Dear Diary,

Using Diaries to Teach American History
Historic diaries can be uniquely informative when used as primary resources in research and learning. Diaries—especially of local residents—can reveal compelling information about how real citizens reacted to major historic events. But it is the mundane, everyday events described by diarists that can truly expose the true history of a specific place and time.

Personal diaries can uncover shared experiences with modern-day citizens: Readers will learn that people in the past possessed the same values, hopes, and fears. But readers of historic diaries will also witness the differences in daily activities and hobbies, transportation, diseases and medical treatment, a typical school or work day, and even language and expressions.
Social studies teachers can use historic diaries to provide personal details related to important events studied in the classroom. Teachers may select one or more diaries to complement or enrich the study of history. Depending on the scope of the diary, a teacher may use one particular diary for an entire semester or school year. Or teachers may choose different diaries to correspond with different historical events. For example, the personal diary of a child living at the turn of the 20th century could be compared to an elderly citizen’s passages during the same era. Or the teacher may wish to use the diary of a woman to illustrate the female perspective toward elections and the right to vote, the home front during war, or societal restrictions and work- or education-related limitations.
The use of historic personal diaries can also be used as part of a creative writing component to the curriculum. Students of varying ages could write personal journal entries. The teacher could ask students to create fictional passages based on events studied throughout the year as part of an enrichment exercise. Or students could be asked to write their own personal journal related to happenings in the world today.

Teachers of younger students can also enrich their lessons with diaries. Select passages could be read aloud to the class. Then students could record their reactions as part of a writing exercise, or perhaps the students could draw a picture of what was described in the journal. After a certain period of time, the teacher could compile the students’ work to create a pictorial history or children’s book based on the diary.
Teachers can also use personal diaries to learn more about the history of a city. Many diarists recorded details about the locations of where they lived, where they worked, stores and other businesses they visited, and the locations of social events, weekend travel, and political gatherings.

Many of the diarists provided details and even recorded street addresses of the homes of friends and family, shops, churches, libraries, and opera houses and other entertainment or social club venues. Historic Sanborn Fire Insurance maps and city directories published during the time of the diaries can be used to identify the exact locations of places mentioned in the diaries. Teachers and students can track the locations on a map and use Google Maps and Google Earth street views to determine what the location is today.
The Ball State University Libraries Archives and Special collections in Bracken Library provides access to local diaries, city directories, Sanborn Fire Insurance maps, photographs, letters, oral histories, newspapers, and other primary resources that can be used to supplement the study of local history.

The Libraries GIS Research and Map Collection (GRMC) includes a collection of historic maps that can be used for research and learning. Bird’s eye-views of Muncie in the GRMC are detailed drawings of the city at the turn of the 20th century. Churches, schools, mills, shops, and even specific houses can be identified using these maps.
Accessing Primary Resources from Ball State University Libraries

The Ball State University Libraries Archives and Special collections in Bracken Library provides access to a range of primary resources via the Digital Media Repository (DMR) so local diaries, historic maps, city directories, and other research tools can be accessed from anywhere in the world with access to the Internet: This gives teachers convenient access for using these unique resources in the classroom.
This section of the bird’s eye-view map of Muncie from 1884 from the GRMC shows the location of Thomas Neely’s house. Neely, a city founder, kept a diary for decades. The diaries are available in the Archives and Special Collections in Bracken Library.
Thomas Neely wrote in diaries dating from 1860 to August 1901, although the whereabouts of the first volume (1860-1867) is unknown. Neely chronicles American and local history, including the controversial presidential election of 1888, women’s suffrage meetings, the construction of the Delaware County Courthouse in 1887, the 1893 depression and bank closings, the opening of the Ball Brothers Glass Factory and other businesses, and a smallpox epidemic.
This photograph of Thomas Neely is available from the Archives and Special Collections. And city directories and souvenir books of Muncie included advertisements for local businesses—like the many roller skate factories located in the city. Neely described many of the local businesses in his personal diary and even recorded bills and receipts for purchases or services provided.
Readers of historic personal diaries learn that Muncie had a popular roller polo team that competed with other teams around the state—a unique part of the city’s history. (This photograph is available from the Ball State University Libraries’ Digital Media Repository).
1887 Sanborn Fire Insurance map of Muncie, Indiana: The Royal Skating Rink was the site of roller skating, roller polo games, and dances. But the Rink was also the site of public speakers and other programs.
A page from Thomas Neely’s diary about his son’s roller skate factory:

