

# New Frontiers

A newsletter for ★ educators

THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND PUBLIC PROGRAMS AT THE JOHN F. KENNEDY PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY AND MUSEUM

## Spotlight on Letters as Primary Sources

This issue of *New Frontiers* spotlights historic letters as primary sources. Our cover story details the impact that teaching with “voices from the past” is having in elementary classrooms in Boston Public Schools. On page four, a document-based classroom lesson highlights John Glenn’s historic orbital flight and features a letter to President Kennedy from a thirteen-year-old who is concerned about the cost and purpose of the space program. These articles provide examples of how letters can help students make connections both to history and today’s world in meaningful ways.

The Library’s website features numerous letters with ties to history curricula including: JFK’s letters home from the South Pacific during WWII; a student campaign manager’s letter to JFK during the 1960 presidential race; letters detailing James Meredith’s long and arduous road to gaining admission to the segregated University of Mississippi; correspondence between a woman who had lost her brother in Vietnam and JFK, whose reply explains his rationale for sending our military to that country; and the series of exchanges between Kennedy and Khrushchev elucidating each side’s position during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

We invite you to explore these and other letters featured in lessons and activities in the teacher resources section of our website or to search our digital archives for

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## Historical Letters Reveal Voices from the Past

Historical letters help students connect to people in the past in unique and exciting ways. In deciphering a message from a young Jack Kennedy, or in analyzing a letter to President Lincoln from an enslaved woman, students become junior historians and discover authentic voices from the past. Since 2010, more than ninety Boston Public School elementary teachers have learned how to effectively use historical letters to teach history and language arts by participating in *Voices from the Past*, a 15-hour seminar funded by a U.S. Department of Education Teaching American History grant. Participants receive a variety of letters from different periods in American history and gain hands-on experience in analyzing the documents. After trying out letter-related activities in the seminar, educators design a classroom project that incorporates an historical letter, related children’s literature, and a writing activity. The projects guide students in constructing historical knowledge, developing historical empathy, and engaging in civic action.

At the Condon School in South Boston, Caroline St. Onge’s fourth-grade students discovered they could learn firsthand about a person’s values, beliefs, and accomplishments through historical letters. In a lesson designed to help students identify Robinson as the first African-American major league baseball player and a civil rights advocate, the young historians read an exchange of letters between Robinson and President Eisenhower regarding the president’s speech at the Summit Meeting of Negro Leaders (written May 13, 1958). They observed that while Robinson was clearly frustrated with Eisenhower’s call for patience on the issue of civil rights, the tone of the letter was polite and respectful. St. Onge established the historical context by reading and discussing excerpts from *Promises to Keep* by Robinson’s daughter, Sharon Robinson, and “Going to Bat for Equality”

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As part of a social studies unit, “Biographies of Problem Solvers,” Sarah Dominick’s second-grade students read and analyzed a letter written to President Lincoln by Annie Davis, who was enslaved in Maryland.

STAFF PHOTO

### HIGHLIGHTS

4 Letters as Primary Sources

6 The Presidency and Civil Rights

7 High School Budget Program

7 Upcoming Forums

## Spotlight on Letters *continued*

correspondence that will both resonate with your students and help to fulfill your teaching goals.

[www.jfklibrary.org/education/teachers/curricular-resources](http://www.jfklibrary.org/education/teachers/curricular-resources)

### ★ Elementary School:

[Plea for a Raise Lesson Plan](#)

[A Letter Home Activity \(The President's Desk Resource Guide, p.26\)](#)

[Managing a Presidential Campaign: The 1960 Election Lesson Plan](#)

[The Road to the White House Lesson Plan \(The President's Desk Resource Guide, p.43\)](#)

["Ask Not What Your Country Can Do For You" Lesson Plan](#)

[They Had a Dream Lesson Plan](#)

[Race to the Moon! Lesson Plan](#)

### ★ Middle School:

[Americans in Space Activities](#)

[Integrating Ole Miss Interactive Exhibit](#)

[Leaders in the Struggle for Civil Rights Online Exhibit](#)

[Why Choose the Moon? Lesson Plan](#)

### ★ High School:

[Integrating Ole Miss: How Should JFK Respond? Lesson Plan \(The President's Desk Resource Guide, p.60\)](#)

[World on the Brink: John F. Kennedy and the Cuban Missile Crisis Interactive Exhibit](#)

[Leaders in the Struggle for Civil Rights Online Exhibit](#)

[Military Advisors in Vietnam \(1963\) Lesson Plan](#)

[Why Choose the Moon? Lesson Plan](#)

## Historical Letters, *continued*

in *Scholastic News*. As a culminating activity, students expressed their regard for Robinson's accomplishments in letters written to Sharon Robinson.

