

THE WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

Primary Document Activities

Saving History

Dolley Madison, the White House, and the War of 1812



Portrait of Dolley Madison - White House Collection

The events leading up to the burning of the White House during the War of 1812 have been well chronicled. Eyewitness accounts and recollections by American and British soldiers, sailors, and civilians have helped bring to light this humiliating episode of America's second war with Great Britain. Among the most celebrated events of the war was the saving of George Washington's portrait by Dolley Madison before the White House was torched. Thanks to a letter written by Mrs. Madison prior to her hasty escape, the circumstances under which the painting and other national valuables were saved are described in detail. Because history is better told in the words of the eyewitness, this letter is often used by historians in their writings on the war.

Recently, however, an expert concluded that there was good evidence to suggest that Dolley Madison did not write the letter on August 23-24, 1814, as the British were marching toward Washington, but later - perhaps 20 years later. While the primary elements and facts of the letter are not disputed, the tone may have changed considerably, and it does pose interesting questions for students of history about what makes a document an original.

The letter in this lesson provides a unique perspective of a tumultuous event in American history from an eyewitness and active participant who also held the prominent position of first lady of the United States. When interpreting the letter, students can look beyond the historical information that Dolley Madison provides to consider how the letter has been used throughout history and whether the "value" of the letter is altered when discrepancies, however minor, are discovered.

Objectives

After reading letters written by First Lady Dolley Madison and completing the activities, students will be able to:

- Describe the activity and action at the White House on August 23 and 24, 1814.
- Characterize the tone that Mrs. Madison used in describing the events.
- Describe the importance of saving the George Washington portrait as a national icon.
- Reflect on the value of records left by public figures who participate in major events.
- Discuss the importance of letters as historical documents and discuss ways that they be altered over time.
- Discuss the destruction of the White House as a symbolic gesture by the British.
- List the pros and cons of the contemplated removal of the seat of government from Washington following the destruction of the Capitol, White House, and Treasury building.
- Describe the role of first lady and characterize the evolution of that "job."

Background

I. Dolley Madison as First Lady

Dolley Madison's rescue of George Washington's portrait secured her place as a legendary figure in American history, although she had made a name for herself in many other ways. She arrived in Washington during President Thomas Jefferson's administration when her husband James Madison was appointed Secretary of State. Her impact was soon felt, as she became an unofficial hostess for the widowed president's

small dinner parties. As first lady during her husband's presidency, Dolley Madison played a major role in the capital's social and political scenes.



The portrait of Washington saved by Dolley Madison - White House Collection

With an astute sense of purpose and considerable charm, Dolley Madison navigated the waters of Washington society in an unprecedented way. She brought together disparate groups of politicians, diplomats, and local residents in a social setting. Weekly parties, called "Wednesday drawing rooms," or "Mrs. Madison's crush or squeeze," provided a relaxed atmosphere for politicking and mingling. With no invitation required, these parties sometimes attracted four hundred guests. Some individuals who rarely associated with one another found themselves together at the White House. Even a boycott by President Madison's opposition party, the Federalists, fizzled when members realized there was no political advantage to staying away.

Mrs. Madison's presence and personality were critical to the success of the events. Dressed vibrantly in rich colors and fabrics and often adorned by an unusual headpiece or turban, she greeted visitors as they enjoyed an evening of refreshments, music, and lively conversation. Mrs. Madison also

presided over dinner parties, captivating her guests with unusual menu items, such as ice cream in warm pastry, and extraordinary conversation skills.

Dolley Madison continued entertaining at the White House until war virtually reached her doorstep. The dinner table was set for 40 guests the day she left the White House. She and a few servants had remained at the White House, packing up valuable documents, silver, and other items of importance. With limited space, she made choices about what to take and what to leave. Among the items that could not be left behind was the full-length portrait of George Washington by artist Gilbert Stuart. Purchased by the federal government for \$800, the portrait was as much a symbol of the republic as any other object. Once the painting was safely on its way, Dolly Madison left the White House. Residents flooded the roads out of town. Even the soldiers assigned to protect the White House had fled before Mrs. Madison. The destruction was about to begin.

II. The War of 1812

The United States declared war against Great Britain on June 18, 1812. Although war had been avoided for several years, the continued harassment of U.S. ships and impressment of American sailors by the British pushed the nations to the brink. Despite protests from pro-English Federalists in Congress, President James Madison, at the time of his reelection, had determined that there was no other solution.

For the first two years of the war, the fighting was confined to Canada, the Great Lakes, and the high seas. Great Britain was preoccupied with their simultaneous war against France and did not have the resources to devote attention to both fronts. The war was distant from the people of Washington. But once Great Britain overthrew Napoleon in April 1814, it consolidated its forces against the United States. The fighting moved down the Atlantic coast towards the Chesapeake Bay.

