Using original documents on the Mexican American War*

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Abstract

This module will explore how to use original documents on the Mexican American War for research purposes. Its intended audience is undergraduate students.

What are these texts?

These texts are digitized versions of documents found in Rice University's Woodson Research Center. They are part of several hundred documents that comprise Rice's Americas Archive. The small selection of texts used in this Connexions module all relate to the Mexican American War. I refer to a couple of the documents throughout the module but you may wish to browse through all six of the documents listed in the upper left corner. They would all be of use to someone writing a research paper on the Mexican American War.

The documents discussed in this module include a letter[1], a piece of currency[2], a message from U.S President Polk[3], and government documents regarding the Independence of Texas[4], the annexation of Texas, and the slave trade[5].

Why use these texts?

Many of the texts found in this archive were purchased by Rice University from private collections. They have not been used in scholarly studies before. In looking at the documents – either on-line here or by going to Fondren Library's Woodson Research Center and viewing them in person - you are tapping into new materials in the field of Hemispheric Studies. By including information you find in them in research papers, you are contributing new ideas to the field.

What am I looking at when I click on the links to these documents?

The links on the left sidebar take you to a page that describes the document in detail. For example, the page for the Independence of Texas document says that it was written by the US Congress House Committee on Foreign Affairs in 1837. There are several key terms that are associated with the document and a paragraph that gives some historical background on its creation. There's also a link to this research module, a link to a module that contains more in-depth background information, and a link to the Americas Digital Archive home page. From the Americas Digital Archive home page, you can access many other documents and learn more about the collection.

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[1]See the file at <http://cnx.org/content/m13831/latest/http://hdl.handle.net/1911/9241>

[2]See the file at <http://cnx.org/content/m13831/latest/http://hdl.handle.net/1911/9236>

[3]See the file at <http://cnx.org/content/m13831/latest/http://hdl.handle.net/1911/9252>

[4]See the file at <http://cnx.org/content/m13831/latest/http://hdl.handle.net/1911/9228>

[5]See the file at <http://cnx.org/content/m13831/latest/http://hdl.handle.net/1911/9237>

At the bottom of the page, there are two links to the document. I recommend accessing the document via the top button that says "Full text with images." (The other option is not very reader-friendly.) This button takes you to a page with an easy-to-read transcription of the Independence of Texas and small images of the corresponding pages of the actual document. If you click on the small images, a new screen will open with a large image of the document page.

Is there an advantage to looking at the actual document instead of the digitized version?

If you can, I'd recommend using both the digitized and the actual document. It's exciting to get to see and hold important historical documents. You can feel the quality of the paper on which they were written, examine how they were bound, and look at their comparative sizes. The documents themselves are truly historical artifacts.

The digitized versions of the documents are clearly advantageous to people unable to visit the paper documents in Rice University's library. They are also much easier to work with over extended periods of time. (It's also easier on the documents if you do most of your work from the digitized versions.)

If I'm working from the digital archive, should I look at the transcription or images of the actual document?

Both the transcription and the original version have something to offer. The transcriptions are often easier to read. You can probably skim through a transcription a lot faster than a handwritten letter from 150 years ago to determine if the document will be of interest to you. In preparing a paper for a class, you may not have time to peruse all the texts that might be loosely related to your topic in their original format, but you could probably skim through a lot of their transcriptions and narrow your selection.

If you find that a particular text will be useful in your research, looking at the original document is of great value. Sometimes a handwritten letter can tell you about its author: if s/he was in a hurry, if s/he possessed the handwriting of a well-educated (and hence usually wealthy) person, if s/he experienced trouble in writing sections of the document with crossed out words, among other things. For example, the letter written by Mattock contains many spelling errors, which have been noted in the transcription. But the steady handwriting would not suggest that the writer wrote in haste; perhaps he simply did not know how to spell well.

