

Simon's Escape

OVERVIEW

This lesson introduces students to the concept of primary source documents and to specific primary source documents—two letters from Oliver Johnson to Rowland T. Robinson that record the journey of Simon as he escaped from Maryland and sought freedom in the North. The letters come from the collection at Rokeby Museum and are used in *Free & Safe: The Underground Railroad in Vermont*, the exhibit you will visit.

DOCUMENTS

- Letter, Oliver Johnson to Rowland T. Robinson, January 27, 1837
- Letter, Oliver Johnson to Rowland T. Robinson, April 3, 1837

Note: *Rowland Robinson replied to Oliver Johnson's January letter, but it is not in the Museum collection. Some of what it said can be deduced from Johnson's second letter.*

DOCUMENT DISCOVERY

Divide students into teams of two and distribute copies of the two letters from Oliver Johnson to Rowland T. Robinson and the document analysis worksheet. You can give half the teams the first letter and the other half the second letter or give all teams both letters, depending on class size and how much time and effort you want students to spend. You may want to have the class read the letters aloud before beginning, depending on age and reading level.

Reconvene and ask students to report on their work. The worksheet asks students to list three things they think are important—list all the items students identified on the board and ask for more. Ask students to summarize what they have learned about Simon and the Robinsons from the letters.

One important thing the author (Oliver Johnson) says is, “Simon had intended going to Canada in the spring, but would prefer to stay in the U.S. if he could be safe. I have no doubt he will be perfectly safe with you.” Ask students what this means about the Underground Railroad at Rokeby and in Vermont.

AN OPTIONAL LESSON ON PRIMARY SOURCE DOCUMENTS

Materials: an orange, an empty container of pure orange juice, an empty container of Sunny D (or some other orange-flavored drink)

Engage students in discussion of primary source documents. Do they know what the term means? It refers to documents created by the people actually engaged in historical events at the time they took place. Primary source documents are the raw materials historians use to write books and articles. Such books and articles are known as “secondary sources.”

Here is a way for students to understand it:

The orange represents Oliver Johnson or Rowland T. Robinson or the Underground Railroad. Ask students to list words that describe the orange.

Pure orange juice is like a primary source document—it's not the orange itself, but as close as you can get to it. How would students describe it? How close is it to their description of the orange?

The orange drink—with no actual orange juice and lots of added sugar and other substances—is like a secondary source. How much is Sunny D like an orange?

This is an excerpt of a longer letter.

Jenner Township, Somerset Co. Pa.

Jan. 27, 1837

My Dear Friend,

I have not forgotten my promise to write you, though I have not, until now, found a favorable opportunity to redeem my pledge. I am induced to write you at this time, on account of circumstances which I shall proceed without further introduction, to communicate. If you will look at the map of the U. S. suspended in your north room, you will perceive that this county lies very near Maryland. I am now, perhaps, 30 miles from the line. There are in this region at all times no small number of runaway slaves, but they are generally caught unless they proceed farther north. I saw yesterday, in this township a stout man who ran away from Maryland. He is 28 years old, and appeared to me to be an honest, likely man. He says he was sold with several others to a soul-driver for \$1,000; consequently he must have been considered very valuable. When he came here (some time in December I think it was) he was destitute of decent clothing, and unable to proceed, as he intended when he left Maryland, to Canada. A man in this place by the name of William C. Griffith, the son of a Friend, who has often rendered assistance to runaways, kindly offered to keep him until spring. A reward of \$200. has been offered for his apprehension, and it is not considered safe for him to remain here after winter has gone by, as search will no doubt be made for him. I was so well pleased with his appearance, and with the account given of him by Griffith, that I could not help thinking he would be a good man for you to hire. Mr. Griffith says he is of a kind disposition, and knows how to do all most all kinds of farm work. He is used to teaming, and is very good to manage horses. He says that he could beat any man in the neighborhood where he lived, in Maryland, at mowing, cradling, or pitching. He has intended going to Canada in the spring, but says he would prefer to stay in the U. S., if he could be safe. I have no doubt he would be perfectly safe with you. Would you not like to have him go to you in the spring? I fear that, if he goes to Canada, he may fall into bad company; but if he is under your guardianship, I think he may become a useful man. The project struck my own mind so pleasantly that I resolved to write you on the subject. It will be a great way for him to walk, but not worse than going to Canada. He can be furnished with the names of abolitionists on whom to call upon the way, and I think may reach Vermont in safety. I wish you would think of the case and write me your conclusions. If you say, "let him come" I will endeavor to make the best possible arrangements in regard to the journey.

... I feel anxious to hear from you, particularly concerning your health. Excuse the haste of this letter, and present my love to all your family.

I am yours affectionately,

R.T. Robinson

Oliver Johnson

This is an excerpt of a seven-page letter; the rest contains details of Johnson's activities and opinions.

South Weymouth, Mass.

April 3, 1837

My Dear Friend,

Yours of Feb.—reached me at Boston. . . .

And now about “Simon.” Immediately after receiving your letter, I wrote to Wm. C. Griffith of Jenner, the man with whom Simon was living, telling him to send the man to you as soon as he could be got ready for the journey. I gave him such directions as will enable him to reach Philadelphia, where he will put himself under the direction of our friends, who will give him all needfull information concerning the route to New York, at which last place he will be befriended by the “Committee of Vigilance,” or by members of the Ex. Committee. I trust he will meet with no serious difficulty on the way. He appeared to me to be a man of considerable perseverance, and I trust he will not be discouraged though it is a long way to your residence. I hope he will arrive in safety and prove to be an honest, faithful laborer—such a one as you need. If such should be the result, I shall have occasion to rejoice that I was instrumental in finding him a place where I am sure every thing will be done to promote his happiness, and where the “laborer” will be considered “worthy of his hire,” instead of being regarded as a mere chattel and compelled to toil without hopes of reward. Mr. Griffith spoke in high terms of his abilities and faithfulness, and the impression which he made on my mind was highly favorable. I saw him but little, however, and formed my opinion chiefly from what Mr. Griffith told me. I hope he will not disappoint us, except by proving himself a better man even than he was represented to be. . . .

...Let me hear from you often. Your letters will afford me no little satisfaction.

Yours affectionately,

Oliver Johnson

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS WORKSHEET*

What type of document is this? Circle one:

newspaper letter map diary census report account book speech other

What are the document's physical characteristics, circle all appropriate:

handwritten typed notations letterhead seals other

What is the date of the document?

Who wrote the document?

What is the author's position or title?

Who was the document written for?

Why was this document written?

List three things the author says that you think are important:

What does the document tell you about life at the time it was written?

What question do you have for the author after reading the document?