Third graders in Kyla McCartney's class at the Dever School in Dorchester found that historical letters can put a human face on history. After learning about John F. Kennedy's life from the biography, *Jack's Path of Courage: The Life of John F. Kennedy* by Doreen Rappaport, students examined "A Plea for a Raise," a document written by ten-year-old Jack Kennedy to his father in which he requests an increase in his allowance. McCartney noted how students "were drawn in by the idea that this was a letter... that was clearly written by a kid, and it wasn't perfect. Then, when they learned that this real letter, with all its imperfections, was written by a future president, they were fully engaged with it." Students identified the audience, tone, and the reasons Kennedy presented to convince his father that he deserved an increase. The letter served as a mentor text for students as they composed their own persuasive letters.

Historical letters can spark students' imaginations and help them empathize with people who lived in the past. Sarah Dominick's second-grade students at the Mather School in Dorchester examined historical letters to explore the question, "How can one person make a difference in a community?" Having studied *Abe's Honest Words* by Doreen Rappaport and Scholastic's website *The Underground Railroad: Escape from Slavery*, students put their historical thinking skills to the test as they read a letter written by Annie Davis, a slave in Maryland, to President Lincoln after he had signed the Emancipation Proclamation asking whether or not she was free. After analyzing the letter, students imagined they were Annie Davis, recently freed, and wrote another letter to Lincoln. In their letters, they described the challenges they had endured and thanked him for ending slavery. In reflecting on the project, Dominick reports, "I believe my students were able to think critically about some very complicated subject matter. They used evidence from informational text and primary sources to draw conclusions and support their interpretations. I was also pleased to see their enthusiasm and interest during this lesson. I think the combination of read-aloud and primary sources really fostered this."

Ann Yard's passion about John Adams rallied her third-grade students at the Martin Luther King Jr. School in Dorchester to civic action. After reading several biographies, including *The Revolutionary John Adams* by Cheryl Harness, *A Picture Book of John and Abigail Adams* by David Adler, and *Why Don't You Get a Horse Sam Adams?* by Jean Fritz, students became strong supporters of the second president of the United States and his wife, Abigail. Their admiration grew as they read letters by John and Abigail Adams, including one dated July 24, 1775 in which John Adams writes to Abigail about the importance and challenges of the Continental Congress. Yard explains, "I was able to pull up John Adams' real letter in his own handwriting and we tried reading that first. They were amazed to be reading an actual handwritten letter. They understood that he was speaking to Abigail about the great responsibility all members of the Congress had assumed, and his tone almost sounded overwhelmed by this responsibility." Impressed by John Adams' accomplishments and talents, the third graders could not understand why there is no memorial to him in Washington, D.C. In an effort to properly honor the second president, they

wrote persuasive letters to President Obama advocating for a memorial to be built, and included original designs for the structure.

These examples are but a sampling of the innovative projects implemented by Boston teachers. Using historical letters adds a unique dimension to a social studies project, introducing real voices from people of the past. As one teacher explained, “It really is amazing what my third graders can understand and work with, and they are so

much more interested in ‘real’ things, rather than just reading out of a text book or secondary source each day. Primary sources, and especially letters, I think, bring history alive, even to elementary students, and I will continue to use them as a way to more fully engage my students.” Since the inception of the program, more than 1,500 students have discovered voices from the past through historical letters and quality children’s literature. ★

### Sample Historical Documents:

#### Jackie Robinson to President Eisenhower, May 13, 1958

[http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured\\_documents/jackie\\_robinson\\_letter/](http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured_documents/jackie_robinson_letter/)

#### President Eisenhower’s response

[http://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/research/online\\_documents/civil\\_rights\\_little\\_rock/1958\\_06\\_04\\_DDE\\_to\\_Robinson.pdf](http://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/research/online_documents/civil_rights_little_rock/1958_06_04_DDE_to_Robinson.pdf)

#### John F. Kennedy, A Plea for a Raise (listed as lesson plan under *Biographical Resources*)

[http://www.jfklibrary.org/Education/Teachers/Curricular-Resources/Elementary-School-Curricular-Materials and Public Programs/ Education/Lesson Plans/Young JFKs Plea for a Raise.pdf](http://www.jfklibrary.org/Education/Teachers/Curricular-Resources/Elementary-School-Curricular-Materials%20and%20Public%20Programs/Education/Lesson%20Plans/Young%20JFKs%20Plea%20for%20a%20Raise.pdf)

#### Annie Davis to President Lincoln (includes lesson from the National Archives Docs Teach program)

<http://docsteach.org/activities/7678/detail?mode=browse&menu=closed&era%5B%5D=civil-war-and-reconstruction&sortBy=title>

#### John Adams to Abigail Adams, July 24, 1775

<http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/aea/cfm/doc.cfm?id=L17750724jacopy>

### Bibliography:

Adler, David A. and Michael S. Adler. *A Picture Book of John and Abigail Adams*. New York: Holiday House, 2010.