Mattock Handwriting Sample

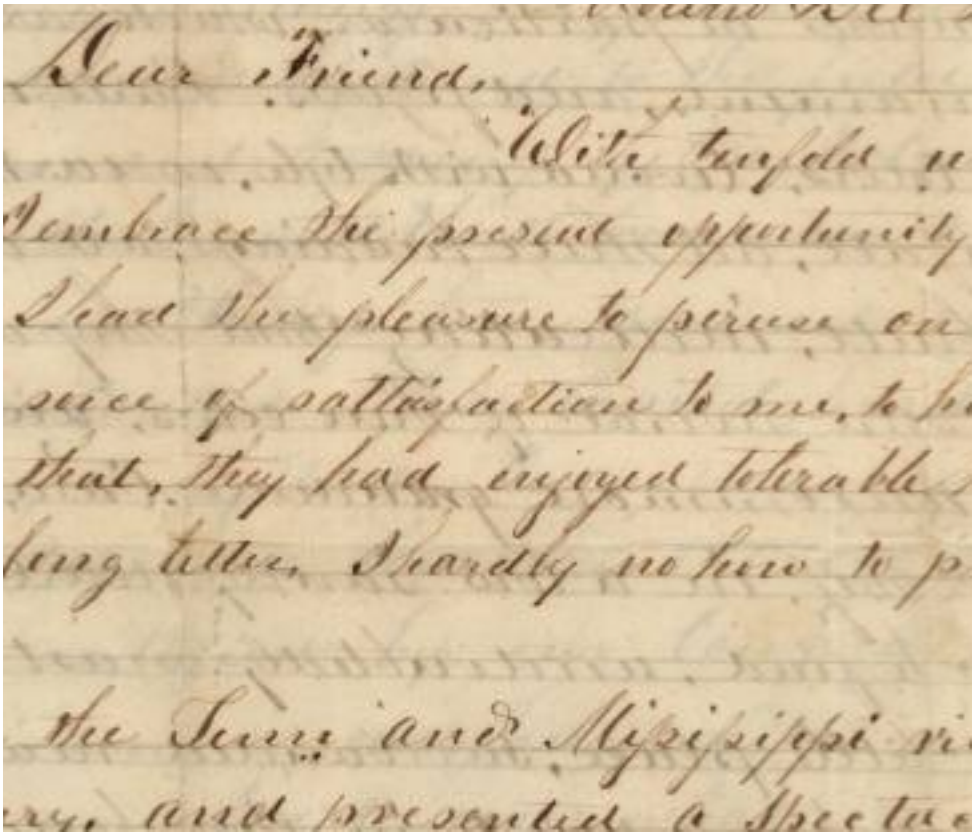
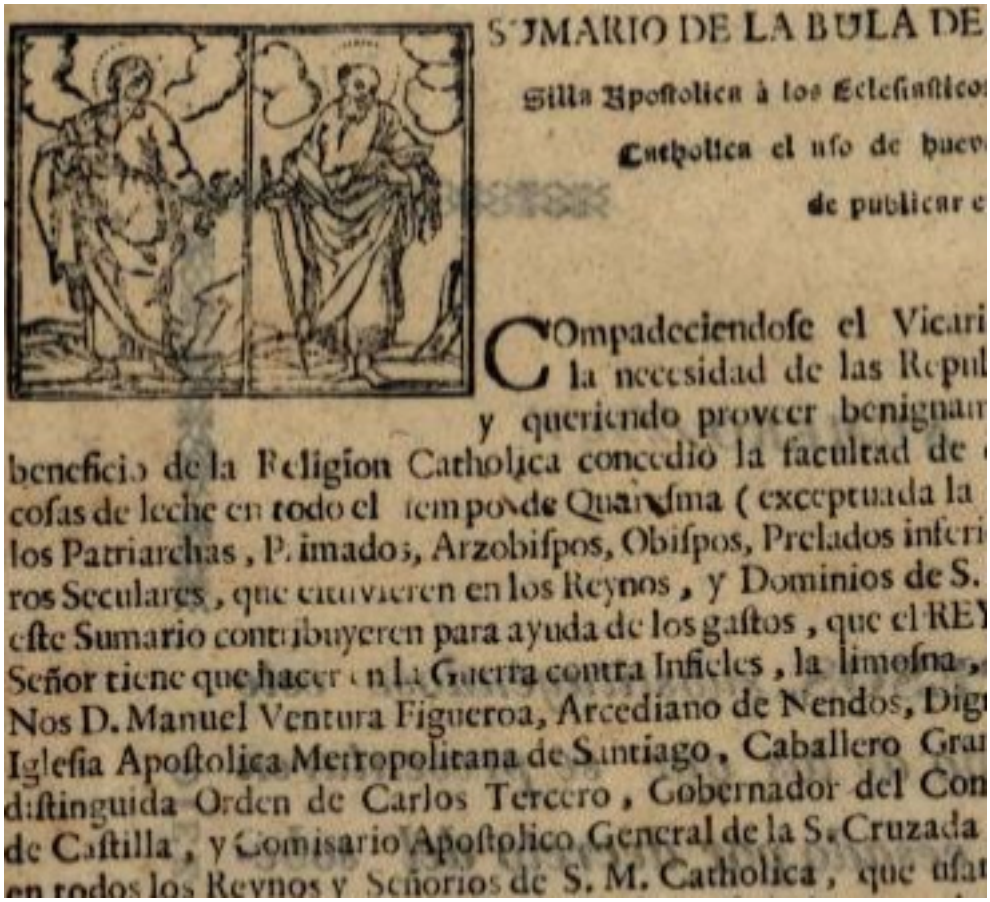


