

# Ordinary People, Extraordinary Circumstances

**Summary:** The three lessons in this unit explore the extraordinary events of the sinking of the SS *Republic* and its impact on the people who were aboard the steamship.

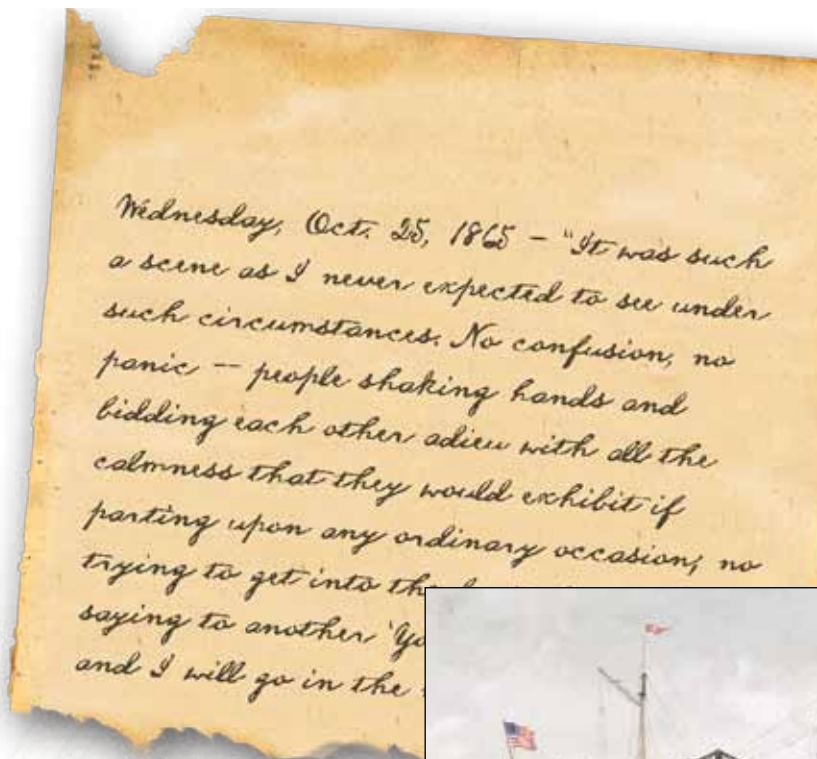
Much of this unit focuses on reading for information, writing to learn and the historical impact of discoveries such as the SS *Republic* shipwreck.

**Level:** Grades 3-8

## Materials Included:

- SS *Republic* Background Information
- Colonel William Nichols' Background Information
- Captain Charles Sauvinet's Background Information
- Transcript of Colonel William Nichols' Letter
- Lesson 1 Worksheet: Voices from the Past
- Lesson 2 Worksheet: A Letter Home
- Lesson 3 Worksheet: Character Map
- Teacher Overview and Instructions

Much of the background material will be used for all of the lessons but each lesson can also stand alone (students do not have to complete each lesson consecutively). The worksheets may be completed by students individually or in small groups of three to four students.



Wednesday, Oct. 25, 1865 - "It was such a scene as I never expected to see under such circumstances. No confusion, no panic -- people shaking hands and bidding each other adieu with all the calmness that they would exhibit if parting upon any ordinary occasion; no trying to get into the boat, no saying to another 'Go' and I will go in the

Colonel William Nichols' Letter to his wife Thyrsa



Colonel William Nichols



SS Republic

# Lesson 1: Voices from the Past

**Essential Question:** How do primary sources (firsthand accounts) impact our understanding of history?

**Summary:** Students will analyze William Nichols' firsthand account of the events prior, during and after the sinking of the *Republic*. Investigating primary sources such as Nichols' letter engages students in the real-life emotions and human resolve during a natural disaster at sea.

