



Finding Inspiration in Primary Sources

Writing 150 Students Use Special Collections & University Archives



ABOVE: Materials used for student research.

More than fifty Writing 150 students visited Seidman House to consult Civil War diaries and scrapbooks, World War II correspondence, a physicist's experiment documentation, and fifteen other primary source documents for an assignment aimed to teach them how to use historical resources in their research. This was a first-time collaboration between Grand Valley State University's Special Collections and University Archives and adjunct writing professor Samantha Dine. Students began their assignment by locating a historical document from Grand Valley's collections to use as inspiration for their research.

Dine collaborated with Leigh Rupinski, Archivist for Public Services and Community Engagement, and Annie Benefiel, Archivist for Collection Management, to craft a class session that encouraged student engagement with primary sources.

The idea for the paper was inspired by a very similar assignment Dine completed in graduate school. "I really loved the idea of finding that inspiration in the content," Dine said. "I hoped that my students would like to do it too."

Dine's students visited Seidman House to learn about the resources housed

in Special Collections and University Archives and how to access them. Special Collections and University Archives collects, preserves, and makes accessible hundreds of rare books, manuscripts, photographs, media, institutional records, and other documents.

Students learned how to use the archival database system to identify and request collection materials that sparked their interest. In total, students worked with over eighteen collections, including: Urban and Environmental Studies Institute materials, letters from 19th and 20th century authors, a homeopathic doctor's

SPECIAL COLLECTIONS & ARCHIVES CONTINUED

papers, Gold Rush-era poetry, military photographs, and more.

While traditional research papers ask students to start with a topic and then dive into research, this assignment plunged students directly into research to search for inspiration.

Writing 150 student Jeanie Yang investigated a scrapbook about the life of Abraham Lincoln and landed on a newspaper clipping of the Sangamon Courthouse in Springfield, Illinois. From there, she researched the Courthouse's history from its construction to present day. Lincoln gave his famous "House Divided" speech at the Courthouse, and Barack Obama declared his presidential candidacy there in 2008.

Jacob Bromley, another student in Dine's class said: "It was interesting to first find a historical document and then do research around it; I felt like it helped to give my paper more structure and clarity."

Bromley's paper was inspired by the Humphrey Family World War II Papers. Frederick Humphrey served as a paratrooper in the 82nd Airborne Division, was killed in action in the Netherlands in 1944, and was posthumously awarded a Purple Heart. His brother, William F. Humphrey Jr., also served in the Army. William was severely wounded in battle and was also awarded a Purple Heart. The collection includes correspondence between the family members, photographs of the sons in uniform, and the official notification of Frederick's death, which sparked Bromley's research. Bromley felt his research paper was the best piece he wrote for the course all semester.

Student Nolan Stanko commented, "Initially I was not looking forward to a Writing 150 field trip to go look at old documents, but actually found some

enjoyment as I was able to write a paper about something that interested me."

Rupinski believes that working with primary sources allows students to think beyond their specific areas of study. "This assignment provided an opportunity for students to look at something they probably wouldn't have in their day-to-day work and see the connections to their own lives and interests," she said.

Dine was impressed with the students' comfort level in using the Archives, as many returned to Seidman House's Reading Room after class to continue their research. She was pleasantly surprised by the connections students made in their assignments and the fun they had researching, all of which led to positive results overall.

According to Stanko, "Having someone to walk me through the process of finding documents in the University Archives was very helpful. Now I not only know that the University Archives exists as a resource, but I know how to utilize the resource."

For more information about Special Collections and University Archives
www.gvsu.edu/library/specialcollections