Figure 1: A sample of Mattock's handwriting

Even a typed document that is more official in nature than a handwritten letter is worthwhile looking at in its original format. For example, take a look at the Texas currency document. You can easily see that the front and back are in fact two different documents by the different typefaces and formats used. In the transcription, this difference is not visually noticeable. Yet the difference between the two texts is great: one side is a papal bull printed in 1784 and the other states that the paper has an exchange value. The currency was printed in 1823 on the back of the out-dated papal bull because of a severe paper shortage in Mexico.

Segment of the Papal bull side of the document



SUMARIO DE LA BULA DE
Silla Apostolica à los Eclesiasticos
Catholica el uso de huev
de publicar e

COmpadeciendose el Vicari
la necesidad de las Repul
y queriendo proveer benignam
beneficio de la Religion Catholica concedio la facultad de
cosas de leche en todo el tiempo de Quaresma (exceptuada la
los Patriarchas, Primados, Arzobispos, Obispos, Prelados inferi
ros Seculares, que estuvieren en los Reynos, y Dominios de S.
este Sumario contribuyeren para ayuda de los gastos, que el REY
Señor tiene que hacer en la Guerra contra Infieles, la limosna,
Nos D. Manuel Ventura Figueroa, Arcediano de Nendos, Dig
Iglesia Apostolica Metropolitana de Santiago, Caballero Gra
distinguida Orden de Carlos Tercero, Gobernador del Con
de Castilla, y Comisario Apostolico General de la S. Cruzada
en todos los Reynos y Señorios de S. M. Catholica, que usa

Figure 2: This is a segment from one side of the document.