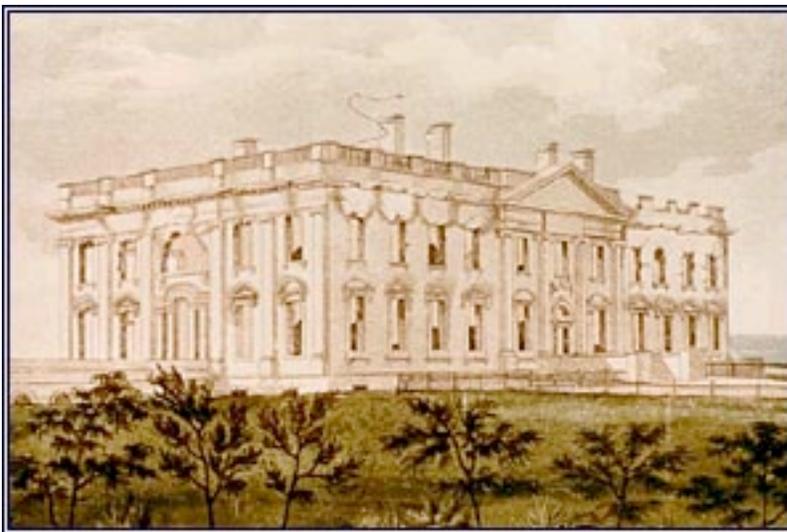
After a disastrous battle at Bladensburg, Maryland, which President Madison witnessed, American forces retreated. The British turned their sights on Washington. Enemy troops marched to Washington and burned the major government buildings, including the White House and Capitol. Although burning the city was primarily in retaliation for the torching of the Canadian capitol, York (now Toronto), the British also hoped to disgrace President Madison and to divide the country once again. Fortunately, the fire did not have the desired effect. After several more months of war, including the needless but successful Battle of New Orleans, the United States declared victory, ratifying the Treaty of Ghent on February 17, 1815. For more information on the War of 1812 consult your textbook or see the *bibliography* (see *appendix*).

III. The Madison White House

The White House has been an evolving structure since George Washington oversaw its design and construction. Early on, the house required considerable work to simply to make it habitable. But by the time James and Dolley Madison moved in (1809) the exterior had remained mostly constant and the White House had begun to emerge as a symbol of U.S. leadership. At the same time, the interior of the President's House, as it was formally known, needed much attention. Working with architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe, Dolley Madison took responsibility for decorating and furnishing the White House with the enthusiasm and energy she applied to all of her endeavors. Changes occurred quickly. Fresh plaster and paint appeared in the rooms and new upholstered furniture and draperies were designed and made. The new furniture featured fashionable Grecian or neo-classical influences but, never forgetting what the President's House represented, the pieces were made in America. Artwork depicted important Americans and American themes. Mrs. Madison actively participated in the decorating including making the choice of red silk-velvet curtains for the drawing room over Latrobe's loud protests. The end result was glamorous and provided the Madisons with a home in which they could entertain graciously and effectively.



This imagined view shows Mrs. Madison packing valuables before the British arrive - Smithsonian Institution



A view of the White House after the burning - Library of Congress

The enjoyment of the renovations was short-lived. British troops burned the White House on the night of August 24-25, 1814. Most historical accounts reveal that they took pleasure in setting fire to the structure that represented a former colony and upstart nation. Although Dolley Madison fled the White House only hours earlier, taking with her state papers, important pieces of silver and the ultimate symbol of the country, the full length portrait of George Washington, she had expected to serve dinner to 40 military and cabinet officers accompanied by her husband. Instead, the British troops consumed

the meal. They looted the house and then set fire to it. The house that had been the site of so many happy occasions was in ruins. All that remained were the scorched sandstone walls. Dolley Madison was distraught when she first returned to view the destruction. Although the Madisons would never live in the White House again, they were committed to the reconstruction of the house and to the resurrection of it as a symbol of the republic.

The destruction of the White House was physical, emotional, and symbolic. There were rumblings that the nation's capital should be moved to a more secure location. But from the ruins the will emerged to keep the government in Washington, in temporary quarters, until the damaged public buildings could be restored and rebuilt. In 1817, after the Madisons had retired to their Virginia home, a new president, James Monroe, moved into the White House and restored its place in history. For more information on the burning of Washington during the War of 1812 go to *Research / White House History Journal Archives* on the WHHA website and select "*The Burning of Washington,*" by Anthony S. Pitch.

Activity I □

Dolley to the Rescue: Part One □

Dolley Madison captured the events of her last few hours at the White House in a letter addressed to her sister and dated August 23-24, 1814.

1. *Read the letter (SEE APPENDIX, p. 10) and complete the following: Why is James Madison not present at the White House? What has the president asked Mrs. Madison to do while she is there? What has she been doing while she waits? Who else is with her at the White House during this time? At what point does Dolley Madison decide she needs to leave the White House?*

Make a list of the most significant information the letter provides. Why was saving the portrait of George Washington so important? Characterize the tone of the letter (i.e., emotional, candid, desperate, calm). Although the letter is written to her sister, to whom might this letter also be written? Explain your answer.

Imagine being placed in Mrs. Madison's position. How do you think you would react under similar circumstances?

