

# Silas Dinsmoor Indian Agent and His Travels

## Objectives

Using a historic letter describing a journey through the Mississippi Territory in 1803 students will gain an understanding of politics, Native Americans and settler relations, and travel. They will also understand the importance and challenges of creating accurate transcriptions of primary documents.

The *Silas Dinsmoor* lesson and handouts are adaptable for grades 6-12.

Mississippi Department of Education Curricular Connections		
Common Core Mathematics	Grade 7	RP1, 2b, 2c, 3, NS 1a, 1c, 1d, 2, 3 EE1, 2, 3, 4a, G1,
	High School	N-Q 2, 3 A-CED 1, 2, 3 IF 5, 6, 8
Common Core Language Arts	Grade 6-8	RH-1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7 RST-2, 3, 5, 6
	Grade 9-10	RH-1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 8 RST-2, 3, 6, 7
	Grade 11-12	RG- 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 RST-2, 3
Social Studies	Eighth Grade United States from Exploration through Reconstruction	2c, 3a, 3c, 4a, 6a
	Mississippi Studies High School	1a, 1b, 4c
	Local Resources	1a
	Minority Studies	1a, 1b, 1d, 2d, 2e, 3a
	Local Cultures	1a, 2a, 3b

## Activity One: Analyze Silas Dinsmoor's Letter

**Objectives:** Using a historic letter describing a journey through the Mississippi Territory in 1803 students will gain an understanding of politics, Native Americans and settler relations, and travel. They will also understand the importance and challenges of creating accurate transcriptions of primary documents.

**Materials:** Magnifying glass; string; *Transcribing Historic Documents*; *Choctaw Agency in Territorial Mississippi*; *Silas Dinsmoor Indian Agent Resource Packet* (print on legal paper); *Silas Dinsmoor Letter Worksheet*.

### Procedures:

1. Have students read *Transcribing Historic Documents* and *Choctaw Agency in Territorial Mississippi*, and the *Silas Dinsmoor Indian Agent Resource Packet*.
2. Use the *Silas Dinsmoor Letter Worksheet* to review information and comprehension of the facts in the letter.

## Activity Two: Mapping Dinsmoor's Route

**Objective:** Students will use a primary source letter to track Silas Dinsmoor's journey and compare it to travels today.

**Materials:** *Map Activity Worksheet*; *Silas Dinsmoor Indian Agent Resource Packet* (print on legal paper); modern Mississippi highway map; measuring string or ruler; magnifying glass.

### Procedures:

1. Divide students into groups and distribute copies of maps and handouts. NOTE: A digital version of the map may be accessed via the MDAH website at [http://zed.mdah.state.ms.us:81/cgi-bin/koha/opac-detail.pl?biblionumber=8089&query\\_desc=kw%2Cwrdl%3A%20mississippi%20and%20kw%2Cwrdl%3A%20alabama%20and%20kw%2Cwrdl%3A%201826](http://zed.mdah.state.ms.us:81/cgi-bin/koha/opac-detail.pl?biblionumber=8089&query_desc=kw%2Cwrdl%3A%20mississippi%20and%20kw%2Cwrdl%3A%20alabama%20and%20kw%2Cwrdl%3A%201826).
2. Have students use maps, string, and/or rulers to answer the questions on the handouts. NOTE: Using a string to measure the distances on the maps allows for greater accuracy when measuring the winding rivers. Simply lay the string around the route traveled and then straighten it alongside the scale to determine the miles. Although final measurements will vary between students, the *Answer Key* has been determined using Map A and string rather than a straight ruler.
3. Discuss their findings as a class.

## Extension Activities

- Have students research the relations, deals, or secessions of land between the United States and the Native American Nations of the Mississippi Territory and create a time line.
- Have students write a defense paper concerning one of the issues facing Dinsmoor. On page six, he refers to a Choctaw chief who is unsure how to punish a tribesman who has wounded a traveler. What punishment is appropriate and why? On pages seven and eight, Dinsmoor debates on whether or not he should repay the Indians for property that was stolen from them. Should he repay them or not? Why?

