

Letter by Stephen Decatur and Painting by Thomas Chambers Related to the War of 1812

Lee Ann Potter and Elizabeth K. Eder

By late October of 1812, the United States and Great Britain had been at war for more than four months. The impressment of American sailors into the British navy, British restraints on neutral trade, and British military support for native tribes blocking American settlement of the Northwest territories led Congress to pass legislation in June declaring war on Great Britain. The Declaration of War signed by President James Madison authorized him to use “land and navel force” against the British.

Among the many naval encounters that followed was a battle that Commodore Stephen Decatur described in a letter to Secretary of the Navy Paul Hamilton. Writing on October 30, while aboard the USS *United States* in the Atlantic Ocean, off the coast of the Azores, Decatur explained how the *United States* defeated and captured the frigate HBM (His Britanic Majesty’s) *Macedonian* during a 1-1/2 hour battle five days earlier. In language formal by today’s standards, Decatur praised the actions of his seamen and marines, listed the names of those men killed or wounded on both ships, and described the condition of the *Macedonian*.

According to the logbook of the *United States*, the two ships lay alongside each other for more than two weeks after the battle while the men completed repairs, and then both set sail for the United States. They arrived in early December and were met with much excitement, for their appearance was the first news most people received about

Decatur’s success.

A headline in the Newport, Rhode Island, *Mercury* announced “Another Brilliant Naval Victory,” and in a letter to Decatur dated December 29, 1812, Secretary Hamilton relayed the following message:

The President of the U.S. desires me to express to You & to Lt. Allen through You, to the officers & crew of the frigate *U.S.*, his warmest thanks & highest appreciation of Your & their conduct on the defeat & capture of his Britanic [*sic*] Majesty’s frigate the *Macedonian*.

Hamilton then discussed the *Macedonian*’s value and explained the factors that would determine the amount that Decatur and his crew could expect to receive as compensation for their prize.

Within a year following the victory, Americans could visualize the battle’s excitement with the aid of several well-known canvases painted by various artists. There was a ready market during the

first half of the nineteenth century for oil paintings of famous naval battle scenes from the War of 1812 and an even larger audience for less expensive etched and engraved commemorative prints made after the canvases. One reason for their popularity, especially for images of the battle between the *United States* and the *Macedonian*, was the celebrity of its American hero, Stephen Decatur.

Artist Thomas Chambers conveyed the noise and turmoil of this particular battle in his 1852 painting entitled *Capture of H.B.M. Frigate Macedonian by U.S. Frigate United States, October 25, 1812* (see p. 212). Chambers based his painting on earlier depictions, yet this scene has a sense of immediacy. Two large ships, with punctured sails, engage in battle on stormy waves amidst billowing clouds of smoke. Everything seems to be in motion, from the waves and smoke in the painting’s foreground, to the diagonal placement of the ships in the center, shown framed by rolling thunderclouds above. The artist used bright, flat colors that contrast with each other: puffy white clouds against a blue-grey sky; dark green-black waves with white caps. He also applied the paint thickly, which adds to the intensity. How do we know which ship is winning? Chambers was not very subtle. The sails of the *United*

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I am his most obedient servant
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to the U. S. United States at sea October 30. 1812

The Hon. Paul Hamilton

Sir.

I have the honor to in-

form you that on the 25th Inst. being in the Lat. 29th N. & Long. 29th 30. W., We fell in with, & after an action of an hour & an half, captured his Britannic Majesty's ship Macedonian commanded by Captain John Borden, and mounting 49 carriage guns (the odd gun shifting) - She was a frigate of the largest class two years old - four months out of dock, and reputed one of the best sailers in the British service - The enemy being to windward had the advantage of engaging us at his own distance, which was so great, that for the first half hour we did not use our cannonades, & at no moment was he within the complete effect of our musketry or grape - To this circumstance & a heavy swell which was on at the time I ascribe the unusual length of the action - The enthusiasm of every officer seaman & marine on board this ship on recovering the enemy, their steady conduct in battle &

predecessors of their sea could not be surpassed - where all has met my fullest expectations it would be unjust in me to discriminate. Permit me however to recommend to your particular notice my first Lieutenant W^m. H. Allen - he has served with me upwards of five years & to his steady united exertions in disciplining the crew, is to be ascribed the obvious superiority of our gunnery exhibited in the result of this contest.