## Instructions:

- Distribute *SS Republic* Background Information, Colonel William Nichols' Background Information, Colonel William Nichols' Letter and **Lesson 1 Worksheet: Voices from the Past**.
- Read to the students or have the students read individually or in small groups the *SS Republic* background and the William Nichols' Background.
- Explain to the students that they will be analyzing a firsthand account of Colonel William Nichols experience as a passenger aboard the *SS Republic*.
- Explain what a primary source is (noted at the top of the Transcript of Colonel William Nichols' Letter).
- Ask the students to read Colonel William Nichols' letter and then answer the questions on the **Lesson 1 Worksheet: Voices from the Past**.
- Discuss the responses from individual students or student teams, and emphasize the power of a primary source as part of historical research. Some possible questions that may assist in guiding these discussions:
  - Why do you think William Nichols took the time to describe the events of the shipwreck in such detail in his letter to his wife?
  - What historical facts can be taken from the account of his voyage aboard the steamship and lifeboat?
  - Did having a personal audience for his letter (his wife) make a difference in the way he wrote it?



## Lesson 2: A Letter Home

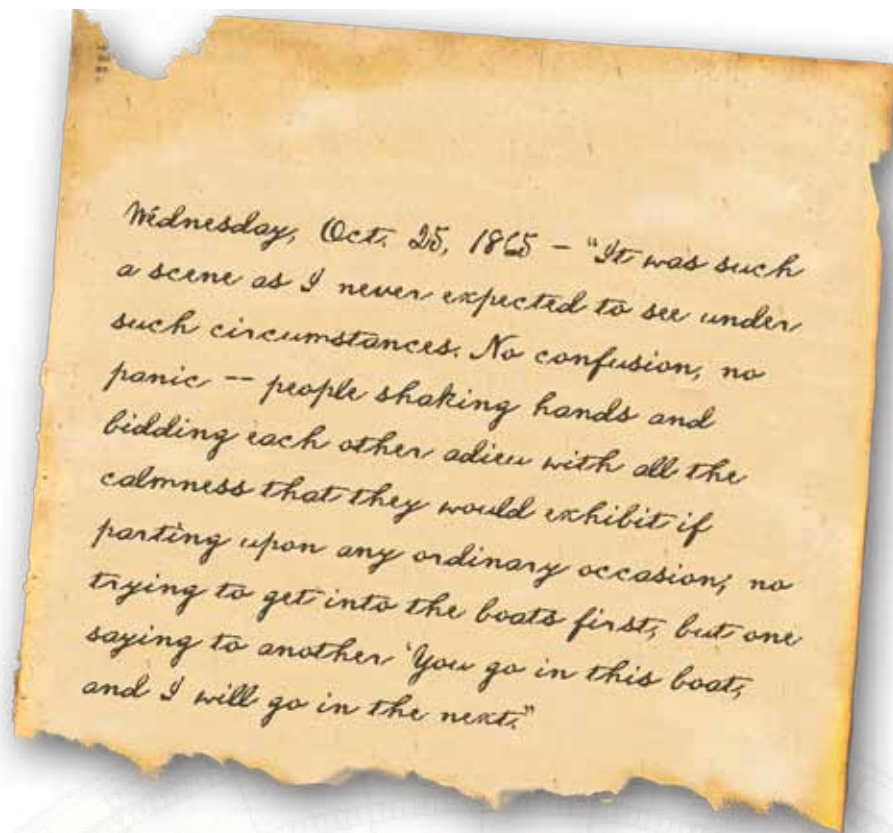
**Essential Question:** How do natural events such as weather impact human conditions and physical environments?

**Summary:** Students will analyze Colonel William Nichols' firsthand account of the events prior to, during and after the sinking of the *Republic*. After discussing the writing style Nichols used to convey information about the events he experienced during the storm, the students will write their own letters home.

