

# Using Historical Documents

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< <http://cnx.org/content/col11316/1.6/> >

**C O N N E X I O N S**

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# Chapter 1

## Using untranslated materials in research<sup>1</sup>

### **What are these documents?**

These texts are digitized versions of documents found in Rice University's Woodson Research Center. They are a sampling of a collection of several hundred documents that comprise Rice's Americas Archive. The selection of documents used throughout this module were all originally written in Spanish and have been translated into English. I refer to a couple of translated documents here, but you may wish to browse through all of the documents listed in the upper left sidebar, all of which are available on-line (or will be soon!) in three formats: their original format, a transcription, and a translation.

### **What is the difference among the formats?**

The original version is a scanned image of the document, so it shows what the document actually looks like - a letter, a printed pamphlet, etc.. The transcription is a typed version of the original in its original language. The transcription should retain any misspellings, typos, and other "errors" that are found in the original. The translation is an English version of the document. The translations are meant to be easy to understand and also to retain the "flavor" of the original. Since the documents were written about 150 years ago, the translations may also have an old feel to them.

### **What is the advantage of looking at the original?**

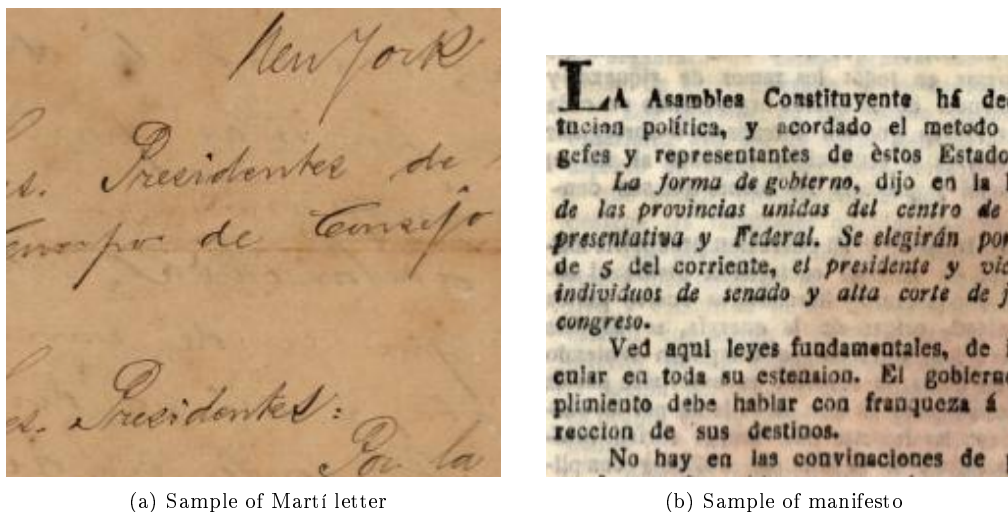
The original version can give you a feel for the type of text you are perusing and also give you some clues about its author. The two documents below are visually quite different; one is a letter<sup>2</sup> written by José Martí and the other is a Central American governmental manifesto<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>This content is available online at <<http://cnx.org/content/m13830/1.7/>>.

<sup>2</sup>See the file at <<http://cnx.org/content/m13830/latest/http://hdl.handle.net/1911/9242>>

<sup>3</sup>See the file at <<http://cnx.org/content/m13830/latest/http://hdl.handle.net/1911/9246>>



(a) Sample of Martí letter

(b) Sample of manifesto

**Figure 1.1:** Some differences between these documents are visually apparent. (a) This is a hastily written letter. (b) This is a typed government document.

Even if you do not understand Spanish, the differences between these documents is very clear. You can tell just by glancing at them that they served quite different purposes. The visual differences are not at all apparent in the transcribed or translated versions.

Please refer to the module "Using original documents on the Mexican American War (Chapter 2)" for more information on the value of looking at the original versions of these documents.

#### **What is the advantage of looking at the transcription?**

Transcriptions are almost always much easier to read than originals. It might take you an hour to read José Martí's letter in his handwriting but only a few minutes to read its typed transcription. You may wish to look at the transcription first to determine if a document is of interest to you. Just remember that a transcription is an interpretation of the original document. If you decide to work closely with a document, you may also wish to read it in its original Spanish version as well as its translated version.

#### **Why should I look at the translated version?**

If a transcription is an interpretation of the original, a translation is an interpretation of the transcription. A translator typically transcribes a hand-written document and then translates it. In this sense, a translation is two steps removed from the original.

That being said, someone who does not understand Spanish would not be able to understand much, if any, of the content of these documents without reading the translation. If you understand some but not a lot of Spanish, reading the transcription might be fairly laborious but reading the translation quite fast. This could help you determine whether or not you want to spend more time with the document.