Subjoined is a list of the killed & wounded on both sides our loss compared with that of the enemy will appear small - Amongst our wounded you will observe the name of Lieutenant Faulk, who died a few hours after the action he was an officer of great gallantry & promise and the service has sustained a severe loss in his death -

The vessel which lost her mizzenmast fore & main topmasts and main yard was much cut up in her hull - The damage sustained by this ship was not such as to render her return into port necessary, and had I not deemed it important that we should see our prize we should have continued our cruise - With the highest consideration

and respect I am for your obedient humble servant
Stephen B. Carter

List of killed & wounded on board the United States -

Thomas Brown. New York. Seaman. Henry Shepherd -
Philadelphia. ditto. William Murray. Boston. Boy. Michael
D'Onofre New York private marine. John Roberts. ditto.
ditto. Killed -

* John Allen Funk. Philadelphia lieutenant. * John
Mehibala. New York. Carpenter crew. Christian Clark
ditto Seaman. George Christopher ditto. Ordinary sea-
man. George Mahan ditto ditto. William James ditto
ditto. John Lator ditto private marine. Wounded -

On board the Macedonian there were thirty six killed
& fifty eight wounded. Among the former were the
Boatswain - one master mate & the schoolmaster & of the
latter were the first & third lieutenants. one master mate
& two midshipmen -

* since dead

Hamilton 6/1/1812



Thomas Chambers; *Capture of H.B.M. Frigate Macedonian by U.S. Frigate United States, October 25, 1812*; 1852; oil on canvas; 34⁷/₈ x 50¹/₄ in.; Smithsonian American Art Museum

More than Just a Pretty Picture: Making the Case for Visual Evidence

Elizabeth K. Eder

How do students learn historical thinking skills and content knowledge in their classrooms? Why teach with both visual images and documents as primary sources? Lee Ann Potter and I set out to answer these and other questions as we discussed ways we could collaborate to further enrich the “Teaching with Documents” department of *Social Education*. This month’s TWD article is our first attempt to pair an image from the Smithsonian American Art Museum’s collection with a textual document from the holdings of the National Archives to help students consider a variety of sources for historical information and increase their visual literacy.

From individual classroom instruction to use in national competitions, more educators and students than ever are integrating primary sources into the teaching and learning of history. Primary sources come in a variety of formats, yet historians have traditionally preferred textual over visual sources. Why bother using visual images when there are so many textual documents around?

Access alone does not guarantee historical understanding. All too often visual images—paintings, photographs, posters, prints, etc.—serve as decoration in the classroom, illustration in textbooks, props in PowerPoint lectures, and the like. While they might add savvy to instruction or beauty to a blank wall, they can be powerful teaching tools, either alone or with related textual sources. If we know how to look at them and provide our students with opportunities to study them, visual images can be important sources for new insights.

Thomas Chambers’s painting, *Capture of H.B.M. Frigate Macedonian by U.S. Frigate United States, October 25, 1812*, briefly discussed in this month’s “Teaching with Documents” article, is not just a pretty picture. Although it is not a primary source from the War of 1812, it is more than simply a depiction of a specific historical event. It is a complex image with layers of meaning. It is a lens with which to examine the social, political, economic, and historical contexts in which—and about which—the work was created.

As art historian Joshua Taylor reminds us, “To See is To Think.” Visual images can help bring alive what students have only read about in their classrooms. Teaching historical events through

visual images is a powerful way to foster classroom discussion and provide a richer understanding of a specific time period.

As with document facsimiles, as opposed to simply transcriptions, students can look closely at visual images, evaluate their importance, draw on personal experiences, and create a more informed understanding about historic events, people, and ideas. Done well, teaching with visual images and textual sources, such as Decatur’s letter, can excite curiosity and help students become active participants in their own learning. It can facilitate the development of their perceptual and visual literacy skills. It can help students to expand their cross-disciplinary, critical, and higher order thinking skills—including the ability to question intelligently. It can also help them to look closely at works of art and to think about the ways they both shape and reflect history.

No matter the subject, or grade level, ways to integrate both visual images and documents as primary sources are abundant. By doing so, students become engaged in what psychologist Rudolf Arnheim calls, “learning by looking and thinking.” In subsequent articles we will provide additional suggestions.