## Activity One: Transcribing Historic Documents

Discovering little known stories about the people behind the history in textbooks is a fun way to make the past come alive. Letters, diaries, photographs, and other primary sources provide first hand accounts of events when they happened. Collections of these resources can be found in an archives, a place where public records and other historical documents are kept. Mississippi's archives contains thousands (millions?) of documents including census records, newspapers, photographs, maps, books, oral histories, film, and more. The Mississippi Department of Archives and History houses the state archives in Jackson.

Primary sources are full of valuable information, but deciphering them can be a challenge. They may be difficult to read for a variety reasons including handwriting, language style, and present condition. What should researchers do then? Should they guess? The answer is answer is no.

In the Silas Dinsmoor letter dated June 1803 there are several holes, illegible words, and moldy patches that make it difficult to decipher. There are several ways to handle difficult to read words when transcribing, or copying. If a word is completely illegible, it is best to leave it blank. If a word appears to make no sense but the letters are clear, copy the word and add [sic] behind it. This means "as was written." If some, but not all, letters are legible, use a combination of blanks and letters in the transcript.

The best solution to deciphering unknown words is research. For example, several historical maps were used to help transcribe the Dinsmoor letter. One illegible word was recovered after comparing a map to the Dinsmoor's route and determining that a point on the map, Balize, matched. The historical map was useful because Balize no longer exists.

Many handwritten documents were written in cursive, but just as spoken language has changed over time so has the style of cursive. Becoming familiar with styles of handwriting is also helpful. Sometimes reading other documents by the same writer will help make more sense of the first document.

Primary sources are important because they are written by people who witnessed or participated in a particular event. These sources reflect the lives of people in a particular time in history and show that there is more than one side to every story.

## Activity One: Choctaw Agency in Territorial Mississippi

Despite having slowly ceded much of their land to the United States government, relations between Choctaw Indians and the white people who traded in and traveled through Choctaw lands were quite friendly at the turn of the nineteenth century. This was due in part to a series of Indian Intercourse Acts passed between 1790 and 1802 that were designed to protect the Choctaw from white encroachment. These laws prohibited whites from entering Indian lands without a passport, settling, herding, or hunting on Indian lands, and trading with the Indians without a license, while also prohibiting the purchase of specific items, such as weapons.

To uphold these laws the federal government placed an Indian Agent within the Choctaw territory, a position held by Silas Dinsmoor (Dinsmore) from 1802 to 1814. Dinsmoor was responsible for upholding the laws passed by the Intercourse Acts, removing white intruders (by force if necessary), and assisting the Indians in adopting white customs. But as his letter of June 16<sup>th</sup>, 1803 reveals, his duties were wide-ranging and he traveled extensively through Choctaw lands, involving himself in trade, political maneuvering, and the exchange of information.

Dinsmoor worked for what is today known as the Bureau of Indian Affairs, a government agency that has existed in various forms since 1775. Today the BIA's mission is to enhance the quality of life of America's native peoples by establishing reservations on native Indian lands, providing health care, education, employment, economic development, and natural resource management.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

### Activity One: *Silas Dinsmoor Letter Worksheet*

Use this worksheet to analyze the letter.

1. When was this letter written? \_\_\_\_\_

2. To whom was this letter written? \_\_\_\_\_

3. What does this letter describe? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

4. Where does the journey start? \_\_\_\_\_

5. What cities/forts are mentioned in this letter? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

6. What landmarks or natural features are mentioned in this letter? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

7. How long does it take for Dinsmoor to make his trip? \_\_\_\_\_

8. What other countries have governments or representatives in the area? What cities did they control?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

9. What goods has he brought for the Native Americans to use?  
\_\_\_\_\_

10. What takes place in 15 days? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Name Answer Key Date \_\_\_\_\_

### Activity One: *Silas Dinsmoor Letter Worksheet*

Use this worksheet to analyze the letter.