April 20, 1887: Thaddeus sold his skate factory today for $6500. He gave $5000 for it about three years ago.
Thomas Neely also chronicled the historic gas boom of Muncie, Indiana and the surrounding area. Readers of his diary will discover how the lighting of gas wells around the city became social events and how the gas boom brought many new factories and thousands of workers to Muncie. This map from the GRMC identifies the locations of the gas wells in Muncie and was published by the city engineer in 1889.
Thomas Neely describes the gas boom:

March 31, 1887: There is a great talk of a boom in Muncie at this time. A great deal of property in this vicinity is changing hands.
May 6, 1887: There has been two iron pipe arches put up today: One on Main and one on Walnut Street with a number of jets for natural gas. They look beautiful when they are lighted.
From Neely’s diary, readers will learn how the discovery and use of natural gas as a power source affected the personal lives of the people of Muncie—in particular Thomas Neely’s hired hand, a young boy named Charley Gilmore. In a traditional history book, these personal repercussions from the changes to society may be overlooked:

October 1, 1887: Charley Gilmore went home to his father’s today. We had nothing for him to do as we have now no cow to feed, no wood to carry in, no ashes to take out since we have gas in our stoves.
And personal diaries are rich resources because the authors document events that have not been widely documented in textbooks. One such event described in the Neely diary was the transfer of “orphans” from Boston and New York City to new homes across the country from 1853 to about 1910. Many of the “orphans” were abandoned children living in the streets of New York and Boston. So a charity sent trains of children to live with new adoptive families across the country. Prospective parents could choose from the orphans at the train station.
Monday, June 2, 1890: About 25 children from the orphans’ home at Boston have arrived in Muncie Saturday evening last in order to find homes for the little wanderers. And we brought a boy home this evening to see how we would like him. His name is George Weeks. We may keep him. He is 13 years of age...

Tuesday, June 3, 1890: We changed George Weeks for Vincent Trengreve, 10 years of age on May 31. We think we will be better suited with him than the other one.
Thomas Neely explains the experience of living through an epidemic of an infectious disease in his diary, describing a unique history lesson about healthcare system and its effects during that time.

Smallpox arrived in Muncie in August of 1893. The first death occurred on September 10. All public gatherings, including church services—a key component of Thomas Neely’s life—were cancelled. A quarantine was issued, and residents of infected houses were banned from travel. Food and milk was delivered to infected houses under the watch of armed guards. Travel to the city was not encouraged. Mail from Muncie was treated. And two hospitals were built specifically for the smallpox patients.
The yellow zone on this map from the GRMC in Bracken Library shows the location of the quarantined area of Muncie during the 1893 smallpox epidemic. The red “X’s” identify infected houses across the city.
August 22, 1893: The smallpox scare in the south part of the city has driven cow herders off. Now we have to keep our cow in the stable.

September 5, 1893: There are four new cases of smallpox reported...

September 7, 1893: There are four new cases of smallpox reported this morning. Business of almost all kinds are nearly at a standstill.


September 10, 1893: The churches were closed today for fear of spreading smallpox.
A Younger Perspective: The Diary of Thomas Neely’s Neighbor, Thomas Ryan

The Ball State University Libraries Archives and Special Collections also has the diary of Thomas Neely’s neighbor, Thomas Ryan (also available via the DMR).

