

Voices from the Hull: William Russell and the Experience of Revolutionary War Prisoners

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DESIGN LEVEL: Middle-High School

Overview

Students will analyze [William Russell's Revolutionary War letters](#), and related documents, to explore the shared hardships, resilience, and emotional experiences of American prisoners of war through primary source investigation and historical inquiry.


Objectives

Students will:

- Analyze primary source letters to understand the lived experiences of Revolutionary War prisoners.
- Identify common themes such as hardship, resilience, family connection, and hope.
- Compare individual experiences to broader historical contexts.
- Develop empathy and historical thinking through close reading and discussion.

Materials

Group A:

- Document 1 Primary Source James Young & Ralph Mitchell, British Justices of the Peace, ms. document, Devon [Eng.], Dec. 19, 1779, being a warrant "To the constables of the parish of Stock Demirale [i.e. Stoke Damerel] in the said County and to keepers of the place ... called Old Mill Prison ..." requiring them to confine Russell
- [Document 1 Transcript, Guiding Questions and Answers](#)
- Document 2 Primary Source William Russell, A.L.S. Mill Prison [Plymouth, Eng.] March 2, 1781 to Mary Russell
- [Document 2 Transcript, Guiding Questions and Answers](#)
- Document 3 Primary Source William Russell, A.L.S. Mill Prison [Plymouth, Eng.] April 11, 1781 to Mary Russell
- [Document 3 Transcript, Guiding Questions and Answers](#)
-  [Group A Supplementary Information](#)

Group B:

- Document 4 Primary Source William Russell, A.L.S. on board the Jersey prison ship New York, November 21, 1782 to Mary Russell
- [Document 4 Transcript, Guiding Questions and Answers](#)

- Document 5 Primary Source William Russell, A.L.S. New York, on board the Jersey Prison Ship, November 25, 1782 to Mary Richardson
- [Document 5 Transcript, Guiding Questions and Answers](#)
- Document 6 Primary Source William Russell, A.L.S. New York, on board the Jersey Prison Ship, December 7, 1782 to Mr. Edes [Benjamin Edes]
- [Document 6 Transcript, Guiding Questions and Answers](#)
- Document 7 Primary Source William Russell, A.L.S. New York, Jersey Prison Ship, December 31, 1782 to Mary Russell
- [Document 7 Transcript, Guiding Questions and Answers](#)
- Document 8 Primary Source William Russell, A.L.S. New York, Jersey Prison Ship, January 17, 1783 to Mary Russell
- [Document 8 Transcript, Guiding Questions and Answers](#)
- [Group B Supplementary Information](#)

Group C

- Document 9 Primary Source Thomas D. Hewlings, British Deputy Commissary of naval prisoners at New York, D.S. partially printed, being a 'true copy' of 3 month parole for Russell & Samuel Thompson. Includes a ms. note that "Bachus, a Negro boy, their servant is allowd to go with them."
- [Document 9 Transcript, Guiding Questions and Answers](#)
- Document 10 Primary Source William Russell, A.L.S. New Haven, Connecticut, March 23, 1783 to Mary Russell
- [Document 10 Transcript, Guiding Questions and Answers](#)
- Document 11 Primary Source William Russell, A.L.S. Halifax, Nova Scotia, May 16, 1783 to Mary Russell
- [Document 11 Transcript, Guiding Questions and Answers](#)
- [Group C Supplemental Information](#)

Recommended Time

Two 50-minute class periods.

Lesson Activities

1. Introduce the activity: Historians are like puzzle solvers—they gather scattered pieces of evidence to build a fuller picture of the past. Today, you will work to piece together the story of William Russell and, in doing so, explore the question: How do his letters and related sources help us understand the shared struggles, resilience, and humanity of Revolutionary War prisoners?
2. Teacher introduced background on William Russell:
Who Was William Russell?

In June 1779, a 31-year-old man named William Russell from Boston joined the crew of a privateer ship called the Jason. Privateers were privately owned ships that

were given permission by the American government to attack British ships during the Revolutionary War. Between 2,000 and 3,000 of these ships were active during the war. Many New Englanders became privateers—records from a British prison show that over two-thirds of the captured privateers were from New England.

Before joining the Jason, William Russell worked as an assistant schoolteacher and was expected to take over as head of the school when the current leader retired. He married his wife, Mary, in January 1772, just before their first child was born. Living in Boston—a center of protest against British taxes—likely influenced Russell's political views. He became involved with the Sons of Liberty and even took part in the Boston Tea Party in 1773.

In March 1776, when the British army left Boston, they damaged and looted the Russell family's home. William and Mary moved to Cambridge to stay with her family until 1777. Already supportive of the American cause, William may have decided to become a privateer for two main reasons: to fight for freedom and to earn money.

3. Provide students with one of the 11 primary sources. It is suggested the teacher grant them access only to the original source, with no/little background information. These links can be found at the bottom of the primary source linked page as IIF Image. Do note: some of these documents are multiple pages with each page having its own specific link. Students may end up in partners or groups of three, this is encouraged. Note: Depending on the ability level of your students and their comfort with primary sources the teacher may have students skip this step and provide only the transcripts. It is suggested that students have access to their primary sources in order to confirm it is a letter, official document, preprinted form and to examine how Russell's handwriting may be affected by his present conditions.
4. As students examine their assigned document have them answer basic primary source analysis questions such as:

Sourcing

- Who created this document?
- When and where was it created?
- What type of document is it (letter, diary, speech, official record)?
- What do we know about the author's background or perspective?

Contextualization

- What was happening at the time this document was written?
- How might the historical context have influenced the content or tone?
- What does this document tell us about the time period?