Fritz, Jean. *Why don't you get a horse, Sam Adams?* New York: Penguin Group, 1974.

Harness, Cheryl. *The Revolutionary John Adams*. Washington, D.C.: 2003.

“Going to Bat for Equality.” *Scholastic News*. Ed. 4 Vol. 74 No. 16.

Rappaport, Doreen. *Jack’s Path of Courage: The Life of John F. Kennedy*. New York: Disney Hyperion Books, 2010.

Rappaport, Doreen. *Abe’s Honest Words*. New York: Hyperion Books, 2008.

Robinson, Sharon. *Promises to Keep*. New York: Scholastic, 2004.

Young, Dwight. *Dear Mr. President: Letters to the Oval Office from the Files of the National Archives*. Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 2006.

### Websites:

#### John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum. [www.jfklibrary.org](http://www.jfklibrary.org).

Teacher resources include biographies of John and Jacqueline Kennedy, historical essays, an extensive digital archive, lesson plans, interactive exhibits, and bibliographies.

#### *The Underground Railroad: Escape from Slavery*. Scholastic. [http://teacher.scholastic.com/activities/bhistory/underground\\_railroad/](http://teacher.scholastic.com/activities/bhistory/underground_railroad/)

A fictional narrative recounts the story of the Underground Railroad. Includes teacher guide, activities, slideshows, primary source material, links to related literature, and video book reviews by young people.

#### Adams Electronic Archive. Massachusetts Historical Society. <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/aea/letter/>

Access handwritten letters (which are transcribed) between John and Abigail Adams, other family members, friends, and professional associates. Includes diaries and autobiography of John Adams, biographical information, and student and teacher resources.

## Letters as Primary Sources: A Teen Criticizes the Space Program and the White House Replies

Recent festivities marking the 50th anniversary of John Glenn's February 20, 1962 orbital flight—the first by a US astronaut—recalled a triumphant moment in the nation's space program. After Col. Glenn's safe return, he was lauded by adults and children alike as a true American hero, and a big step had been taken toward President Kennedy's goal of reaching the moon. But not everyone was on board in the so-called "race for space."

A month before Glenn's historic flight, an eighth grader from Michigan had written to the president questioning why billions should be spent on space travel when money and talents could be used for "making our world a better place to live in." In her letter, 13-year-old Mary Lou Reitler also expressed a belief that when God created the world he expected human beings "to make a living with the tools He provided them with" and that "if He had wanted us to orbit the earth, reach the moon, or live on any of the planets... he would have put us up there Himself or He would have given us the missiles etc. to get there."

The writer's religious views aside, her basic criticism of the president's decisions was echoed by many other Americans and reflected a larger debate about what the nation's priorities should be with regard to the space program—a debate that continues today. Teachers exploring this topic in the context of history, current events or civics can use the letter as a focus for student engagement. It's an accessible primary source document in an authentic teenage voice—suitable for both middle school and high school classes.

### Using the Document in the Classroom

Hand out copies of the letter to students and have them read it first for content and comprehension. Then ask students to re-read it as though they were doing "a peer review" of a classmate's draft, focusing initially on the quality of the writing. They may notice that at the beginning and again at the end of her letter, Mary Lou Reitler asks the president to answer her question—but the question is never stated, only implied. Students should try to summarize her critique and re-frame it in the form of a question. They should then continue their peer review, adding notes in the margins with suggestions for how to strengthen the writing.

Turning students' attention to the content of the letter leads to a consideration of historical context. Here are a few suggested questions:

- Why do you think President Kennedy believed it was important to focus on space and landing American astronauts on the moon?



President Kennedy inspects the *Friendship 7* Mercury capsule with John Glenn, Cape Canaveral, Florida, February 23, 1962.

- What reasons could the president have given the US Congress to justify a large increase in the budget for NASA?
- What other national priorities in the early 1960s would have competed for federal funding?