Thomas Ryan was 14 when he began writing his diary in 1886 and recorded happenings nearly every day until 1890. He wrote about the weather, getting in trouble at school, playing marbles and “the game of living chess,” trips to the library and opera house, chores, and woodworking projects. But—surprisingly for such a young man—he also recorded his reaction to the presidential election, traveling evangelists visiting the city, and provided social commentary like the controversial views about playing sports on a Sunday. A unique and valuable resource on its own, the Ryan diary can be a great supplement to the Thomas Neely diary since the two authors wrote about some of the same events happening in the city.
Thomas Neely and his brother, Walter
(from the Ball State University Libraries Digital Media Repository)
Two Perspectives on the Presidential Election of 1888:

From Thomas Neely:

November 6, 1888: ...muddy, unpleasant day. But the voters went to the polls, some on foot, some in carriages. They took me to the voting precinct in a carriage. I did not stay at the voting place five minutes. I am very anxious now to know who are elected. I hope it will be Benjamin Harrison and Levi Morton. And not Cleveland and Thurman.

November 7, 1888: ...we think we have enough reliable news to warrant the belief that Benjamin Harrison is elected President of the United States. And the men downtown are as wild as Comancie (sic) Indians. We think the Republicans have carried every northern state.

From Thomas Ryan:

November 5, 1888: Tomorrow is Election Day, and there are a good many people in town. The Indianapolis Journal has a flaming front toward the Republicans to be careful about Democratic fraud.

November 6, 1888: The presidential election occurred today, and Harrison is elected. Hurrah!
Two Perspectives on the Presidential Election of 1888:

From Thomas Neely:

November 9, 1888: ...The Election news gets better for the Republicans. It seems probably that we have carried West Virginia. That would be breaking in on the solid South.

Saturday, November 10, 1888: The Republicans had a real jamboree today and tonight. There were a great many people present. There was a long procession in buggies, horseback, and on foot. And wagons decorated with every imaginable thing. And tin horns and firing anvils. It was a real Pandemonium.

From Thomas Ryan:

Saturday, November 10, 1888: The weather is bad yet the Republicans are going to jollify today and have a torchlight procession tonight. All are happy.
Two Perspectives on the Presidential Election of 1888:

Thomas Neely anxiously reports the outcome of the close election for weeks, while for the younger Thomas Ryan, the results appeared certain on Election Day.

November 14, 1888: The election returns from West Virginia are not all in yet.

November 19, 1888: We have not had definite word from West Virginia about the election. Both parties claim it. And both parties claim they have a majority in the lower house of Congress.

December 1, 1888: It appears to be a settled fact that the Republicans will have a majority of five in the lower house of Congress. And a small majority in the Senate.
Beyond Thomas Ryan’s perspective on important historical events, his diary also gives readers an interesting glimpse into the everyday activities of a young boy in the 1880’s—many in a humorous fashion. For example, Ryan enjoyed pranking his older sisters:

May 3, 1886:

Walt, Charley, and I made a cloth rat and fixed a string to it and put it across the sidewalk and when the girls and women came past, we jerked it alternately and scared them.
January 4, 1886:

I had to stay in this afternoon and write four big paragraphs in U.S. History just because I was incorrect.

January 6, 1886:

I got to laughing in school today and having a little fun, and I had to stay in with some older boys and write my history lesson. I was till dark getting my wood and coal...

January 26, 1886:

Walter and I got out our sled this morning and had a dandy time. I was examined in arithmetic today and I don’t think I will get very high.

February 3, 1886:

I had to stay in after school in the afternoon and it was because I just had a little fun with Arthur Huffer.
May 6, 1886:

Papa and Mama went out riding in the buggy and I got to go to the show at the Opera House and it was very funny. I came past the Royal Rink and got to hear the music rendered by three guitarists. And I came home and couldn’t get in for a long time.

May 8, 1886:

We all went to the commons to see the big boys play ball and I washed the buggy and then drove out to the Buckles’ and had a good time. But when I came back, I ran into a buggy which was standing in the street but no damage was done. And thank God it was no worse as I was scared pretty much.
Teacher Resources for the Thomas Ryan Diary

The Ball State University Libraries GIS Research and Map Collection (GRMC) has created lesson plans, worksheets, games, custom maps, and other activities that can be used by teachers in the K-12 classroom. These resources are available from the Libraries’ Cardinal Scholar online repository.

One of the lessons is a list of discussion questions for teachers to use with the Thomas Ryan diary.
Using excerpts from the diary, teachers can review some of the similarities and differences between students’ lives today and the life and even language of Thomas Ryan:

- Thomas and his brother play marbles. Explain this traditional game to students and discuss how terms like “playing for keeps” and “losing your marbles” are part of everyday language today.