### Instructions:

- Distribute SS *Republic* Background Information, Colonel William Nichols' Background Information, and Colonel William Nichols' Letter if the students have not already received these with Lesson 1.
- Distribute **Lesson 2 Worksheet: A Letter Home**.
- Read to the students, or have the students read individually or in small groups the SS *Republic* background, the William Nichols' Background, and the William Nichols' Letter if they have not already read these as part of Lesson 1.
- Review parts of the William Nichols' letter such as:
  - **Sunday, Oct. 22.** -- The weather is beautiful, and the ship bounds on her way like a thing of life. The passengers are all in first-rate spirits and dressed in their best attire. The porpoises are playing and sporting around the ship in the very exuberance of animal life.
  - **Monday, Oct. 23.** -- The weather was fine in the morning, but at 9 A.M. it began to blow strong, and kept increasing all day. At dinner at 2 P.M. the dishes slipped off from the table so, that pies, meats, vegetables, condiments, etc., became mixed in strange confusion over the floor. The ship began to labor heavily, and during the night shipped heavy seas, so that we were wet in our berths and did not sleep a wink.
  - **Tuesday, Oct. 24.** -- The scene at this time and forward beggars all description. One gang were set to bailing the ship and another to breaking up the cargo. We put out everything that could be got hold of--silks, block tin, liquors, dry goods, vegetables, tobacco, oil, varnish, white lead, and in fact everything of which the cargo was composed. Men worked as only men can work when their lives are [at] stake. When the cargo was put out, we found that the water, had gained on us. And all hands were set to work bailing the ship. I thought I could not stand, I was so tired from lifting out cargo, but I went into the hold of the ship and took my station to pass water in the buckets, and there I stood for twelve and one-half mortal hours, passing at the rate of from 25 to 50 pails of water per minute all that time.... I supposed I had seen something like confusion in battle, but the scene at this time was sublime. The ship had 300 tons of coal, and as she lurched from side to side, the roar of the coal and water sounded like Niagara, and the water on the outside dashing against the ship was another distinct sound and horrid enough of itself. The wind was howling through the rigging like the demons of the sea, ... the men, excited and yelling to each other, begrimed with black smut and engine grease, and their eyes glaring through the dim light of the ranging lamps, made it a scene fit for a painter. I cannot describe in words the impression which it made upon my mind. It was desperation intensified. No man stopped to think what was the fate impending in a few hours, and yet but few hoped for anything but life, and none expected anything but death. At that time had the ship gone down, it would have been impossible to save a life, as the boats could not have been launched in that sea and in the dark.

- Discuss how the letter makes you feel. Discuss how it allows you to understand and feel that you are a part of the SS *Republic* journey and enables you to relate to the passengers' experience through descriptions of activities and weather. Also talk about the comparisons that Nichols used to portray the events that took place.
- Now ask students to write their own letters home, describing their journey aboard a ship that was getting ready to sink in a hurricane. Students can use the **Lesson 2 Worksheet: A Letter Home** as a planning tool. Use information from previous lessons to encourage students to write as authentically and descriptively as possible. The Colonel William Nichols letter will serve as a model.



Wednesday, Oct. 25, 1865 - "It was such a scene as I never expected to see under such circumstances. No confusion, no panic -- people shaking hands and bidding each other adieu with all the calmness that they would exhibit if parting upon any ordinary occasion; no trying to get into the boats first, but one saying to another 'You go in this boat, and I will go in the next.'"

*Colonel William Nichols' Letter to his wife Thyrsa*



## Lesson 3: Survivors of the *SS Republic*: Character Map

**Essential Question:** What lessons can we learn from historical figures who have overcome obstacles in order to survive and thrive in the world they live in?

**Summary:** Students will explore the extraordinary events of the sinking of the *SS Republic* and its impact on the people who were aboard the steamship. Students will learn about the two passengers: Colonel William Nichols and Captain Charles Sauvinet. Nichols was a Union Army soldier who fought at Gettysburg during the American Civil War. He was also a businessman who wrote a detailed letter of his experience aboard the *SS Republic*. Sauvinet was the longest serving African American officer in the Union Army during the American Civil War and reached the rank of Captain. He later became the first African American Sheriff of Orleans Parish.

### Instructions:

- Distribute *SS Republic* Background Information, Colonel William Nichols' Background Information, and Colonel William Nichols' Letter if the students have not already received these with Lesson 1 or Lesson 2.
- Distribute Captain Charles Sauvinet's Background information and TWO COPIES of **Lesson 3 Worksheet: Character Map** to each student or group.
- Explain to students that they will be learning about two important people from history, both of whom were passengers aboard the *SS Republic*: Colonel William Nichols, a Union soldier and businessman who wrote a detailed firsthand account of his experience on the ship and Captain Charles Sauvinet, the first African American Sheriff in the South who served in both the Confederate and Union armies.
- Ask students to read the background information provided.
- Ask students to complete the character map based on what they learned about these two passengers from the background information provided. Remind them that in order to complete this activity, students must infer information from the text.
- Once they have completed a character map on both passengers, use the maps to compare the life of Colonel William Nichols to the life of Captain Charles Sauvinet [For example, both men lost children to illnesses].