Close Reading

- What is the main idea or message of the document?
- What specific details or language stand out?
- Are there any emotions or opinions expressed? How are they conveyed?

Perspective and Purpose

- Why was this document created?
- Who was the intended audience?
- What might the author want the reader to think, feel, or do?

5. Keeping students in the same pair/small group, provide them with the transcript of their document. Included in the transcript are guiding questions specific to that document. (Possible answers are also included for the teacher's use.)
6. At this time students should have a strong understanding of their individual document. Have students combine into Groups A, B, and C, depending on where their document was listed under "Materials". Students should share their analysis and contents of their document with their letter group and the group should work together to create a clear picture of William Russell's situation at this time.
7. Once students believe they have an accurate account of what was happening to Russell at that time, provide them with their assigned Supplementary Information sheet. Once students have had a chance to read it, encourage them to go back to their answers and edit them to reflect the information they now know.
8. Give each group post-it notes or papers they will use to create a timeline of their era of Russell's experience. Students should include as many events as needed to include:
 - Involvement in the war
 - Capture by British forces
 - Imprisonment dates and conditions such as illness or health struggles
 - Letters sent to family (with dates and key themes)
 - Parole or release from captivity
 - Expressions of hope, despair, resilience, and family connection in letters
 - Mentions of friendships with captains or fellow prisoners
 - Reflections on freedom, patriotism, and duty

Remind students that their supplementary information was specific to their group and information from those essays should also be included.

9. Students will combine as a whole class to create a timeline of William Russell's experiences between 1779 and 1783. While this has been presented as a "post-it timeline" it could easily be completed digitally as a shared PowerPoint or Slides activity. The goal is for students to share what they know about William Russell's experience based on the sources provided.
10. Teacher information to share with students
So What Happened to William Russell?

The summer of 1783, after months of attempted trade, Russell finally returned to Boston. But after all his years of hardship, he came home with very little. His family had remained in Cambridge, living with Mary's relatives. Russell reopened a school and returned to teaching, but his health had been badly damaged by years of imprisonment. His tuberculosis worsened, and on March 7, 1784, William Russell died at the age of thirty-five.

Culminating Activity

During the American Revolutionary War, it is estimated that approximately 20,000 American soldiers and sailors were held as prisoners of war by the British, and nearly 8,500 of them died in captivity due to harsh conditions, disease, and neglect. William Russell was one of many, we know his name because so many of his letters survived.

How do William Russell's letters and related sources help us understand the shared struggles, resilience, and humanity of Revolutionary War prisoners?

Student Instructions:

Using at least two of William Russell's letters and one additional source (such as a historical background text or another POW account), write a well-developed response that addresses the prompt above. Your response should:

- Introduce who William Russell was and the context of his letters.
- Describe the hardships faced by Russell and other prisoners (e.g., illness, hunger, separation from family).
- Explain how Russell's words show resilience and emotional strength.
- Reflect on what these sources reveal about the human experience of war.
- Use direct evidence (quotes or paraphrased details) from the letters and sources to support your ideas.

Suggested Length:

Middle School: 1–2 paragraphs (6–10 sentences)

High School: 3–5 paragraphs (structured essay)

Extension

Creative Writing: Historical Perspective Letters

Students write a letter or journal entry from the perspective of:

- A Revolutionary War prisoner (like William Russell)
- A privateer at sea
- A family member waiting at home

They should include historical details, emotional tone, and references to actual events or conditions described in Russell's letters.

Mapping Russell's Journey

Students create a visual map tracing William Russell's movements during the war, including locations such as:

- The Jersey prison ship
- Mill Prison in England
- Halifax, Nova Scotia
- New Haven, Connecticut

Each location should be annotated with quotes or summaries from his letters and historical context.

Dramatic Reading or Podcast

Students select one of Russell's letters and perform a dramatic reading or record a short podcast episode. They can include:

- Narration of the historical context
- Voice acting of the letter
- Reflections or commentary on the emotional and historical significance

Primary Source Detective

Students receive excerpts from Russell's letters out of chronological order. Working in teams, they:

- Analyze language, content, and historical clues
- Sequence the excerpts correctly
- Justify their reasoning with evidence from the text and historical knowledge

Standards Addressed

Middle School (Grades 6–8):

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.6-8.1](#) Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.6-8.2](#) Determine a central idea of a text and how it is conveyed through particular details.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.6-8.6](#) Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text and explain how it is conveyed.

High School (Grades 9–10):

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.1](#) Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.3](#) Analyze how the author unfolds an analysis or series of ideas or events.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.6](#) Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how an author uses rhetoric to advance that point of view or purpose.

Writing (W)

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6-10.1](#) Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6-10.2](#) Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information clearly.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6-10.9](#) Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Speaking & Listening (SL)

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6-10.1](#) Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions with diverse partners on grade-level topics, texts, and issues.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6-10.4](#) Present claims and findings, sequencing ideas logically and using appropriate facts and descriptive details.

Additional Resources:

- Cogliano, Francis D. *American Maritime Prisoners in the Revolutionary War: The Captivity of William Russell*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2001.
- Jones, T. Cole. "The Dreadful Effects of British Cruelty: The Treatment of American Maritime Prisoners and the Radicalization of the Revolutionary War at Sea." *Journal of the Early Republic* 36, no. 3 (Fall 2016): 435–465.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/jearyrepublic.36.3.435>.
- Outten, Andrew. *A Collection of Letters Written from Captivity by William Russell*. The American Revolution Institute, December 15, 2023. Video, 49:15.
<https://www.americanrevolutioninstitute.org/video/a-collections-of-letters-written-from-captivity-by-william-russell/>.
- The Prison History. "Mill Prison, Plymouth, Devon." Accessed July 23, 2025.
<https://theprison.org.uk/PlymouthPW/>.