

**SOLOMON BROWNS'S LETTERS: LIFE IN WASHINGTON DURING THE CIVIL WAR**

**Objectives:** Students will learn what a primary source is, how to find information in primary sources, and why primary sources are valuable in the study of history. Students will learn what life was like in Washington, DC, during the Civil War.

**Time:** 55 minutes (*Adjust Time As Needed*)

- introduction, (*suggested: 15 minutes*)
- small groups, (*suggested: 20 minutes*)
- large group discussion, (*suggested: 20 minutes*)

**Skills:** Reading, Critical Thinking, Document Based Question and Analysis

**Content Area:** Social Studies, American History

**Materials:** (contained below)

- Solomon Brown Letters
- Solomon Brown Letter Transcripts
- student worksheet

**Grade Level:** Grades 6 – 8

**Historical Overview:**

Solomon G. Brown (c. 1829-1906) was the first African American employee of the Smithsonian Institution. He was hired in 1852, just four years after the establishment of the Institution, and worked here for fifty-four years. During his time at the Smithsonian he held many titles and performed many duties in service to the Institution. He served under the first three Secretaries, Joseph Henry, Spencer Fullerton Baird, and Samuel P. Langley. Brown formed a deep personal friendship with Baird, which is evident in the letters featured in this lesson plan. He also served his community in Anacostia, a neighborhood in Washington, DC, and was a writer, poet, and prominent advocate of African American progress.



Solomon G. Brown was a free black man in Washington, DC, and he grew up while slavery was still legal and practiced in the south. In 1861, the Civil War began, with the country divided into the Union and the Confederacy, split over the issues of

slavery and states' rights versus a strong federal government. While Brown was born free, slavery was not made illegal in Washington until President Lincoln signed the DC Emancipation Act on April 16, 1862. Even after the act, African Americans in Washington, and throughout the Union, were not treated as the equals of white men. They would not gain the right to vote until after the war when the 15th Amendment was passed in 1870, and even then were still considered second-class citizens.

Brown served at the Smithsonian Institution through the war, living in DC, the seat of the Union government but just across the Potomac River from Confederate Virginia. Washington felt many effects of the war, and Solomon Brown witnessed them. He wrote to Spencer F. Baird, then the Assistant Secretary, while Baird and his family were away from the city. Brown was left in charge of Baird's household, while also performing his duties at the Institution. His letters tell of the changes and dangers of war time Washington.

### **Primary and Secondary Sources:**

A **primary source** is any original source of information that provides a direct or first-person connection to a historical event. Examples may include: documents such as letters, diaries, birth certificates, receipts, and notebooks; photographs and drawings; objects, such as clothing or furnishings; oral history interviews, and home movies. Primary sources were created by a person who witnessed an event first-hand.

**Secondary sources** are summaries, second-hand accounts, and analyses of events. They were created by someone who did not witness the event, but may have read or heard about it. Examples may include: books or articles written on a topic, artworks depicting an event, letters or diaries recounting a version of events told to the author by another source.

One source can contain both primary and secondary information. For example, a diary entry that contains a version of events the author read in the newspaper (**secondary**) and the author's feelings about the event (**primary**). Whether a source is primary or secondary can depend on the question you ask. If you are looking for information on how an event occurred, the diary entry written from a newspaper article would be a secondary source (the newspaper article may

be a primary source). But if you are asking how the author learned about an event, the diary entry written from a newspaper article would be a primary source.

Primary sources provide valuable information that we cannot find elsewhere. They speak to us in a first-person voice and bring history alive. They provide an individual's view of historic events and times, and they tell stories about how people lived and coped in the past. These letters, diaries, and photographs create engaging stories for students to learn about and relate to. By comparing conflicting primary sources, students learn to carefully examine actual documents, as well as the words they contain, evaluate evidence and point of view, and develop critical thinking skills about the past and also about their world today.

**Instructions for Teachers:**

Explain the definition of a primary source to your students. Ask them to think of examples of primary sources. Ask why they think primary sources are a valuable way to study history.

Divide students into small groups. Print copies of the letters, transcripts and worksheets for each student in each group. Give each group one letter, alternating the letters.

Before sending the groups to look at and read their respective original documents, describe the historical context of Solomon Brown's letters and life in Civil War Washington.