## You may also use Odyssey-produced materials in your own lesson plans:

Additional material and information about the *SS Republic* is available at [www.shipwreck.net/ssrepublic.php](http://www.shipwreck.net/ssrepublic.php)

Archaeological and historical papers on the *SS Republic* shipwreck are available at <http://www.shipwreck.net/featuresarchpapers09.php>

Photographs and information about artifacts recovered from the *SS Republic* are available in Odyssey's Virtual Museum at [www.odysseysvirtualmuseum.com](http://www.odysseysvirtualmuseum.com)

## SS *Republic* Background

Originally called the SS *Tennessee*, the SS *Republic* was an industrial marvel built during the steam age in Fells Point, Baltimore. She was equipped with a vertical walking-beam steam engine, twin return-flue boilers and other machinery. Her two 28-foot sidewheels were driven by a massive single piston. The sturdy 210-foot long vessel was originally built to transport 100 passengers and store 5,000 barrels of cargo in her hold.

The ship had an interesting military career, serving both the Confederate and Union navies during the American Civil War. This career ended when her hull was damaged in a storm. A New York shipping magnate bought the ship in 1865 and renamed her SS *Republic*. After an extensive refit, she was used to service shipping lines operating between New York and New Orleans.

On her fifth voyage, the SS *Republic* departed New York with 80 passengers and crew. On board was an enormous cargo of goods. There were also barrels of money to be used in New Orleans' post-Civil War economy. On the third day of her journey a storm blew in from the south. By nightfall the *Republic* was stalled without power in a fierce hurricane. Passengers worked for hours bailing out water and cargo. On October 25, the auxiliary engine stopped working. With water rising rapidly in the hold, the crew and passengers abandoned ship on four lifeboats and a quickly-built raft. At 4:00 p.m. the SS *Republic* disappeared beneath the waves, taking her precious cargo down to the bottom of the deep, cold Atlantic Ocean.

## Colonel William Nichols Background

Colonel William Nichols was born in 1829. Even though his parents were poor Welsh immigrants, Nichols was a self-made business man. He became wealthy through real estate investments.

Nichols was a Civil War veteran and was well recognized for his leadership during the battle of Gettysburg. His Vermont regiment was among those that defeated the Confederate troops and led to the surrender at Gettysburg, the bloodiest Civil War battle in history.

Nichols' life after the Civil War was not easy. His businesses lost a great deal of money. His only daughter May died of Typhoid fever. He was suffering from Rheumatism. When Nichols purchased a ticket aboard the *Republic*, he was hoping to find new investments and improve his health. He certainly did not expect to be caught at sea in a hurricane. Nichols and the other passengers on the *Republic* abandoned ship in four lifeboats and a raft and were rescued by passing ships.

Nichols wrote the only firsthand account of the trip. He described in great detail the events that led up to the sinking of the *Republic*. The letter was addressed to his grieving wife but never reached her. She died of Typhoid fever before the letter arrived. After his ordeal on the *Republic*, Nichols became a successful civic leader. He founded the Chicago suburb of Mayfield, Illinois. Nichols named the town after his daughter May. He built a factory that produced farm tools and helped stimulate Mayfield's economy for over one hundred years.

Nichols' account of the tragedy at sea remains a powerful primary source of what happened to the SS *Republic*.

# Captain Charles Sauvinet Background

Captain Charles Sauvinet was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, about 1828. Sauvinet's father, a native of France, was a wealthy Caucasian lawyer and banker (and an associate of pirate Jean Lafitte). His mother was a racially-mixed Haitian woman. It was impossible for Charles' parents to marry because of their racial differences.