#### **What is the value of comparing all three versions?**

It can be quite useful for a student who speaks some amount of both Spanish and English to browse through all three versions of the document. The translation may have interpreted some words in one sense, while you may prefer to think of them in another sense. In addition, not all words and their translations have exactly the same connotations

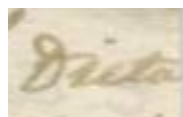
Cecelia Bonnor, who transcribed and translated the letter from J.G. de Torde along with several other documents in the Americas Archive, says that when working with originals "I have had to contend with different hands, which must be deciphered in order to allow the documents to speak for themselves. In particular, I am thinking of the Goliath letter, the first manuscript document I translated for the Americas



project as it presented interesting and immediate challenges having to do with the common practice of abbreviating words. Specifically, the first line of this document contains the word "Disto.," which is shorthand for "Districto" or "District." At first glance, it would seem that "Disto." reads "Osito" [i.e., little bear] but this word does not fit within the context of the sentence, which has to do with the Royal Corporation. Further, the word in question becomes clearer when one realizes that it was acceptable to use abbreviations in the nineteenth century. Therefore, in attempting to translate documents, I have found that contextualization can be of significant help in deciphering unknown or ambiguous words."

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**unclear abbreviated word**



**Figure 1.2:** This word is probably "Disto," an abbreviation of "Districto" or "district," but it also looks like "Osito" or "little bear."

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This example illustrates the importance of referring to the original yourself when working closely with a document. If a casual translator interpreted the word as "little bear," imagine how different the letter would seem! It's a good idea to check any unusual words or phrases against the original - you may know more about the context in which the document was written and than whomever translated it.



## Chapter 2

# Using original documents on the Mexican American War<sup>1</sup>

### 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<sup>2</sup>, a piece of currency<sup>3</sup>, a message from U.S. President Polk<sup>4</sup>, and government documents regarding the Independence of Texas<sup>5</sup>, the annexation of Texas, and the slave trade<sup>6</sup>.

### 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.

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.

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<sup>1</sup>This content is available online at <<http://cnx.org/content/m13831/1.18/>>.

<sup>2</sup>See the file at <<http://cnx.org/content/m13831/latest/http://hdl.handle.net/1911/9241>>

<sup>3</sup>See the file at <<http://cnx.org/content/m13831/latest/http://hdl.handle.net/1911/9236>>

<sup>4</sup>See the file at <<http://cnx.org/content/m13831/latest/http://hdl.handle.net/1911/9252>>

<sup>5</sup>See the file at <<http://cnx.org/content/m13831/latest/http://hdl.handle.net/1911/9228>>

<sup>6</sup>See the file at <<http://cnx.org/content/m13831/latest/http://hdl.handle.net/1911/9237>>

**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.)

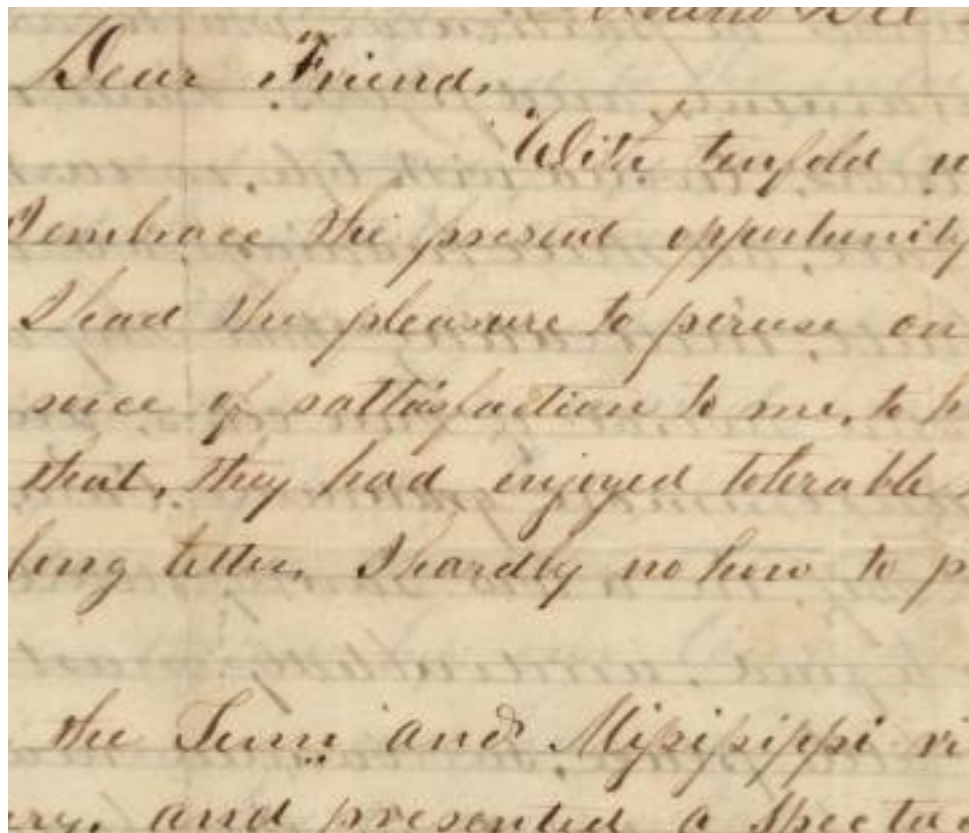
**If I'm working from the digital archive, should I look at the transcription or images of the actual document?**

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.