First have students examine the original documents carefully in their individual groups. Students should use the original documents and complete an analysis of the documents before they turn to the transcripts, which can be used for reading.

After students have thoroughly analyzed and read their documents and answered their questions in the small groups, bring the class back together for a large discussion. Have each group share a summary of their letters and the answers they found. Ask these questions to begin a discussion:

- What do these documents tell you about the lives of free Blacks in Washington, DC, prior to, during, and after the Civil War?
- How does reading these documents differ from reading a history of Washington, DC, in the 19th century?

*Please note that all Smithsonian Institution primary and secondary source materials can be used and reproduced for educational purposes without further permission.*

**Instructions for Students:**

In your assigned groups, look at, read, and analyze your source documents carefully. Answer the questions listed on your worksheet, using evidence from the documents to support your answers.

**Solomon Brown Letters: Life in Washington During the Civil War**

**Names:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Questions:**

1. Who wrote this letter?
2. When and where was this letter written?
3. What is this letter about?
4. Why was this letter written?
5. Who was the intended audience?
6. What was the point of view of the letter writer?
7. What does the letter tell you about life in Washington, DC, during the Civil War?
8. How does the grammar/spelling and word use differ from today's writing style?
9. Is this letter a primary source or secondary source, or both?
10. Are any/all parts of it a primary source, explain why or why not?
11. How could you check the accuracy of the information in the letter?
12. How does the information in the letter compare to what you have learned in your textbooks?

Letter Solomon G. Brown to Spencer F. Baird, September 4<sup>th</sup>, 1862:

617

Smithsonian Institution,  
Washington Sept 4<sup>th</sup> 1862

Prof Baird

Dear Sir

our city is again thought  
to be in great danger. Every body seems much frightened  
the enemy is said by some this morning to have appeared  
in Maryland — if this be true I don't see why they  
cannot come to Washington. in view of which  
I write to know if it would not be well to have  
your Silver quit ready for sending on to you as  
cartridges.

Please write soon (and) let me know.  
I feel as usual quite cool but yet I begin to fear  
our General is not alright. Some how or there is  
a serious doubt.

Respectfully yours,  
S. G. Brown

P.S.

We can do but little work here as we have  
no money — for every place and streets  
is filled with the poor cut up men.

Solomon G. Brown to Spencer F. Baird, September 4<sup>th</sup>, 1862, Smithsonian Institution Archives.  
<http://siarchives.si.edu/history/exhibits/documents/brown2.htm>

**Transcript:**

Smithsonian Institution

Washington Sept 4<sup>th</sup> 1862

Prof Baird

Dear Sir

our city is again thought to be in great danger. Every body seems much frightened the Enemy is said by some this morning to have appeared in Maryland – if this be true I don't see why they cannot come to Washington. in view of which I write to know if it would not be well to have your Silver got Ready for Sending on to you at Carlisles.

Please write soon and let me know. I feel as usual quite well but yet I begin to fear our Generals is not alright, Some how or there is a [?screw loosed].

Respectfully yours,

S.G.Brown

P.S.

We can do but little work here we have no [ ] for every place and streets is filled with the Poor cut up men.



Letter Solomon G. Brown to Spencer F. Baird, September 6<sup>th</sup>, 1862:

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Washington Sept. 6<sup>th</sup> 1862

Prof S F Baird

Dear Sir

your two Letters is before me. I went to Brady Gallag. Mr Amodei Requested me to say to you that I he had Recd your Letter some days before. but had not been able up to this time to fill your order owing to the fact that the negative plate of Capt Biddle being mislaid. but that he has found it now and will have Cords Ready in a few days and forward them to you. I was just now attempt to send the Box of S. for our city is in great Excitement over the news that Rebel has crossed in to Maryland with large numbers and that are marching on the Relay (and Annapolis) junctions if this be true it is dangerous to attempt to send any thing by Rail. however so many Troops is passing over the R.R. that the Express come are detained here. I have set about selecting a good place for it and should I find it necessary to hide it I will Inform you where it is. Excuse this Letter I write in haste for fear that the

Solomon G. Brown to Spencer F. Baird, September 6<sup>th</sup>, 1862, page 1, Smithsonian Institution Archives.