Sauvinet was well educated and spoke French, German, Spanish and English. As a grown man during the Civil War, Sauvinet served first as an officer for the Confederate Native Guards and then for the Union with the U.S. Colored Troops. He was the longest serving black officer in the Union Army. He had been promoted to the rank of captain several months before he mustered out in July 1865. Sauvinet was one of the 80 passengers and crew aboard the *Republic* traveling from New York to New Orleans. When boarding the ship, he did not anticipate the *Republic* would sail directly into a fierce hurricane. After several days, the crew and passengers abandoned ship in four lifeboats and a raft. Sauvinet and the others aboard the lifeboats were rescued by passing ships.

Sauvinet returned to New Orleans where he ran the city's Freedman's Bank. He was one of the first "men of color" to be elected to office in Louisiana. In 1870, Sauvinet became the first African American Sheriff of Orleans Parish.

While serving as Sheriff, Sauvinet went into a local food establishment called "The Bank." He was refused service because of the color of his skin. Sauvinet filed suit against the owner and the judge awarded him \$1,000 in damages. The owner of the business filed an appeal. Sauvinet continued to fight, going all the way to the United States Supreme Court, where he won his case. This decision became a legal precedent for over one hundred cases between 1875 and 2003.

Tragedy struck Sauvinet when his 17 year old son died of yellow fever. Sauvinet's life was filled with struggle, but he will be remembered for his great contributions to the freedom and rights of African Americans.

## **For additional information about the life of Charles Sauvinet:**

Nystrom, J.A., *New Orleans after the Civil War: Race, Politics, and a New Birth of Freedom* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).



# William Nichols Letter Transcript

## Letter of William T. Nichols to wife Thyrza Nichols in Rutland, Vermont

Atlanta, Ga., Nov. 2, 1865.

Dear Thyrza:

**Primary Sources are generally original, personal or firsthand accounts of an event, time period, individual, project or idea being studied. We sometimes refer to these as “people accounts.” A primary source may also be a document, painting, recording or map.**

I give you below a short synopsis of the fortunes which have happened to me by sea and land since we left home.

**Wednesday, Oct. 18.** -- We went down to take the steamer, in company with our friends, Mr. Royce, Mr. Robbins and Mr. Wardwell; shook hands and parted with them at the gangway. Found the arrangements on the ship good; had state room No. 13, and having stowed away our baggage and made ourselves as comfortable as we could, we awaited with patience the sailing of the ship. At 3:30 P.M. she cast off from her moorings, and our voyage was begun.

**Thursday, Oct. 19.** -- The ship came out as far as Staten Island, and the weather being heavy outside of the harbor, we laid to till this morning, and started at 9 o'clock. The weather was not very bad, but was far from being fine. Passed the Hook early, and during the day, several ships inward bound. Got somewhat acquainted with some of the passengers, and among others with Captain Geo. W. McNair, late of the ship Inspector, and his brother.

**Friday, Oct. 20.** -- During the night the weather grew heavy, and in the morning was blowing a gale, which continued all day, and caused considerable anxiety to the passengers, and I think some to the captain of the ship. But she rode out the gale all day long, and at midnight the storm abated.

**Saturday, Oct. 21.** -- The storm has abated, and the sea gradually subsides. In the afternoon the sea become conspicuously smooth, and we were making good headway. Became quite well acquainted with several of the passengers this evening, and really the voyage began to assume a pleasant and agreeable aspect.

**Sunday, Oct. 22.** -- The weather is beautiful, and the ship bounds on her way like a thing of life. The passengers are all in first-rate spirits and dressed in their best attire. The porpoises are playing and sporting around the ship in the very exuberance of animal life.

**Monday, Oct. 23.** -- The weather was fine in the morning, but at 9 A.M. it began to blow strong, and kept increasing all day. At dinner at 2 P.M. the dishes slipped off from the table so, that pies, meats, vegetables, condiments, etc., became mixed in strange confusion over the floor. The ship began to labor heavily, and during the night shipped heavy seas, so that we were wet in our berths and did not sleep a wink.

**Tuesday, Oct. 24.** -- This morning we had no breakfast, as the ship was rolling so heavily that it was impossible either to cook anything or set a table. It was as much as a man could do to walk from one side of the ship to the other, by hanging on to anything he could get hold of. Still the gales kept increasing, and the ship sprung a leak at 9 A.M., but the passengers did not know it. The fires in the boilers of the ship were put out only by the water in the hold before noon.