Students will likely need to do research in order to respond to these questions. Once they have more historical background on the issues, have students imagine themselves being on the White House staff assisting President Kennedy with his correspondence. Ask them to prepare a letter of reply on the president's behalf.

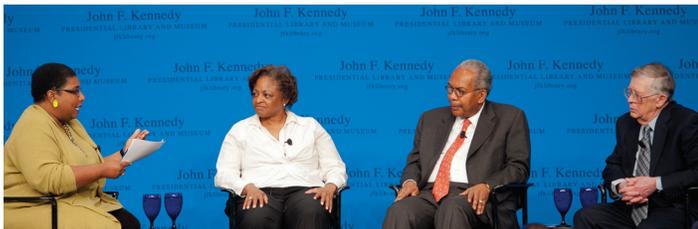
Students will naturally wonder whether President Kennedy ever answered Mary Lou Reitler's letter. A personal reply was in fact sent—not by the president himself but by a member of the White House staff named Myer Feldman. To read his letter and to see a more detailed lesson plan on space, including these two documents and additional



# The Presidency and Civil Rights: Conference Examines Milestones from FDR to LBJ

On February 20, a group of distinguished historians, journalists, and veterans of the Civil Rights Movement gathered to discuss key moments in civil rights history, from FDR's administration to the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Organized by the Kennedy Library with input from the Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, and Johnson Libraries, the conference also examined how lessons learned from the past resonate in our politics today.

The program began with a video greeting by former president George H.W. Bush, who recalled his vote for equal opportunity in housing as a congressman in 1968. In the opening session, Allida Black, executive director of *fdr4freedom*, discussed Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt's involvement with civil rights, noting how Mrs. Roosevelt's activism even led to attempts on her life. She highlighted Mrs. Roosevelt's role in the 1939 performance by singer Marian Anderson at the Lincoln Memorial. The audience also viewed an excerpt of the historic concert.



Panelists discuss the Truman and Eisenhower administrations at *The Presidency and Civil Rights* conference. Pictured from l. to r. are Callie Crossley, Carol Anderson, Ernest Green, and David Nichols.

In the second panel on *Truman and Eisenhower*, David Nichols, author of *A Matter of Justice: Eisenhower and the Beginning of the Civil Rights Revolution*, observed that while President Truman has been given due credit for desegregating the armed forces, his successor's role in advancing civil rights has not been adequately recognized, especially with regard to the Supreme Court. "Eisenhower appointed five justices ... he refused to appoint any justices with segregationist views."

The third panel on *Kennedy and Johnson* focused on how President Kennedy and his administration were drawn into the struggle against legalized segregation through the Freedom Rides, James Meredith's registration at Ole Miss, the conflict in Birmingham, and the integration of the University of Alabama.

Addressing young audience members, Charlayne Hunter-Gault, the first African-American graduate of the University of Georgia, stressed that, "It was the young people like



The final panel of *The Presidency and Civil Rights* conference assesses the current landscape of civil rights. Pictured from l. to r. are Tom Putnam, Ray Suarez, Charlayne Hunter-Gault, Roger Wilkins, and Allida Black.

you who changed the minds of the Kennedys ...." She added, in reference to the Freedom Rides, that "... it took these young people, fearless and ready to die, in order to get the attention of the federal government."

Harris Wofford, who served as JFK's special assistant for civil rights, summarized his impressions of the Kennedy presidency by noting that "...the Kennedys started way down toward ground zero in terms of understanding or a commitment to a priority of civil rights. By the time John [President Kennedy] was killed... they were way up there. And they were committed in ways that no president who had really been on the firing line committed before."

On the issue of President Johnson's role in securing passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the extent to which the Kennedy administration had laid the groundwork, the panelists expressed diverse opinions. They cited both LBJ's legislative acumen and the impact of the president's death as having contributed to the passage of the legislation which was by no means an inevitable outcome.

The conference closed with a final session assessing the current landscape of civil rights and more recent issues, such as the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy, immigration laws, and gay marriage. Despite the many achievements of the past 80 years, panelists asserted that civil rights have not come far enough.

To view a video of the conference, please visit [www.jfklibrary.org/Events-and-Awards/The-Presidency-and-Civil-Rights](http://www.jfklibrary.org/Events-and-Awards/The-Presidency-and-Civil-Rights). ★

The conference is part of a series of programs, *JFK50: Justice for All*, sponsored by the Kennedy Library in partnership with Bingham McCutchen LLP.