<http://siarchives.si.edu/history/exhibits/documents/brown2.htm>

Solomon G. Brown to Spencer F. Baird, September 6<sup>th</sup>, 1862, page 2, Smithsonian Institution Archives.

<http://siarchives.si.edu/history/exhibits/documents/brown2.htm>

**Transcript:**

Washington Sept. 6<sup>th</sup> 1862

Prof S F Baird

Dear Sir

your two letters is before me. I went to Brady gallery – Mr [?Amodon] requested me to say to you that I he had received your letter some days before, but had not been able up to this time to fill your order owing to the fact that the negative plate of Cape [?Bidelle] being [?misaid], but that he has found it now and will have [?cards] Ready in a few days and forward them to you. I will just now attempt to send the Box of S. for our city in is great Excitement over the news that Rebels had crossed in to Maryland with Large numbers and that are marching on the Relay and Anapolis Junctions. if this be true it is dangerous to to attempt to send any thing by Rail. however so many troops is passing over the R.R. that the Express [?cars] are [?delivered] here. I have set about selecting a good place for it and should I find it necessary to hide it I will inform you where it is. Excuse this letter I write in hast for fear that the mails **[Start Page 2]** may be stopped.

Yours Very Respectfully

S.G.Brown.



Letter Solomon G. Brown to Spencer F. Baird, July 15th, 1864:

4380  
July 21  
Smithsonian Institution  
Washington July 15<sup>th</sup> 1864  
Prof Baird  
Dear Sir  
Yours dated July 12<sup>th</sup> have just arrived and we are all glad to hear from you and family all here is well - many have been much frightened at the annual visit of the Rebels to their friends at Maryland, but we are told that the Johnny Rebs are returning home with lots of presents ~~and~~ including money from their pay entertainers, we are also told here <sup>that</sup> among many other funny things they performed <sup>that</sup> they knocked but the door of Washington was not opened unto them they being a set of high bred gentlemen concluded not to come in with us, some of civil treatment, so they marched off much to the joy (and comfort) of a greatly excited populace of this city, but you would really feel secure were you here just now

625  
Just as I was closing the book I saw a letter from you in my pocket. I will send it to you by the next mail. I am sure you will be glad to hear from me. I am sure you will be glad to hear from me. I am sure you will be glad to hear from me.

Solomon G. Brown to Spencer F. Baird, July 15th, 1864, page 1, Smithsonian Institution Archives.  
<http://siarchives.si.edu/history/exhibits/documents/brown2.htm>

particularly when the Report come in that the  
Rebels had left - for the South, to see the great number  
of brave fighting men that come out from their  
hiding places and paraded through streets in search  
of arms to meet the Rebels. but they was mistaken  
and to return to them several dens, I.E. the printing  
saloons, gambling halls and other low places. to fight among  
them else, for it was impossible for decently disposed persons  
to pass certain localities without be interfered with  
by this brave men who wanted to fight when the Rebel  
had gone, But not one gravel in the Roof of your  
very pleasant home has been misplaced, the inmates  
have much frightened the past 3 days refusing all  
consultations, but glad to sing on my visit this day  
found them <sup>very</sup> ~~happy~~ <sup>Parlous</sup> ~~and~~ of food which sustain life. and  
do at least afford consolation to the hungry. Mr Vander  
desire to be remembered to you and says that up to this  
time nothing have come & with <sup>the</sup> exception of one Thrilled Box  
(114) Books which Prof H. had me (Solomon) to open and  
miss gone to enter send aff. your chest, gun-belt & sword  
shall be got ready to day (and) sent off to E. Town. My  
the work of rearranging books. on hand progresses but

Solomon G. Brown to Spencer F. Baird, July 15th, 1864, page 2, Smithsonian Institution Archives.  
<http://siarchives.si.edu/history/exhibits/documents/brown2.htm>



Slouty, The Secd Nat. Park. l. of Meteor Results is being  
delivered Bound in cloth.

The Building is very slowly attended by visitors  
scarcely one person to be seen in Museum  
at any one time in the day.

Mary, & Sarah desire me to remember their kindly to  
you Mrs Baird & Miss Lucy.