- What type of candy was popular with the children of Muncie in 1886?
  - What sports and other recreational activities were practiced?
  - What chores performed by Thomas are not practiced today?
  - What kind of transportation was available in 1886 Muncie?
    - How was a doctor’s visit different in 1886?

- Research items mentioned in the diary: A picture box, macarons, toe slippers.
  - What books did Thomas read?
The diaries of Norene Hawk are also available in the Digital Media Repository. The two diaries chronicle the life of a single working woman in Muncie, Indiana at the turn of the 20th century. Norene records information about her job at a real estate office, riding bicycles with friends, shopping, fashion, and her sometimes volatile courtship and other social activities. Norene makes no report about historical events or national news, but her diaries offer clues about the unique lifestyle of a career woman in 1898. And Norene provides valuable information about the stores and other businesses she patronized, so her diary provides information about the city of Muncie.
January 20, 1898: It surely seems to me that the more I see of life, the more firmly I am convinced that the only safe plan is to stay single.

November 30, 1898: How glad I am that life is worthwhile and how much happier we might be if we would only remember this instead of being so easily discouraged.

July 20, 1899: I wish I knew what to do about my future. It seems the shaping of it lies in my hands.
An inspirational quote taped inside the back cover of Norene Hawk’s diary:

The universe pays every man in his own coin: if you smile, it smiles upon you in return; if you frown you will be frowned at; if you sing you will be invited into gay company: if you think, you will be entertained by thinkers; and if you love the world and earnestly seek for the good therein, you will be surrounded by loving friends, and nature will pour into your lap the treasures of the earth.—Whitney Philosopy.
Other Diaries in the Digital Media Repository

Teachers can access the personal diaries of other local citizens via the Digital Media Repository. These writers vary in age, and the time periods offer a variety of eras to provide unique perspectives on American history:

- **Mina McCormick Beckett**, 1933, 1934, 1938-1940
  “An upper-middle class woman who recorded dinner menus and daily activities, weather, special happenings around Muncie, Indiana”
  - **Robert Maggs**, 1901-1902
    “Teenaged boy living in Muncie at the turn of the century”
  - **Frederick Putnam**, 1846-1900
    “A city founder, husband, father, business owner, and served as the Delaware County Treasurer and Assistant Auditor”
  - **Mary Alta Smith**, 1926-1945
    “Wife, mother, grandmother living in western Indiana who recorded bank closings during the Great Depression, disease, church activities, the home front and grandsons enlisting for World War II”
  - **Philander Smith**, 1864
    “Civil War diary of a sergeant promoted up to Captain chronicling his activities, war news, and conditions”
Dear Diary,

Fictional Diaries from the Educational Technology and Resources Collection

The Ball State University Libraries Educational Technology and Resources Collection in the lower level of Bracken Library has a large collection of fictional youth books that can enhance the study of U.S. history:

Dear America is a series of fictional diaries that review the experiences of young girls during an important event or time period. The variety of topics covered in the books and the accurate details of the girls’ lives makes the series a popular teaching resource.

The Libraries’ collection includes:

- A Journey to the New World: The Diary of Remember Patience Whipple
- I Thought My Soul Would Rise and Fly: The Diary of Patsy, a Freed Girl
- Christmas After All: The Great Depression Diary of Minnie Swift
- So Far from Home: The Diary of Mary Driscoll, an Irish Mill Girl
- The Winter of Red Snow: The Revolutionary War diary of Abigail Jane Stewart
- When Will this Cruel War Be Over? The Civil War Diary of Emma Simpson
  - Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: The Diary of Bess Brennan
- Across the Wide and Lonesome Prairie: The Oregon Trail Diary of Hattie Campbell
- A Desperate Road to Freedom: The Underground Railroad of Julia May Jackson
Dear Diary,

For more information about using historic personal diaries for teaching, please contact the GRMC at 765-285-1097.

For more information about any of the primary resources available from Ball State University Libraries, please contact the Archives and Special Collections at 765-285-5078.
The End.