine the usefulness of any document.

How easily can the document be integrated into the scope and sequence of the course you are teaching?

The document should be easy to integrate into the curriculum. When considering how a document might fit into the scope of your course, examine the document carefully for names of historic figures; geographic locations; suggestions of U.S. Constitutional provisions; connections to economic developments; references to specific groups of people, historic events, or pieces of legislation; and suggestions of important social trends or processes. For example, the Carson nomination can be used to examine the role of “Kit” Carson and Franklin Pierce in U.S. history, presidential appointment power and the role of the Senate as provided for in the Constitution, as well as the relationship between Carson and Pierce. Such uses may be obvious, but often documents

that more subtly fit the curriculum may be the most motivating and effective. This document references the Pierce administration and New Mexico and is clearly dated 1853, so it can be used as a link in a chronological approach to regional history of the West (including New Mexico) and pre-Civil War U.S. history. The document also suggests the study of U.S. geography and westward expansion, government, politics, and constitutional studies on the presidential appointment process and ethnic studies relative to Hispanic and/or Native American cultures. Based on the NCSS Curriculum Standards for Social Studies, the document could also be used in the themes of **i** CULTURE; **iii** PEOPLE, PLACES, AND ENVIRONMENTS; **vi** POWER, AUTHORITY, AND GOVERNANCE; and **vii** PRODUCTION, DISTRIBUTION, AND CONSUMPTION.

When considering how well a document can be integrated into the sequence of a course, its length and depth should be taken into account. For example, the 1965 Medicare Amendments to the Social Security Act run over two hundred pages. It is clearly not a document that could be used in its entirety in the classroom, but salient excerpts may be very effective.

Would discussion of the document lead to larger issues or concepts of study?

When a document’s components are examined individually, they should have the potential for discussion of larger issues and concepts. Teaching creativity and imagination certainly come into play. Brainstorm by yourself, with colleagues, or with students to develop a list of all the possible issues and concepts related to the document. Examine the list and select the

issues and concepts that provide the most powerful enrichment for your students after the basics of the document have been explored. In this example, biographies of Franklin Pierce and Kit Carson will reveal men who were deeply involved in the great issues of their time. Those issues included the acquisition of territory resulting from war (the Mexican American War and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo); the concomitant controversy relating to slavery in newly acquired territory; political, racial, and economic issues resulting from American westward expansion; and constitutional issues relating to rights of citizenship in acquired territory. As Pierce’s nomination at the Democratic convention in 1852 was an intriguing event, there is also the issue of the presidential election process that exists outside the Constitution.

Does the document have immediate or potential relevance for students?

Determining a document’s relevance to students is always tenuous. Sometimes the relevance is immediately clear, like the opinion from a Supreme Court case that expands or limits the rights of students within a public school setting. They may simply identify with a president who has illegible handwriting or with the plight of a group of people struggling to maintain their identity. Often with primary documents, students are immediately impressed just seeing the handwriting, signatures, or photographs of “someone from history.” Also, a certain amount of theatrical staging on the teacher’s part can intensify students’ interest, as, for example, handling the document with white gloves or putting it in a plastic case. Other items that enhance the interest level of a document are special markings like

Executive Office

March 19, 1853.

To the Senate
of the United States.

I nominate
Christopher Carson of New Mexico to be
Indian Agent in New Mexico,
to fill a vacancy.

Franklin Pierce

TOP SECRET or CONFIDENTIAL. In the case of the Carson nomination, students will probably be surprised to see that the nomination process appears to be very simple. After all, this is just a one-sentence letter from the president to the United States Senate. Students may find it intriguing to learn that the process can get very complicated thereafter, so they could research some of the more controversial presidential appointments. They may also pause to think about the impact that appointed officials have on their lives, compared to elected officials. Examples are federal judges (including the Supreme Court justices), cabinet officers, and heads of administrative agencies, like the Internal Revenue Service, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the director of the Office of Management and Budget. Additionally, the document may prove highly relevant to students when it is used as a springboard into other topics of study. Creative and imaginative lessons will help students see the relevance of the document.

Can an historical context for the document be clearly and easily established?

The historical context for a document is usually easy to establish. It will help students to know and understand what else was “happening around the document.” The key clues for setting the context should be information from the document itself, like names, dates, places, and government branches or agencies. Sometimes the context of the document is implied and becomes a wonderful exercise in critical thinking skills for students. One of the most important elements, as in the Carson nomination,

may be the date. In this case, 1853 places the document in the middle of one of the most fascinating and crucial periods in American history. Carson’s nomination takes place during the era of great western expansion in America. Beginning in 1820, the Missouri Compromise set off a chain of events, that inevitably linked territorial acquisition to the expansion of slavery, the displacement of native peoples, sectional conflict, and a civil war.

Does the document raise additional topics for research or discussion in other content areas?

Primary documents are magical for educators looking for interdisciplinary or cross-curricular lessons. Patent applications, for example, can lead to lessons in science and math. Visual documents like photographs and posters can lead to lessons in art and art history. Many primary documents will lead to lessons in literature or rhetoric, in the case of speeches. A very teachable cross-curricular connection with the Carson nomination is western literature, in general, and the literature of the Southwest, in particular. Specifically, this document could be used as a link to Hispanic and Native American literature. The document’s connection to racial issues in New Mexico in 1853, and in the rest of the country, could lead to its use in other content areas such as ethnic studies, sociology, foreign language studies, borderland history, and environmental studies.

Can the document be used to streamline the time spent on a particular topic?

Educators will appreciate how primary source documents can be used to streamline the amount of time spent on a particular topic. There is an old saying among history teachers, “Every year we have an additional year of history to teach, but we have the same amount of time in which to teach it.” Using primary source documents is not a short-cut but simply a way of using one teaching tool to cover a large amount of material. Consider using primary source documents as a springboard to various topics for student research that cover large blocks of material. A primary

source document could also be used as a culminating exercise to examine students’ knowledge of a major period or topic. Using the Carson nomination, students would be asked to complete in one class period a graphic web of events and people linked to anything in the document. The learning and timesaving that result from this type of activity are often staggering.

How legible is the document?

What may be an early decision about the usefulness of a document is its legibility. Many pre-twentieth-century documents are hand-written and often not legible because of the handwriting and the wear and tear of age. Close examination of the featured document reveals that it is a form letter (yes, even in those days) written by a secretary with the appropriate details filled in later. Nonetheless, the content and signature on the document are easily read.

Will the document serve as a tool for students to become historians?

If the document satisfactorily meets all of the criteria above, it can’t miss as a tool that puts the student in the role of the historian. The way students will understand history is through the thoughtful consideration and analysis of primary source materials. In today’s classrooms, with the emphasis on standard-based education and the increased reliance on traditional assessment, there tends to be a renewed and sometimes directed dependency on secondary source materials, namely textbooks that are correlated to standards. The use of primary source materials makes the student the historian. This practice will be a valuable, effective, and refreshing alternative to the textbook-driven classroom. 📖

ABOUT THE DOCUMENT

The document featured in this article is the Message of President Franklin Pierce nominating Kit Carson to be Indian Agent in New Mexico, 03/19/1853; Records of the United States Senate, 1789-1990 Record Group 46; ARC Identifier 306434; National Archives Building, Washington, D.C. You may reproduce the document shown here in any quantity.

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