

*Important Note: This is a mostly complete draft copy of Assignment #1 for my Museum Programming class. I was only able to find the draft copy because the final version was downloaded onto a former laptop and was not backed up to the cloud. However, I still wanted to showcase the piece as it stands as it is still a major assignment from my graduate coursework.*

In the process of historical research, primary documents are historians' greatest resources for gaining insight into the lives and minds of the people of the past. Depending on the time period, most of what is encountered lies in political documents, records of transactions, and books and analyses created by the elites of society. Alone, these would create a certain image of events in history and the leaders of the time. However, when historians find historical letters, an entire new world can be uncovered. While letters between leaders are incredibly important, those between two common people or between a common person and a historical figure can add nuance and depth to the stories and lessons that we have been learning for most of our lives.

For example, the International Spy Museum contains a letter from General George Washington to Nathaniel Sackett in 1777, a spymaster appointed by Washington to secure intelligence on the British army's plans. This letter highlights Washington's original offer to Sackett and the value of chasing this kind of information as a spy. Washington offered Sackett fifty dollars a month, equivalent to over a thousand dollars in today's currency, and another five hundred dollars to set up a spy network in New York. ([ISM](#)) Readers find that Sackett came highly recommended by William Duer, a Continental Congressman, and Washington trusted him with this large sum to distribute as he saw fit as long as Sackett sent a report of the expenses at a later point ([Encyclopedia of AR](#)). This object caught my eye because it is rare for a paper object from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to survive this long in such quality. I also found it interesting to find a clear example of the exchanging of currency and the formation of local alliances that changed the course of the Revolution. The International Spy Museum emphasizes the importance of espionage in all types of wars, in assuaging diplomatic concerns, and in learning important information before one needs it, and this letter is a good representation of those themes.

If I was to take this object and create an entirely new exhibition around it, I would create "Letters That Shaped History – Simple Words, Big Impact." Focusing on American history letter, this exhibit would showcase how something as simple as a letter could change the course of history.

Overall, visitors would get a strong introduction to primary source research, what letters can reveal between the lines about the people and events of the past, and how one voice can make all the difference. I imagine a simple gallery space with cases along the walls and a few in the center, creating a clear pathway for visitors to wind through. The room would have low lighting to protect the documents, but each large text panel accompanying the letters would feature its own personal lighting so visitors would be able to read it clearly. The text would need to be large to accommodate those with disabilities, and audio guides would be made available as well as an option.

The exhibit would begin with an introductory section on writing letters, covering the practice, the objects and types of material used throughout history, and their importance to the study of history. This is where visitors would also get a glimpse behind the scenes of historical research with details on what historians are looking for in the content of the letter and beyond. Then visitors would proceed to the letters themselves. Each letter would have three sections of text with the accompanying document and other related items if available: the letter and its contents, the people involved in the correspondence, and the aftermath and/or impact of the letter. The content would be a mixture of letters between easily recognizable figures and those whose names rarely appear in history textbooks, and each one would represent something significant to American history in one way or another. For example, I would include Albert Einstein's letter to Franklin Delano Roosevelt that alerted the president to nuclear research being done abroad that needed to be brought to the United States immediately in order to keep up with the rest of the world. (mental floss). Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" would be an anchoring piece as well. It is one of the few pieces where King argued against waiting patiently for social change to be enacted, and it was considered to be a rallying cry for activism. (mental floss) On the more obscure side, I would include Febb Ensminger Burn's letter to her son, Tennessee House Representative Harry Thomas Burn, imploring him to vote for the state to ratify the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment. Her letter flipped his vote and allowed for the amendment to be enacted. I would also select 11-year-old Grace Bedell's letter to Abraham Lincoln, recommending to him that he should grow a beard in order to become a more attractive candidate, especially to "the ladies" (mental floss).