And I would say that I may also be remember to them  
Paul Henry & family, Mr Meek, Mr Lyle, Mr Banister,  
Mr Reese Mr Force & Miss Sumner is still here  
also Mr Grant. Mr Seipp, Mr Lulivan, & Mr DeBorst.  
and assuming Mr Brown is also here.

all able to be at their several post & duty  
so that no dissatisfaction seems to exist. all is harmonious  
The market here have taken a sudden rise so that  
the cost of living since Saturday last is awful  
in the extreme. Flour \$20 @ 25. Butter .50 @ .75. Hams 35 @ 40.  
Milk 30 @ 35. Shoulder Bacon 25 @ 30. per lb. (and I learned this moment  
that they are yet going up in price. Should you go to Phila  
Please send me word what hours can be bought for them  
with the address of the Parties, and Brown Sugar is 35 @ 40  
here with an upward tendency, now what people here is to

Solomon G. Brown to Spencer F. Baird, July 15th, 1864, page 3, Smithsonian Institution Archives.  
<http://siarchives.si.edu/history/exhibits/documents/brown2.htm>

do is a question remain to be solved.  
I will not write more here will send for letter  
soon from you.  
I send on to day another Batch  
of Bafors. to the care of your Brother Mr. Wm Baird  
If your Mother is <sup>or ready</sup> ~~soon~~ Be kind enough to give  
regards to her -  
Yours very Respect-fully.  
Solomon G. Brown  
P.S. I had proposed a place in centre of the cell cellar  
under South tower under stone floor for the deposition of  
a box of Minerals committed to my care should any  
thing suddenly turn up to prevent them being shipped  
to a place of safety. outside of town.  
This you will remember should any thing turn  
up - but at present they remain where  
you have seen them  
Yours  
Solomon

Solomon G. Brown to Spencer F. Baird, July 15th, 1864, page 4, Smithsonian Institution Archives.  
<http://siarchives.si.edu/history/exhibits/documents/brown2.htm>

**Transcript:**

Smithsonian Institution

Washington July 15<sup>th</sup> 1864

Prof Baird

Dear Sir

Yours dated July 12<sup>th</sup> have just Arrived and we are all glade to hear from you and family all here is well - many have been much frightened at the annual visit of the Rebels to their friends at Maryland, but we are told that the Johny Rebs are returning home with lots of Presents ~~an~~ including money from their [?joy] Entertainers, we are also told here that among many other funny thing they performed that they knocked but the door of Washington was not opened unto them. they being a set of high bread gentlemen concluded not to come in with no, sure of civil treatment, so they marched off much to the joy and comfort of a greatly Excited Populace of this city, but you would really feel secure wane you here just now[**Start Page 2**] particularly when the Report came in that the Rebels had left for the South, to see the great number Brave fighting men that came out from their hiding Places and Paraded through streets in serch of arms to meet the Rebels. but they was mustered out to return to they several dens .I.E. the drinking Saloons, gambling halls and other low places. to fight enemy them selves, for it was Imposable for decently disposed persons to pass cirtain localities with out be interfered with by this brave men who wanted to fight when the Rebel had gone, But not one gravel on the Roof of your very pleasant home has been misplaced. the Inmates have much frightened the past 3 days refusing all consolations, but glad to say on my visit this day found them ~~Par taken each~~ Partaken of Food which sustains life and do at least afford consolation to the hungry. Mr Varden desire to be remembered to you and says that up to this time nothing have come & with the exception of one Flügel Box (114) Books which Prof H. had me (Solomon) to open and Miss Jane to Enter send off. your chest, jun-box & trunk shall be get Ready to day and sent of to E. Town, Ny. the work of Rearranging stock on hand progresses but [**Start Page 3**] slowly. The Sec'd Nat. Part. l. of Meteo Results is being dilivered Bound in cloth.

The Building is very slimly attended by visitors scarcely one person to be seen in Museum at any one hour in the day.

Mary, & Sarah desire me to remember them kindly to you Mrs Baird & Miss Lucy.

And I would beg that I may also be remembered to them Prof Henry & family, Mr Meek, Mr Gill, Mr Banister, Mr Rheese Mr Force & Miss Burner is still here Also Mr Gount Mr Diggs, Mr Sullivan, Mr DeBust and occasionally Mr Brown is also here.