Currency side of the document

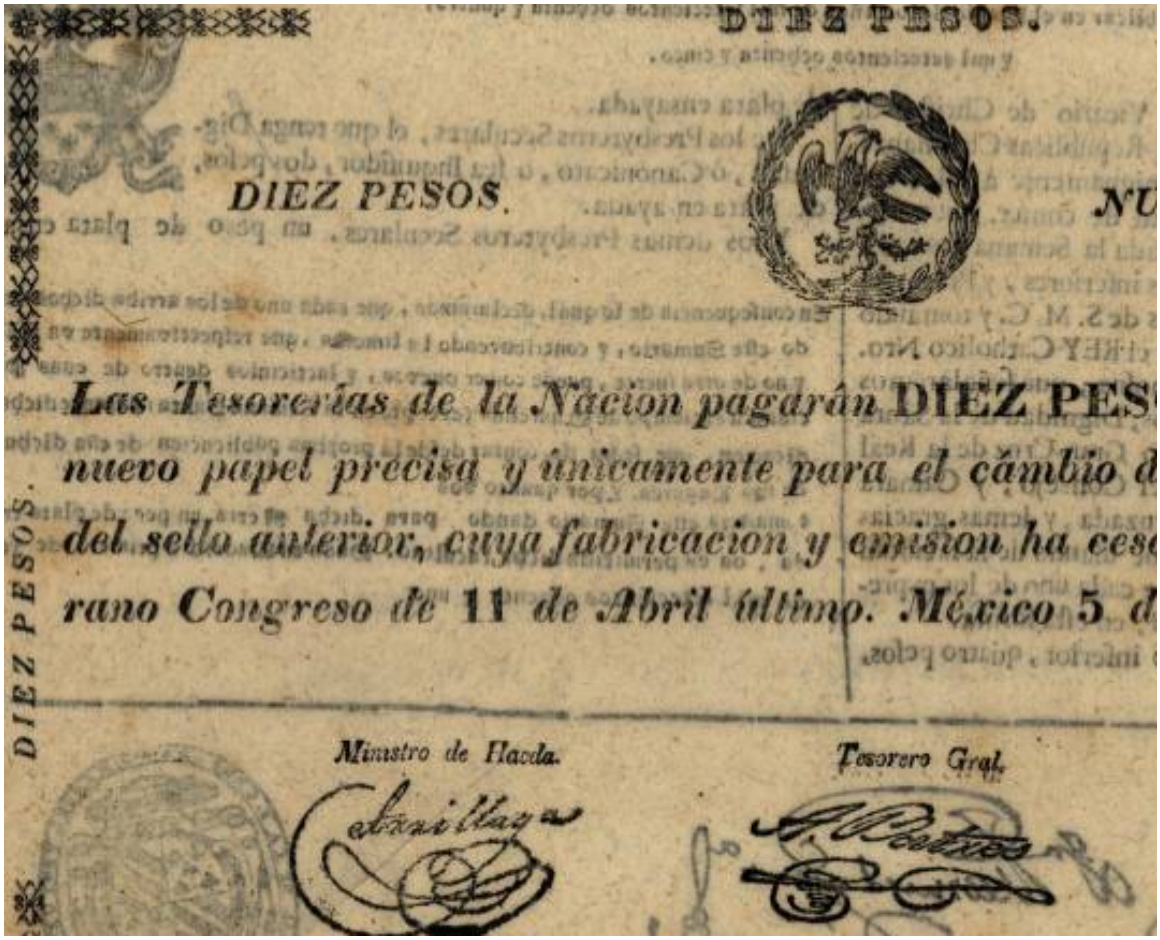


Figure 3: This side of the document notes its exchange value. It was printed on the back of the papal bull nearly 40 years after the papal bull was published. The two sides are visibly different documents with different typefaces and styles.

Another advantage to looking at the original text in a digitized format is that transcriptions are interpretations. If you work from a transcription, you must cite the transcription – not the original document – as your source. A transcription might have typos or (as is more likely with today's spell checking features) might correct errors in the original. In addition, the transcriber might not have devoted as much time to his/her interpretation of the original as you would like to and might have left some words marked as illegible. You may wish to put in a little more research to decipher what such words are if the document is of particular importance. For example, in the Mattock letter again, there is a word the transcriber interpreted as "(attol)". However, it might make sense as "Cattol," a mispelling of "cattle." You might have still other ideas about what the writer meant.

Unclear word from Mattock letter

Figure 4: The transcription may have one interpretation of this word, but you may have another.

If you notice any errors or "corrected" errors or decipher any words marked as illegible, please let us know!

For more information on the relative value of transcriptions and original documents in research projects, please refer to the module "Using Untranslated Materials in Research."[6]

[6] "Using untranslated materials in research" <http://cnx.org/content/m13830/latest/>