## High School Students Set National Priorities

With generous support from: 

**"This is hard!"** one teenage girl groaned. Seated around a table at the Kennedy Library, a group of 15 high school students from seven schools heatedly debated how their government should spend taxpayer dollars. One student declared that we spend too much money on defense and that we "have enough nuclear arms to blow up the world seven times over." Another argued that people around the world hate us, and we need a strong defense to protect against terrorism. A third student insisted that we must draw down the federal debt, and that cutting defense spending would be a good place to begin since we "already have the best army in the world."

Throughout the winter, they and approximately 1,000 of their peers from communities throughout Massachusetts took part in *Setting National Priorities: A Federal Budget Simulation Program*. Acting as economic advisers to the president, the students grappled with the difficult budgetary issues facing our nation. After reviewing a list of government programs, they worked in small groups to prioritize

spending needs and make recommendations on where they would either invest more or make cuts in each category.

Although the federal debt was a pressing concern for the students attending the February 15th event, described above, fewer than half the groups agreed to make significant cuts in overall federal discretionary spending. Most groups made major cuts in defense spending, but wanted to increase funding for education, and energy research and conservation; and a few asserted that the government should spend money where it would stimulate the economy and create the most jobs.

In facing these real world challenges, students realized that it is easier to talk about the need for particular programs than to find money to fund them. Teachers noted that the program brought to life a subject that can be tedious for high school students and that the opportunity for students to sit with a diverse group of their peers and discuss the issues of the day was invaluable. ★

## UPCOMING KENNEDY LIBRARY FORUMS *Spring 2012*

Watch live-streaming webcasts of Kennedy Library Forums at [www.jfklibrary.org/webcast](http://www.jfklibrary.org/webcast). The forums with Madeleine Albright and David McCullough are full, but if you are an educator and would like to attend, email [jfkforums@nara.gov](mailto:jfkforums@nara.gov) to reserve a place.

### A Conversation with Madeleine Albright

Thursday, April 26,  
6:00 p.m. to 7:30 p.m.



Madeleine Albright discusses her memoir, *Prague Winter: A Personal Story of Remembrance and War, 1937-1948*, with Ambassador **Nicholas Burns**, professor at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government.

### Alan Brinkley on JFK

Tuesday, May 15,  
5:30 p.m. to 7:00 p.m.

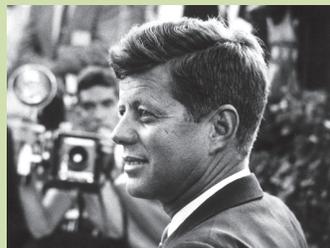


PHOTO BY JACQUES LOWE

Alan Brinkley, the Allan Nevins Professor of American History at Columbia University, discusses his new biography in The American Presidents Series, *John F. Kennedy: The 35th President, 1961-1963*, with historian **Ellen Fitzpatrick**.

### LBJ: From Senate Majority Leader to President

Wednesday, May 16,  
5:30 p.m. to 7:00 p.m.



Pulitzer Prize-winning author **Robert Caro** discusses the fourth volume in his biography of LBJ, *The Passage of Power: The Years of Lyndon Johnson*, with Pulitzer Prize-winning *Boston Globe* writer **Mark Feeney**.

### David McCullough on Americans in Paris

Thursday, June 7,  
5:30 p.m. to 7:00 p.m.



David McCullough discusses his latest book, *The Greater Journey*, about prominent 19th-century Americans' formative years in Paris.

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## FREE PERFORMANCES FOR STUDENTS AND FAMILIES

The *Celebrate!* series, appropriate for family audiences and children ages 5 and up, highlights America's rich cultural diversity through the performing arts. Each event provides an opportunity for children to learn something new about a tradition or art form. Schools often organize family outings to *Celebrate!* programs taking place during school vacations. To make a reservation for families at your school, please visit [www.jfklibrary.org](http://www.jfklibrary.org), or call the *Celebrate!* hotline at 617-514-1644. Families may also sign up individually online or by phone. ★

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STAFF PHOTO

The audience joins performer Veronica Robles on stage during her *Celebrate!* performance, October 10, 2011, Stephen Smith Center.

For more online educational resources, be sure to visit [www.JFK50.org](http://www.JFK50.org), winner of the 2011 Gold MUSE Award for Education and Outreach.

*Additional support for the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum's history and civic education programs is provided by the Connell Family Fund, the John F. Kennedy Irish Abroad Gift and:*



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The Kennedy Library  
Department of Education and  
Public Programs offers free  
museum passes to teachers  
considering a field trip to the  
Library. Please call 617.514.1600.

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**Museum Hours**  
Daily, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.  
Closed Thanksgiving,  
Christmas, and New Year's Day