The first time we knew that we were in trouble was about 1 o'clock P.M., when we were told that if the gale did not abate, we must begin to throw the cargo overboard at 2. The news caused considerable consternation, and at half past one we were set to throwing the cargo overboard. The scene at this time and forward beggars all description. One gang were set to bailing the ship and another to breaking up the cargo. We put out everything that could be got hold of--silks, block tin, liquors, dry goods, vegetables, tobacco, oil, varnish, white lead, and in fact everything of which the cargo was composed. Men worked as only men can work when their lives are [at] stake.

When the cargo was put out, we found that the water, had gained on us. And all hands were set to work bailing the ship. I thought I could not stand, I was so tired from lifting out cargo, but I went into the hold of the ship and took my station to pass water in the buckets, and there I stood for twelve and one-half mortal hours, passing at the rate of from 25 to 50 pails of water per minute all that time. I supposed I had seen something like confusion in battle, but the scene at this time was sublime. The ship had 300 tons of coal, and as she lurched from side to side, the roar of the coal and water sounded like Niagara, and the water on the outside dashing against the ship was another distinct sound and horrid enough of itself. The wind was howling through the rigging like the demons of the sea, ... the men, excited and yelling to each other, begrimed with black smut and engine grease, and their eyes glaring through the dim light of the ranging lamps, made it a scene fit for a painter. I cannot describe in words the impression which it made upon my mind. It was desperation intensified. No man stopped to think what was the fate impending in a few hours, and yet but few hoped for anything but life, and none expected anything but death. At that time had the ship gone down, it would have been impossible to save a life, as the boats could not have been launched in that sea and in the dark.

**Wednesday, Oct. 25.** -- The ship is still afloat, and has been kept afloat simply by the efforts of the passengers in bailing, as the pumps were all out of order, and, strange to say out of the chaos of the occasion, something like order has grown up. It was desperation, but men were just on the eve of exhaustion. We were laboring to keep the ship afloat a few hours longer, as the sea was subsiding, and making our preparations to leave the ship in the boats. At half-past one in the afternoon we stopped bailing as it was evident that she could not float much longer. The boats were launched and a raft made, and at two the men began to get into the boats. It was such a scene as I never expected to see under such circumstances. No confusion, no panic -- people shaking hands and bidding each other adieu with all the calmness that they would exhibit if parting upon any ordinary occasion; no trying to get into the boats first, but one saying to another "You go in this boat, and I will go in the next."

The ladies and children were all put into the boats first, and then the men were allowed to take their chances. Henry and I were in boat No. 2, though it was the last boat lowered into the sea. We had 13 in her, and by a singular good fortune, Capt. McNair, an old sea captain was with us, and to him under God, we owe our lives, as he knew how to steer the ship by sun and stars.

At four o'clock P.M. the ship sunk to the bottom with \$300,000 in gold and much other treasure on board. The four boats and raft now started on their cruise for life. It was a magnificent sight. They happened to form in the shape of a pentagon, and with the sea rolling 40 feet high, the boats would rise and fall like our hopes and fears. Our boats got filled with water within 15 minutes after we started out, but we took off our hats and caps and soon bailed her out, and during the remainder of the night we kept her head on the sea, and waited with patience and anxiety for daylight.

**Thursday, Oct. 26.** -- At last it came, and availing ourselves to the general fact that land was to the west, we steered in that direction and rowed for our lives. A little after noon Capt. McNair rigged up a sail out of a table-cloth which was on board, and with that we made rapid progress till nearly night, when the wind died away, and we had to take to the oars, and all that night we had to pull, and were looking, anxiously looking for a sail or land, but neither came in sight.

Thirst, more terrible than anything else I ever suffered, was added to our other calamities. We had not one drop of water, and with all the labor we had performed it seemed impossible to live without water. But we said little to each other in regard to it, and kept hard at work.