4. What types of programs could be developed to deepen the viewer's connection to the exhibit?

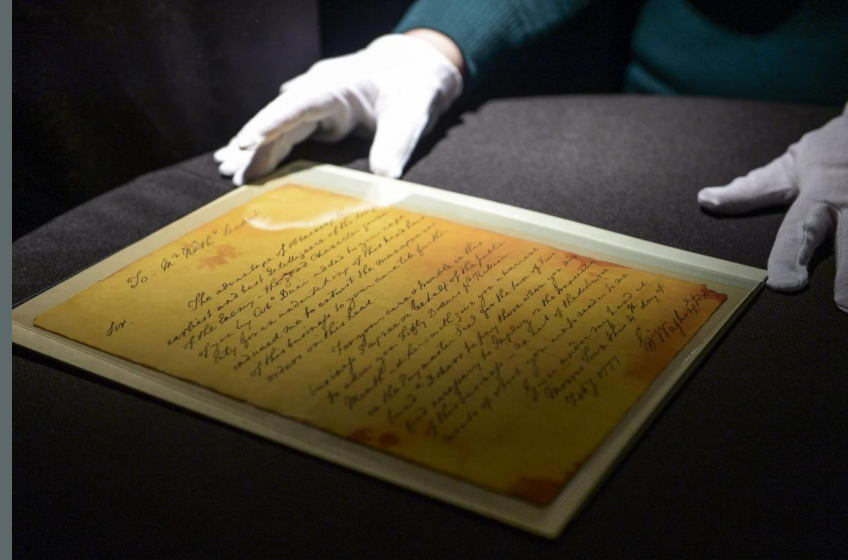
Which audiences would the programs engage?

- Deciphering historical handwriting
  - Seniors
  - Grandkids with grandparents with loopy handwriting
  - Those looking to learn more about deciphering primary sources

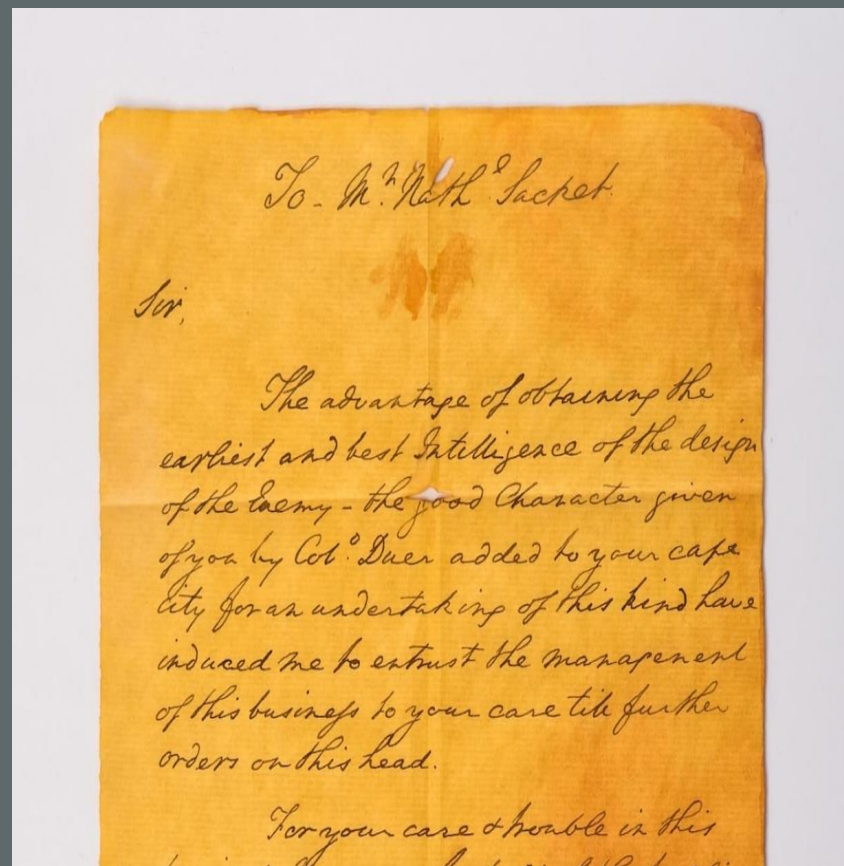
A large red square with a white border, centered on a white background. Inside the square, the text "Speculative Exhibit Proposal" is written in white, bold, sans-serif font.

