



Decoding Primary Source Documents at Liberty Hall Museum

Documents speak volumes and can give us insight into historical events, but what exactly is a document? A document is a written or printed paper or record furnishing information or evidence. Do you think you have ever handled a document? Have you ever received a receipt from a restaurant or store? That receipt is a document, and that “document”, if found two hundred years from now, could provide a historian in the year 2220 vital information about the diet of people living 200 years ago.

The document you’ll be examining today is a specific type of document, called a primary source document. That means it was created at the time under study.

The document below is a copy of the original document. We have provided this document for study purposes because the actual document may be too fragile to handle. While analyzing this document, you will be doing the work of a historian. When you read a social studies textbook, have you ever wondered “how do we know that happened?” or whose viewpoint is being represented. This is your opportunity to directly explore how historians record history.

Instructions:

- Start by looking at the document itself. Do your best to read the cursive and try to pick out a few words. We have provided you a transcribed version of the document to make things a little easier.
- Read through the transcription.
- Follow the prompts on the worksheet:
 - Collect Knowledge
 - Analyze the Information
 - Question the Document
- Remember to think about what conclusions you can draw about this period in history from reading the document.

Tag us on Social Media!

If you enjoyed decoding this document, we'd love to hear about it! Please share your stories and pictures by emailing the museum or tagging us on our social media platforms!

- Email: libertyhall@kean.edu
- Facebook: libertyhallmuseum
- Instagram: @libertyhallmuseum

Document:

To: Peter Kean

From: Sarah Morris Kean

August 09, 1815

me either at this place or Albany is perfectly convenient, if
not brother John has kindly offered to return me to Maine. —
Mr. & Mrs. Branch, Col. & Mrs. Van Rensselaer came down
to see me last week, they admired our fine boys much. — The
weather is delightful indeed, morning & evening we set by a fire
and have for a fortnight past how different from that I
experienced this time last year, indeed I think the construction of
the Maine House a very hot one, I have never felt the heat
any where so oppressive. — I wish you would endeavor to procure
an oil cloth for the room over the Kitchen it is a convenient room &
I like it for winter, but I wish never occupy it in summer again
would it has been a matter of no small concern since I felt you
that you should sleep there during the hot weather. it is by far
the hottest room I ever slept in in my life, it is enough to destroy the
most robust constitution. —
We are in daily expectation of a visit from George
B. & Mrs. Coville. — the latter I shall not

Transcription:

To: Peter Kean

From: Sarah Morris Kean

August 09, 1815

... me either at this place or Albany if perfectly convenient, if not brother John has kindly offered to return me to Ursino.—

Mr. & Mrs. Franchot, Col. & Mrs. VanRenssaler came over to see me last week, they admired our fine boys much.— The weather is delightful indeed, morning + evening we set by a fire and have for a fortnight past. How different from that I experience this time last year, indeed I think the construction of the Ursino house a very hot one, I have never felt the heat any where so oppressive— I wish you would endeavor to procure an oil cloth for the room over the kitchen it is a convenient room & I like it for winter, but I will never occupy it in summer again indeed, it has been a matter of no small concern since I left you lest you should sleep there during the hot weather. it is by far the hottest room I ever slept in in my life, it's enough to destroy the most robust constitution.

We are in daily expectation of a visit from ...

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Background information: In 1811, Susan Livingston Kean Niemcewicz buys Liberty Hall through her son Peter Kean because women were not allowed to buy property. Susan then changes the name of the estate to Ursino, in honor of her husband. Peter and his wife Sarah eventually move into Ursino. This document is only a portion of a letter from Sarah to Peter. In this excerpt, Sarah is writing from her family's estate in Butternuts, Otsego, New York to Peter and Susan who are at Ursino.

Collect Knowledge:

What is the date? _____

Who is the author? _____

Who received the document? _____

Analyze the Information:

1. What is Sarah commenting about in this letter?
 - a. What does this tell about how people lived during Sarah's time?

2. Sarah wrote this letter from Upstate New York. She had brought her children with her to New York. Why might she have taken the kids out of New Jersey to Upstate New York?
 - a. What clues can you find in this excerpt that might answer the above question?

 - b. What does this tell us about life during Sarah's time?

Question the Document:

What questions does this document raise?

Feel free to email your questions to the museum at libertyhall@kean.edu.

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