**Friday, Oct. 27.** -- Morning came, and with it no sail--no land. It was water everywhere. Our throats began to swell from thirst, and I took out May's gold chain and put it in my mouth, to keep it moist, and gave Henry a coin for the same purpose. His jaws began to set themselves, but the poor fellow worked without saying anything, and did his part like a man. At 9 a.m. a sail hove in sight, and we began to pull for her, and pulled till we were exhausted, and had to give up in despair, as she had gained on us, instead of our gaining on her. At this point we were on the point of despair, and took off our clothing and jumped into the sea, to absorb moisture externally, which alleviated our suffering very much for the time being. Just after we got into the boat again, a sail hove in sight in the opposite direction, and though, almost dead, we took to the oars again, and after pulling over an hour we got to the ship, which proved to be the Horace Beals, Capt. Joseph Blankenship, and he treated us with all the civility and politeness which a trueborn gentleman could bestow upon us. We could not stand at first when we got on the deck, but water, coffee and something to eat, together with a night's sleep, restored us.

**Saturday, Oct. 28.** -- We were on the ship during the day, and rested what we could.

**Sunday, Oct. 29.** -- The steamer General Hooker, which was sent out by the Government to search for us, came up and took us on board about 5 P.M., and we headed for Charleston.

**Monday, Oct. 30.** -- We arrived in Charleston this morning, and once more are upon land. To a kind and overruling Providence, I return my sincere and profound thanks.

I have given you a simple narrative of a terrible suffering, and when I have more time I will give you a similar history of our adventures on the land. Henry and myself are both well, and on our way to New Orleans.

W.T.N.  
(William T. Nichols)

**End Note:**

William T. Nichols wrote the above letter to his wife, Thyrza, not knowing that at the time she was dying of Typhoid fever. His beloved young daughter May, had died of the fever prior to his voyage aboard the SS *Republic*. William and Henry Nichols finally reached New Orleans. Both lived to be successful and influential civic leaders. William founded the Chicago suburb of Mayfield, Illinois, which he named for his daughter May. He built a factory that produced farm implements and helped fuel Mayfield's economy for over a century.

# Lesson 1 Worksheet: Voices from the Past

## The Letter of Colonel William Nichols: Firsthand Account of the Sinking of the *SS Republic*

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Read the letter entries dated October 18 through 22.

What do these accounts tell you about the start of a journey aboard a steamship?

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Read the letter entries dated October 23 through 24.

How did the weather change the journey for the passengers and crew aboard the *SS Republic*?

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**Colonel William Nichols writes,** “The ship had 300 tons of coal, and as she lurched from side to side, the roar of the coal and water sounded like Niagara, and the water on the outside dashing against the ship was another distinct sound and horrid enough of itself. The wind was howling through the rigging like the demons of the sea,... the men, excited and yelling to each other, begrimed with black smut and engine grease, and their eyes glaring through the dim light of the ranging lamps, made it a scene fit for a painter. I cannot describe in words the impression which it made upon my mind.”

Look at the underlined parts of the letter. How did Nichols’ use of figurative and metaphorical language help us see and feel what was happening on the *SS Republic*? Be sure to address each underlined part separately.



# Lesson 2 Worksheet: A Letter Home

## Letter Writing Challenge

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Read the letter written by Colonel William Nichols and imagine that you are on the SS *Republic* as a fellow passenger. As you read the text underline important facts and use your Planning Tool to make notes about what it was like to travel on a steamship in the late 1860s.

Three days into the journey from New York to New Orleans a huge storm arises and the ship begins to take on water. Use the Planning Tool to write down how you would feel being on the ship in a hurricane and what type of weather you would have experienced.

Use your notes from the planning tool and the important facts you underlined to write a letter home to your family similar to the letter written by Colonel William Nichols.



*Colonel William Nichols*

## Planning Tool

### List Facts and Ideas about Life on a Steamship

### List Thoughts about Sailing During a Storm



# Lesson 3 Worksheet: Character Map

## Directions:

Create a character map for Colonel William Nichols and one for Charles Sauvinet. Then compare the two men and their contributions to history. All answers must be supported from the text.

**Says**  
(real or inferred) ...

**Thinks**  
(real or inferred) ...

**Feels (real or inferred) ...**

Use arms and legs to tell some of the things each character did.