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### Mattock Handwriting Sample



**Figure 2.1:** A sample of Mattock's handwriting

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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

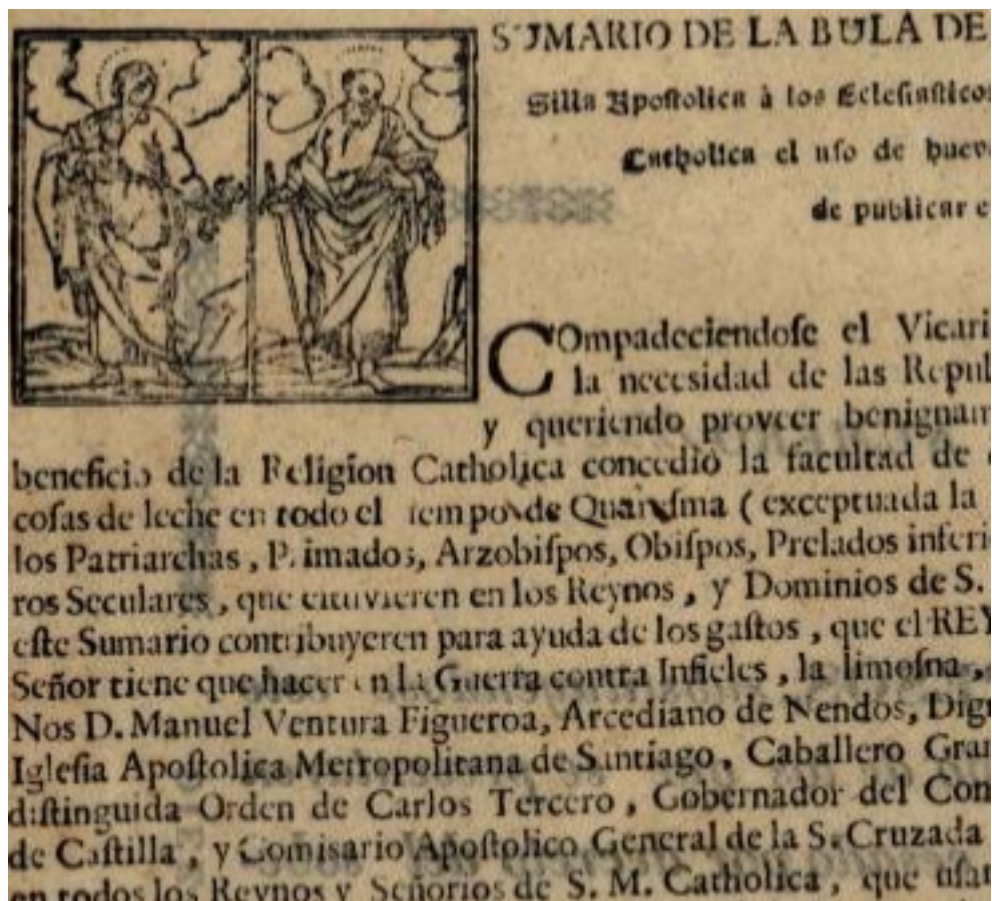
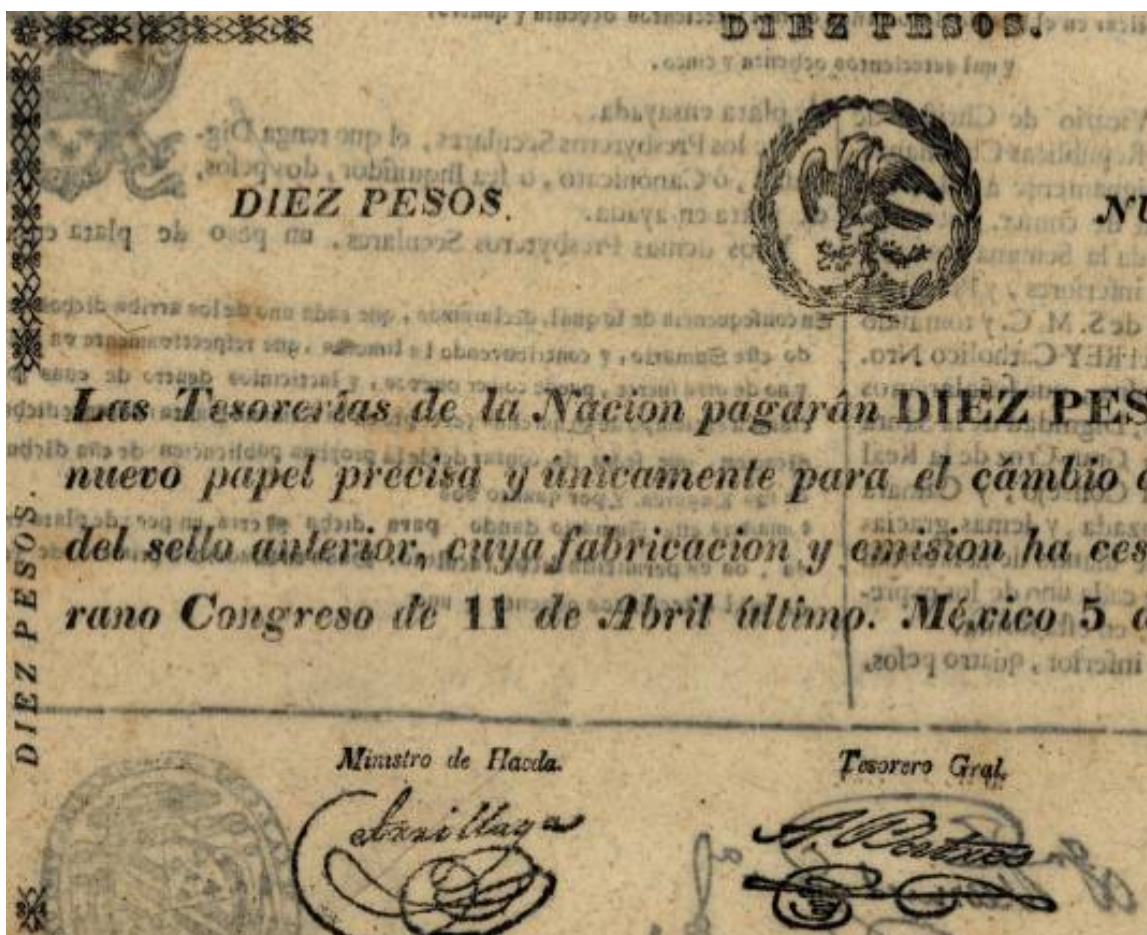


