

Mississippi Department of Archives and History

Learning Lagniappe: Educators Extras

The George Rapalje/Rapalji Notebook

Z/0580.000

http://www.mdah.ms.gov/arrec/digital_archives/series/rapalji

This trader's notebook (9 cm. x 15 cm., 137 pages) of George Rapalji of the Natchez District contains accounts, miscellaneous notes, and Choctaw vocabulary words for the period April 9, 1788, through April 1, 1797, written on forward and then reverse pages in the notebook. Accounts include customer names, some of which are Choctaw, and a list of items purchased or traded as well as amounts owed and paid. Rapalji traded such items as thread, knives, gunpowder, salt, sugar, coffee, tobacco, and animal skins. He also dealt in livestock, as evidenced by the livestock inventories (pages 14 and 28). Rapalji recorded memoranda of events, recipes, home remedies, and geographic notes regarding the Mobile and Tombecbe [Tombigbee] Rivers. Of note is the list of inhabitants on the Big Black River, which includes the years they settled in the area (pages 19-23). Of particular interest are the pages containing Choctaw words and phrases with their English equivalents (pages 10, 43-76).

MDAH staff numbered the notebook pages front to back (1-84, including several loose pages beginning with page 79) and then back to front (1v-67v), prior to typing a transcript circa 1937. This was the order followed when the notebook was scanned in 2013. Blank pages not listed in the transcript were not scanned. Descriptions that accompany the page scans were generated by comparing images of the pages with the transcript.

Subjects that can be addressed within this Digital Archive:

The French and Indian War, the Seven Years War, the American Revolutionary War, relationships between British, French, and Spanish settlers with Native Americans, frontier trade and economy, and Choctaw language.

For more lessons and activities based on the Rapalje Notebook Digital Archive and other collections visit the Classroom Materials page on our website at

<http://www.mdah.ms.gov/new/learn/classroom-materials/lesson-plans-and-teaching-units/>

Teacher Discussion Guide on Reverse

Teacher Discussion Guide

Use images from the MDAH Digital Archive entitled “George Rapalje/Rapalji” (found at http://www.mdah.ms.gov/arrec/digital_archives/series/rapalji) to lead your class in a discussion analyzing and interpreting the below images. Note: To locate specific pages, go to above website, click on “Browse Images,” and then enter the desired page number in the box at the bottom of the screen (below the image).

1. What kind of information can we glean from the list of early settlers on the Big Black River recorded on pages 20-24 of the Rapalje Notebook?

This would be an invaluable resource to genealogists researching their family’s history. There were not many government records kept during this early period on the frontier and of those many were have not survived. This could be the only link a researcher could make that places their family in Mississippi prior to the 1820 US Census.

This list can also help us going forward through recorded history. If you can locate a name on this list, you may be able to track that person and their descendants through Mississippi history. Perhaps they became a prominent family with members in Mississippi government or governments in other states.

On a broader scope, these names can help us track the ethnicity of early settlers on the Mississippi frontier and their origins, both in the eastern United States and, perhaps, even back to Europe.

2. Using contemporary resources, compare the Choctaw words presented in the Rapalje Notebook on pages 11 and 44-77 with their modern Choctaw equivalents. An excellent online resource is the Chahta Anumpa Aikhvna School of Choctaw Language from the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma at <http://www.choctawschool.com/Home.aspx>. This website has learning tools ranging from vocabulary lists to complete lesson plans and provides audio options that allow students to hear the Choctaw language.

Why might words describing the same thing in the same language be different in the 18th Century than they are today? Can we contribute any differences solely to the evolution of the Choctaw language or can we assume that Rapalje might have made errors in his transcription?

Teachers can also use Middle English documents to illustrate the evolution of the English language itself. It might also be instructive to have the class examine an original copy of the Declaration of Independence or the US Constitution to see the differences in spelling and punctuation in the Rapalje Notebook’s contemporary documents.

3. There are relatively few references to the true trading of one good for another in the Rapalje Notebook. Most of the transactions were paid for with currency, but there are many different kinds of currency mentioned. Why? What does this tell us about Rapalje and the world he lived in?

In the late 18th Century, the Mississippi frontier was populated and trafficked by Native Americans and Spanish, American, British, and French settlers. Though there were obvious tensions between these groups, they often cooperated or at least communicated and traded with one another in an effort to carve out a living from the frontier. With so many different types of people governed under different powers living, working, and trading in the area, many types of currencies circulated. For a businessman like Rapalje, it would have been essential to be familiar with and deal in these different currencies.