Note about the painting:

Capture of H.B.M. Frigate Macedonian by U.S. Frigate United States, October 25, 1812 is one of several battle scenes from the War of 1812 that Thomas Chambers (1808–after 1866) painted throughout his career. Chambers’s source for this work is a Thomas Birch (1779–1851) painting of the battle, all six known versions of which were made into prints by Benjamin Tanner (1775–1848). Chambers’s painting was given as a gift to the Smithsonian American Art Museum by Sheldon and Caroline Keck in 1992 in honor of Elizabeth Broun.

TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

1. Divide students into two groups. Provide each student in the first group with a copy of Decatur's letter, ask them to read it, and assign them to draw a picture of the battle he described. Provide each student in the second group with a copy of Chambers's painting (available online at americanart.si.edu). Ask them to study it, pretend they are the captain of one of the ships depicted, and assign them to write a letter to their commanding officer explaining what happened. Invite student volunteers from each group to share their work. (You may wish to create a box $34\frac{7}{8} \times 50\frac{1}{4}$ in. on your classroom wall with masking tape to show the actual size of the painting.)
2. Provide the first group from activity #1 with Chambers's painting, and group #2 with Decatur's letter. Lead a class discussion comparing the two sources of information. Ask students to explain why the letter is a primary source and the painting is a secondary source for information about the battle. Invite students to consider instances in which the painting would be a primary source. Encourage them to consider other possible sources that relate to this event and in what repositories they might reside.
3. Explain to students that they are to write the outline for a proposed documentary on the battle between the *United States* and the *Macedonian*. Tell them that the producer has decided on the six discussion topics below for the program. Divide students into six research teams and assign each group one of the following topics:
 - a. Stephen Decatur
 - b. USS *United States*
 - c. Thomas Chambers
 - d. Secretary of the Navy Paul Hamilton
 - e. Other naval battles of the War of 1812
 - f. HBM *Macedonian*Explain that they are to conduct research on their topic and write a 3- to 5-page summary of information to be included in the documentary. Invite students to share their findings with the class and collaboratively decide on an outline for the proposed program. (Suggested websites for this research include the Naval Historical Center at www.history.navy.mil; the Decatur House www.decatourhouse.org/museum; and the Smithsonian American Art Museum at americanart.si.edu.)
4. Show students a copy of one of the commemorative prints depicting the battle, such as the Alonzo Chappel engraving entitled "Battle Between the *United States* and the *Macedonian*, 30th October 1812." (It is available online from the National Archives ARC database at www.archives.gov/research/arc, through a keyword search on ARC Identifier 512967.) Ask students to compare it to the Chambers painting. Encourage them to consider their similarities and differences and what emotions both inspire. Ask them to pretend that they are writing a book about the War of 1812 and can include only one of these as an illustration. Encourage them to decide which one they would choose and write a letter to their editor explaining their choice.
5. Introduce students to the website of the Smithsonian American Art Museum at americanart.si.edu. Ask them to look at Sir Amédée Forestier's *The Signing of the Treaty of Ghent, Christmas Eve, 1814* (1922.5.2), another painting in the museum's collection that relates to the War of 1812. Ask students to develop a skit based on the painting. Where and when does the scene take place? Who are the main characters? What are they discussing? What happens next?
6. To understand how artists depict historical events in a variety of media, choose a classroom activity from the Smithsonian American Art Museum's Classroom Resources available at: americanart.si.edu/education/resources/index.cfm. Choose from *A House Divided: Civil War Photographs*, which provides students with reproductions of photographs which they later link to the historical context of the Civil War; *Young America: George Washington Lesson*, which uses writings and images of George Washington to examine ideas about this president's life and leadership during a defining period in U.S. history; or another classroom activity option.

TEACHING WITH DOCUMENTS

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States, although damaged stand tall, and the American flag still flies unharmed (on the right). In contrast, one of the *Macedonian's* main sails is collapsed in darkened shreds and several other smaller sails drag in the water while the unsecured British flag hangs off its mast as if the next gust of wind will blow it out to sea (on the left). By focusing on an important American victory, Chambers created a patriotic image that reflected

the mood of the country during a period of tremendous growth and change in the United States. 

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Note about the document:

The letter from Commodore Stephen Decatur to Secretary of the Navy Paul Hamilton, October 30, 1812, concerning the capture of HBM Frigate *Macedonian* by U.S. Frigate *United States* is in Naval Records Collection of the Office of Naval Records and Library, Record Group 45, at the National Archives.