Jean O’Connor

From the Boston Stone Jail, 1775

The author shares a letter written by American patriot James Lovell in September 1775 and encourages teachers to use primary sources to entice students’ development of narrative.

I slit open the tape-bound sides of the square cardboard package. Within a glossy plastic sleeve lie large, rectangular papers, tan and so brittle with age that cracks mar their surface. Delicate handwriting covers the pages, the ink faded to a dull brown.

I pull the two sheets out, holding my breath. “My dear boys” are the first words of the elegant, antique script. I gasp. I know this writing, the wording, the content. I have read this letter—though I have never seen it before.

I turn the paper over and find the date, the flowing signature. “September 21, 1775. James Lovell.” My sister said she had found something, but her finding startles me beyond belief.

I read the letter quickly. In good parenting fashion, Lovell’s letter warns his children to have upright behavior, reminds them of God’s love for them, asks them to be kind to one another. He concludes with “both my dear boys, be assured of the tokens of the continued love of your affectionate father.”

What anxiety, affection, and hope he expressed so long ago! I do know the story.

I have spent months researching American patriot James Lovell. Lovell first beckoned to me from the pages of my grandmother’s journal. I followed the story of my great-great-great-grandfather to Boston, then to Halifax, then to Washington, D.C. and finally to Ithaca.

An eighteenth-century schoolmaster of the Boston Latin School, political prisoner, and statesman, he fell under suspicion of spying for the Americans following the Battle of Bunker Hill. Thrown into the Boston Stone Jail in June of 1775, he suffered the heat, flies, and filthy conditions of the British jail that summer and winter.

Lovell wrote to his two boys, Jemmy and
Johnny, ages twelve and thirteen, during his stay in the Boston Stone Jail. The boys lived with a family friend at Cambridge while the British occupied Boston.

In early spring, Lovell was transferred to a British prison in Halifax, Nova Scotia, when General Howe evacuated Boston. Eight months later, in November of 1776, he was finally exchanged with a prisoner at the request of General George Washington. Lovell joined the Second Continental Congress, where he served for five years as clerk and secretary, longer than any other member of this wartime governing body. As part of my research I had obtained a copy of this very same letter from Lovell to his boys, sent to me by the William Clements Library in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The letter from the Library was penned in the even handwriting of a clerk. Now I hold the real thing, the beautiful antique script graceful and elegant, in James Lovell’s distinctive handwriting.

My sister explains she found the old letter in a box salvaged from our grandmother’s house in Andover, Massachusetts. I marvel at the love of the family that would save treasures such as this letter for the future.

How has the original turned up when I know a copy had been filed in a research library? I can only surmise that someone investigating James Lovell’s story visited my grandmother’s house, recorded the letter, then returned the original to the family.

In the hundreds of pieces of research I gathered in my pursuit of the story of James Lovell, books, first person accounts, letters, and records from the Colonial British Office, I found no other piece that showed the deep feelings this revolutionary had for his children. The letter tells me more about the love and affection he held for his family than any other portion of the record. The actual letter James Lovell had written in that pest-ridden jail so many years ago speaks volumes of his love and loyalty.

How can one doubt the existence of love? Following this story as I have for five years, writing the story into a novel I title The Cause, I know this letter holds the secret to his efforts to help his country, his love for his family.

How does this story speak to us as teachers? The kernels of truth in primary sources are limitless. I advocate for using our museums, our libraries, mining them for reflections on our lives and communities. The Montana Historical Society has digitized nearly 460,000 full-text searchable pages from 71 newspapers (1883–2015), available at the site “Montana Newspapers.” Another 257,000 pages from 59 newspapers (1864–1922) can be found on the national site “Chronicling America.” Both are linked at this page: https://mhs.mt.gov/research/collections/newspapers/mtnews.

Allowing students to create the “story” behind the published articles can be fascinating and illuminating to them. My students wrote narratives bringing to life experiences in Montana during the Depression after reading The Grapes of Wrath. Find them at Montana Stories of the Land Ch. 18 Resources:


Most of all, encourage students to explore the resources using their imaginations. Cookbooks, journals, pictures, all can be gateways to those stories that are inherent in their creation, waiting to be told.

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