All able to be at their several post & duty so that no dissatisfaction seems to Exist. all is harmonious The Market here have taken a sundon Rise so that the cost of living scence Saturday last is awfull in the Extrem. flour \$20 to 25. Butter 50 to 75. Hares 35 to 40 [?mulding] 30 to 35. shoulder bacon 25 to 30 per lbs. and I learned this moment that they are yet going up in price. Should you go to phila Please send me word what hams can be bought for there with the address of the Parties. and Brown sugar is 35 to 40 here with an upward tendency. now what people here is to [Start Page 4] do is a question remain to be solved.

I will not write more here will look for a letter soon from you.

I send on to day another Batch of paper to the care of your Brother  
Mr. Wm Baird If your mother is ~~there~~ at Reading Be kind Enough to give  
regards to her-

Yours very Respectfully

Solomon G. Brown

P.S. I had prepared aplace in center of the cole celler under South tower under stone floor for the deposition of a box of valuables committed to my care should any thing suddenly turn up to prevent them being shipped to a place of safty. outside of town.

This you will remember should anything turn up - but at present they  
remain where you last saw them

yours

Solomon

Letter Solomon G. Brown to Spencer G. Baird, September 23, 1864:

sep 29  
4579

185 7. Street  
Washington Sept. 23 1864

Prof Baird

Dear Sir

I have this day received notice that I (Solomon G. Brown) had been hired on Monday Sept. 20 legally (after) in service of US, for the period of one year. (and I was required to report for duty Saturday Sept. 24. but I am glad to inform you that I separated to duty (23) (and) was exempted on the grounds of Physical disability. and papers furnished accordingly. please inform Mr Baird (and) Miss Lucy, I have nearly run myself down hunting substitutes. and will have to take a days rest before resuming my ordinary duties. you will not fear find things in a very good order at S.I. on your return as I could wish. all well at home. none of the S.I. chief is yet arrived.

No more from yours very respectfully,  
S. G. Brown.

Solomon G. Brown to Spencer G. Baird, September 23, 1864, Smithsonian Institution Archives.  
<http://siarchives.si.edu/history/exhibits/documents/brown2.htm>

**Transcript:**

185 F. Street

Washington Sept. 23 1864

Prof Baird

Dear Sir

I have this day Received notice that I (Solomon G. Brown) had had been on Monday Sept. 20 legally drafted in service of U.S. for the period of one year. and I was required to report for duty Saturday Sept. 24. but I am glade to inform you that I reported to day (23<sup>rd</sup>) and was exempted on the grounds of Physical disability. and papers furnished accordingly. please inform Mrs Baird and Miss Lucy. I have nearly run myself down hunting substitutes. And will have to take a days rest before serving my ordinary duties. you will not I fear find things in a very good order at S.I. on your return as I could wish. all well at home. none of the S. I. chief is yet armed.

no more fear yours very respectfully,

S.G.Brown.

**Additional Resources:**

Reliable websites with documents online:

SI Stories, Smithsonian Institution Archives,  
<http://siarchives.si.edu/history/exhibits/documents/index.htm>

Smithsonian Institution Archives History Pages,  
<http://siarchives.si.edu/history>

Smithsonian Institution Archives Home Page,  
<http://siarchives.si.edu/>

Historic Pictures of the Smithsonian, Smithsonian Institution Archives,  
<http://siarchives.si.edu/history/exhibits/historic-pictures-smithsonian>

Smithsonian Institution Education site,  
<http://www.smithsonianeducation.org/educators/>

Smithsonian Institution Abraham Lincoln Online Conference,  
<http://www.smithsonianconferences.org/2009/siarchives/>

National Postal Museum, Letter Writing in America,  
<http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/letterwriting/index.html>

American Memory, Library of Congress, <http://memory.loc.gov>

Digital Classroom, National Archives, <http://www.archives.gov/education/index.html>

Edsitement, The Best of the Humanities on the Web, National Endowment for the Humanities,  
<http://edsitement.neh.gov/>

History Matters, The U.S. Survey Course on the Web, The Social History Project,  
<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/>

New York Times Archive, <http://timesmachine.nytimes.com/>