Figure 2.2: This is a segment from one side of the document.

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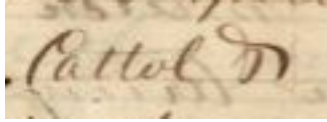
Currency side of the document



**Figure 2.3:** 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.

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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 misspelling of "cattle." You might have still other ideas about what the writer meant.

**Unclear word from Mattock letter**

**Figure 2.4:** The transcription may have one interpretation of this word, but you may have another.

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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." (Chapter 1)**



## Chapter 3

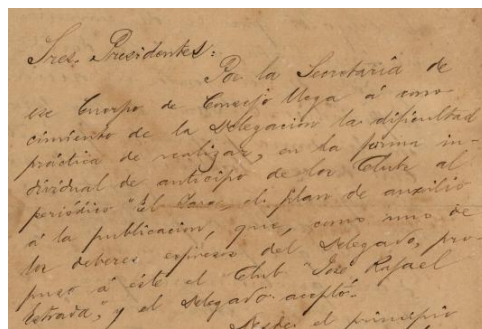
# Using archival documents in the Spanish classroom<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

The Our Americas Archive Partnership<sup>2</sup> offers many archival documents in Spanish that can be used in the Spanish language or literature classroom. All the documents in the collection include transcriptions and those in Rice University's and Instituto Mora's online collections offer digital page images as well. They are all freely accessible to teachers and students alike.

This module seeks to outline ways in which these historical texts can be incorporated into the classroom as parts of lessons, lectures, homework assignments, presentations, and special projects.

### Excerpt of a José Martí letter



**Figure 3.1:** From Carta de Jose Marti a los presidentes de las organizaciones de cubanos exiliados en Florida, 18 de marzo 1893<sup>3</sup>

### Why use archival materials?

These historical documents can bring authentic material and culture into the classroom. They offer new ways of contextualizing culture, history, language, and literature and give human voices to elusive historical events. They also provide exciting visual elements for presentations!

<sup>1</sup>This content is available online at <<http://cnx.org/content/m38485/1.2/>>.

<sup>2</sup>See the file at <<http://cnx.org/content/m38485/latest/http://oaap.rice.edu/>>

<sup>3</sup>See the file at <<http://cnx.org/content/m38485/latest/http://hdl.handle.net/1911/9242>>

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