1. When was this letter written? June 1803
2. To whom was this letter written? Governor Claiborne
3. What does this letter describe? Mr. Dinsmoor's trip from New Orleans, LA to Choctaw Agency office in Mississippi Territory
4. Where does the journey start? New Orleans, Louisiana
5. What cities/forts are mentioned in this letter? New Orleans, Mobile, Fort Stoddart, Fort St. Stephens, Pensacola, Natchez, Fort Adams
6. What landmarks or natural features are mentioned in this letter? Blockhouse Bayou, Mobile Point, Dauphin Island, Oak Noxaby River, Jones Landing
7. How long does it take for Dinsmoor to make his trip? 65 days (March 27<sup>th</sup>-May 31<sup>st</sup>)
8. What other countries have governments or representatives in the area? What cities did they control?  
Spain                      Mobile                      Pensacola
9. What goods has he brought for the Native Americans to use?  
hoes and axes
10. What takes place in 15 days? General meeting of the Nations

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Activity Two: Map Activity Worksheet

Use the string, magnifying glass, historic and highway maps to complete the activity on a separate piece of paper.

1. Use the letter and historic map and chart, to trace the route of Silas Dinsmoor.
  - a. Log the arrival and departure dates and locations on the chart when possible.
  - b. Find the sites on the map (using the second map as a reference as needed).
  - c. Note modes of transportation used, and any stops, or difficulties that might have occurred along the route.
  - d. Use the string and scales on the map to calculate the distances that Dinsmoor traveled on each leg of his journey and enter it into the chart.
  
2. Calculate
  - a. Using  $D=RT$  (*Distance=Rate x Time*) calculate the rate of speed has he traveled during each leg of his journey when all information is available.
  - b. Calculate the total distance traveled.
  - c. Calculate the length of his trip in days.
  - d. Using  $D=RT$  calculate his average rate of speed for the entire journey.
  
3. Use the highway map and match his route as closely as possible (by land). Use modern transportation and speeds. Calculate the time it would take him to complete his journey today. (Use Gainesville, AL as an end point and an average speed 60mi/hour) Compare this with Silas Dinsmoor's trip.
  
4. Use the highway map to calculate the quickest/best route using today's roads, transportation and speeds. (Use Gainesville, AL as an end point and an average speed 60mi/hour) Compare this with Silas Dinsmoor's trip.
  
5. Where do you think the Choctaw Agency office was located? On the 1826 map there is a New Choctaw Agency listed near Columbus. But there is also an Old Agency which is traditionally where Silas Dinsmoor was known to work. Where do you think it is located, remembering that he left on May 30<sup>th</sup> for home and arrived on the 31<sup>st</sup>?
  
6. There were some roads in existence. Why do you think Silas Dinsmoor decided to take the water route from New Orleans to the Choctaw Agency?

Location	Date	Transportation Used	Layover Time	Distance Traveled	Travel Time	Rate of Speed
		sailing ship	_____	_____	_____	_____
Arrive Blockhouse Bay-ou above Ba[lize]			_____	110 miles		
			6 days	_____	_____	_____
Arrive East end of Dauphin Island			_____		2 days	
Leave Dauphin Island	April ?		_____	_____	_____	_____
			_____		3 days	_____
Leave Mobile for Fort Stoddart (at junction of Mobile and Alabama Rivers)		boat	_____	_____		_____
			_____			
			_____	_____		_____
Arrive Fort St. Stephens	May ?		_____		_____	_____
			? days	_____	_____	_____
Arrive Mouth of the Oak Noxaby		boat	_____			
Arrive Jones Landing (exact location unknown)	May 24	boat	_____	_____	4 days	_____
Leave for Home	May 30	unknown	6 days	_____	_____	_____
Arrive Home (exact location unknown)	May 31	unknown	_____	_____	1 day	_____
<b>Totals</b>	_____	_____				_____

Note: The shaded area towards the bottom of the chart can be accurately calculated because Dinsmoor's letter often includes places not found on modern or historical maps. Other details of the trip are missing due to the poor condition of the letter.