**Speculative  
Exhibit Proposal**

# George Washington Spy Letter - International Spy Museum



- Letter from General George Washington to Nathaniel Sackett in 1777



# Letters That Shaped History - Simple Words, Big Impact



- Letters from American history
- Introduction to primary source research
- What letters reveal between the lines





## Layout

- Simple gallery space with cases along the walls and a few in the center
- Winding pathway
- Low lighting
- Individual lighting for text panels

# Exhibit Components

- Introductory section on letter writing
- The Letters
  - The letter itself
  - Three sections of accompanying text
    - The letter and its contents
    - The people involved in the correspondence
    - Aftermath and/or impact of the letter
- Mixture between easily recognizable figures and those whose names rarely appear in history textbooks

# Letter Examples

- Albert Einstein to Franklin D. Roosevelt
- Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail"
- Febb Ensminger Burn to Tennessee House Representative Harry Thomas Burn
- Grace Bedell to Abraham Lincoln

Martin Luther King, Jr.  
Birmingham, May 1963  
April 16, 1963

Bishop C.C. J. Carpenter  
Bishop Joseph A. Perini  
Bishop John J. Sheehan  
Bishop Paul Herold  
Bishop Wilton D. Larson  
The Rev. George Rutherford  
The Rev. Edward F. Sheehan  
The Rev. Earl Stallings

By dear Father George,

I write confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I am reverend your recent statement calling for present activities "wise and timely," bold, if true, do I guess to answer criticism of my work and ideas. If I could to answer all of the criticisms that arose my desk, my secretaries would be engaged in little else in the course of the day, and I would have no time for constructive work. But since I feel that you are men of genuine goodwill and your criticisms are sincerely and fairly, I would like to answer your statement in what I hope will be plain and reasonable terms.

I think I should give the reason for my being in Birmingham, since I have been frightened by the argument of "moderates coming in." I have the honor of serving as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an organization operating in every Southern state with headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia. We have some administrative offices throughout all across the South - one being the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. However necessary and possible we were made, educational and financial resources who our affiliates, several months ago we had launched a non-violent campaign for economic justice and we engaged in a non-violent direct action program if such were deemed necessary. We readily complied not when the group came on line to our program. If I am here, along with several members of my staff, because we were invited here. I am sure because I have been organizational, like here.

Beyond this, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the simple century progress left their little village and carried their "hills and the great sea beyond the mountains" if their time being and just as the people had left their village of Berlin on the ocean to the shores of the New World to practically every beach and city of the Green-Island world, I too am compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my particular home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.

Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. An area is not an island unto itself; it's all connected. Never again will we be able to live with the narrow, provincial Northern-Island lines. Anyone who lives inside the United States has never been outside anyone in this country.

To deplore the demonstrations that are presently taking place in Birmingham, but to say that your statement did not express a similar concern for the conditions that brought the demonstrators into being, is not the same. If you would want to go beyond the superficial social acceptances who look merely at effects, and does not grapple with underlying causes, I would not hesitate to

*Handwritten letter in cursive script, dated August 19, 1939.*

Albert Einstein  
Old Stone Dr.  
Passaic, New Jersey  
August 2nd, 1939

J. R. Roosevelt,  
President of the United States,  
White House,  
Washington, D.C.

Sir:

Some recent work by E. Fermi and L. Szilard, which has been communicated to me in manuscript, leads me to expect that the element uranium may be turned into a new and important source of energy in the immediate future. Certain aspects of the situation which has arisen seem to call for watchful haste and, if necessary, quick action on the part of the Administration. I believe therefore that it is my duty to bring to your attention the following facts and recommendations:

In the course of the last four months it has been made possible through the work of Fermi in France as well as Fermi and Szilard in America - that it may become possible to set up a nuclear chain reaction in a large mass of uranium, by which vast amounts of power and large quantities of new radium-like elements would be generated. Use it appears almost certain that this could be achieved in the immediate future.

This new phenomenon would also lead to the construction of bombs, and it is conceivable - though much less certain - that extremely powerful bombs of a new type may thus be constructed. A single bomb of this type, carried by boat and exploded in a port, might very well destroy the whole port together with some of the surrounding territory. However, such bombs might very well prove to be the best way for transmutation by air.

Very sincerely,  
Albert Einstein

Einstein's letter to Roosevelt, August 2, 1939



## Companion Program

- Quarterly workshop on deciphering historical handwriting
- Appeals to broad audience
- Learning the quirks of older handwriting and how to read it
- Learning about primary source research and its importance
- Includes letters from the exhibit and those that didn't make the final cut