## Activity Two: *Map Activity Worksheet*

Route	Distance	Time	Rate
Original Route			
Comparable Modern Route		In Days:	
		In Hours:	
Quickest Modern Route		In Days:	
		In Hours:	

## Activity Two: Map Activity Worksheet *Answer Key*

Location	Date	Transportation Used	Layover Time	Distance Traveled	Travel Time	Rate of Speed
Leave New Orleans	March 27	sailing ship	_____	_____	_____	_____
Arrive Blockhouse Bay-ou above Ba[lize]	April 1	sailing ship	_____	110 miles	5 days	22 miles/day
Leave Blockhouse Bay-ou above Ba[lize]	April 7	sailing ship	6 days	_____	_____	_____
Arrive East end of Dauphin Island	April 9	sailing ship	_____	95 miles	2 days	47.5 miles/day
Leave Dauphin Island	April ?	sailing ship	_____	_____	_____	_____
Arrive Mobile	April 12	sailing ship	_____	40 miles	3 days	_____
Leave Mobile for Fort Stoddart (at junction of Mobile and Alabama Rivers)	April 13	boat	_____	_____	1 day	_____
Arrive Fort Stoddart	April 20	boat	_____	50 miles	7 days	7.15 miles/day
Leave Fort Stoddart	April 21	boat	_____	_____	1 day	_____
Arrive Fort St. Stephens	May ?	boat	_____	40 miles	_____	_____
Leave Fort St. Stephens	May 7	boat	? days	_____	_____	_____
Arrive Mouth of the Oak Noxaby	May 20	boat	_____	120 miles	12 days	1.77 miles/day
Arrive Jones Landing (exact location unknown)	May 24	boat	_____	_____	4 days	_____
Leave for Home	May 30	unknown	6 days	_____	_____	_____
Arrive Home (exact location unknown)	May 31	unknown	_____	_____	1 day	_____
<b>Totals</b>	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

Note: The shaded area towards the bottom of the chart can be accurately calculated because Dinsmoor's letter often includes places not found on modern or historical maps. Other details of the trip are missing due to the poor condition of the letter.

**Activity Two: Map Activity Worksheet *Answer Key***

Route	Distance	Time	Rate
Original Route	455 miles	36 travel days	12.64 miles/day
Comparable Modern Route	374 miles	In Days: 0.26 days	60 miles/hour
		In Hours: 6.23 hours	
Quickest Modern Route	282 miles	In Days: 0.2 days	60 miles/hour
		In Hours: 4.7 hours	

**MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY LESSON PLANS  
TEACHER EVALUATION**

COMPLETE BOTH SIDES AND PLEASE MAIL OR FAX TO THE ADDRESS ON THE NEXT PAGE. THANK YOU!

TEACHER NAME \_\_\_\_\_

SCHOOL NAME & ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

EMAIL (OPTIONAL) \_\_\_\_\_

TOTAL NUMBER OF STUDENTS \_\_\_\_\_ GRADE LEVEL \_\_\_\_\_

LESSON TITLE \_\_\_\_\_

1. In your opinion, did this unit elicit better than average student response; if so, how?
2. Which segments of the unit exceeded your students' attention span?
3. Will this unit be of assistance to you in developing future classroom activities; if so, how?
4. How did this unit add to your earlier teaching on the same subject?
5. Would this teaching unit be handier to use as a:  
\_\_\_ multi-day unit      \_\_\_ multi-week unit      \_\_\_ other
6. Were the activities and lessons appropriate for your students? How?

Please rate the following lesson materials and activities by circling the appropriate number.

4=excellent, 3=good, 2=average, 1=inadequate

<u>Directions and Notes</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>1</u>
<u>Curricular Connections</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>1</u>
<u>Student Worksheets</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>1</u>
<u>Interactive Activities</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>1</u>
<u>Historic Images</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>1</u>
<u>References and Resources</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>1</u>

<u>Activity One</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>1</u>
<u>Activity Two</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>1</u>
<u>Extension Activities</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>1</u>
<u>Overall unit</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>1</u>

We would appreciate any additional comments on this teaching unit and any suggestions for improvement. Comments may be entered in the space below.

**Museum Division**  
**Mississippi Department of Archives and History**  
P.O. Box 571, Jackson, MS 39205  
Phone: 601-576-6800 Fax: 601-576-6815  
[outreachprograms@mdah.ms.gov](mailto:outreachprograms@mdah.ms.gov)