2. Five months after the White House was burned, Dolley Madison wrote a letter to Mrs. Benjamin Latrobe, wife of the architect with whom Dolley had worked so closely on the White House's decoration. She described the events of August 1814. *Read this letter (SEE APPENDIX, p. 11) and compare its contents to the one addressed to her sister: What additional information do you learn about Dolley Madison and the White House in this letter? □ Which letter is more "emotional"? "Personal"? Explain your answers.*

Dolley to the Rescue: Part Two

Dolley Madison's letter to her sister is as suspenseful and tense as any drama. Using the letter as background information and additional research as needed, complete one or both of the following activities:

Create a theatrical scenario using the events that Dolley Madison described as the basis of your script and then use your imagination to complete the scene. Include the following: major characters, setting, and dialogue. Put on a performance for your classmates!

Pretend you are Dolley Madison and write a journal entry describing the events of August 23-24, 1814, as if no one would ever read the entry. Consider both the letter to her sister and the letter to Mrs. Latrobe.

Activity II

Putting Historical Documents to Work: The Long Life of Dolley Madison's Letter

The extract of the letter Dolley Madison wrote to her sister describing the events leading up to her White House escape is dated August 23 and 24, 1814. Because the richly detailed letter is unique as a record of these critical events and was written by one of the few White House witnesses present, historians have used the contents of the letter over and over again in their histories of the period and in biographies of Dolley Madison.

Recent research by historian David Mattern, who is also an editor of James Madison's papers, revealed some interesting findings. He explains that the original letter does not exist. What historians use is a transcript or extracts of the letter that Dolley Madison copied from a book, *The National Portrait Gallery of Distinguished Americans*, published in Philadelphia, 1837-1846. Twenty years after the White House burned, Mrs. Madison was asked to select some letters from the past to be published in this book. The letter to her sister was the only one selected to be printed. At some point in time, Mrs. Madison then copied it out of the book in her own handwriting. This transcription is the only record of the letter in her handwriting.

Although the letter begins with, "Dear Sister," there is no indication which sister she meant: Lucy Todd Washington or Anna Cutts. It was customary to make a handwritten copy of a letter for the record before you mailed the original; in her haste, Mrs. Madison probably did not. Therefore, she would have had to retrieve the letter from her sister in order to send it to the publisher. Because sister Anna lived near Dolley, and it would be convenient to retrieve the letter, it is thought that Anna was the recipient. (It was not at all unusual to keep letters for long periods).

While Mrs. Madison regularly corresponded with friends and family, this particular letter differs in its tone and formality. She provides details that do not seem to be necessary to add, if she were simply writing to her sister. Did she re-write it later, for a broader audience? What is not in question, however, is the accuracy of the information. Another Madison letter written to Mary Latrobe, December 3, 1814, does not contradict the details.

- *Re-read Dolley Madison's letter to her sister (SEE APPENDIX, p. 10).*
- Go to the *bibliography (see appendix)* of this lesson. Look at the sources marked with an *. The letter appears in these sources in some way.
- Visit a library. Using the bibliography, or other publications related to this event, find at least three sources that refer to the letter. Describe the context in which the letter is used and how it is cited in footnotes and bibliographies. Use the

worksheet as a guide (*SEE APPENDIX, p. 13*). Analyze your results and compare them with the findings of your classmates.

- Since the content and veracity of the letter are not in dispute, does it make a difference if the existing document is a copy of a letter written at an earlier date? Explain your answer.
- In what ways do you consider this document "valuable"? How would the "value" of the document change if the original letter written on August 23-24, 1814 were discovered?
- Other eyewitnesses wrote about the burning of the city of Washington. What makes Dolley Madison's letter so "valuable"?

Extract from a letter to my Sister published in the sketch of my life written for the "National Portrait Gallery."

Tuesday Augt. 23d. 1814.

Dear Sister

My husband left me yesterday mornng. to join Gen. Winder. He enquired anxiously whether I had courage, or firmness to remain in the President's house until his return, on the morrow, or succeeding day, and on my assurance that I had no fear but for him and the success of our army, he left me, beseeching me to take care of myself, and of the cabinet papers, public and private. I have since recd. two despatches from him, written with a pencil; the last is alarming, because he desires I should be ready at a moment's warning to enter my carriage and leave the city; that the enemy seemed stronger than had been reported, and that it might happen that they would reach the city, with intention to destroy it. . . . I am accordingly ready; I have pressed as many cabinet papers into trunks as to fill one carriage; our private property must be sacrificed, as it is impossible to procure wagons for its transportation. I am determined not to go myself until I see Mr. Madison safe, and he can accompany me, as I hear of much hostility towards him, . . . disaffection stalks around us. . . . My friends and acquaintances are all gone; Even Col. C with his hundred men, who were stationed as a guard in the enclosure . . . French John (a faithful domestic,) with his usual activity and resolution, offers to spike the cannon at the gate, and to lay a train of powder which would blow up the British, should they enter the house. To the last proposition I positively object, without being able, however, to make him understand why all advantages in war may not be taken.

Wednesday mornng., twelve o'clock. Since sunrise I have been turning my spy glass in every direction and watching with unwearied anxiety, hoping to discern the approach of my dear husband and his friends; but, alas, I can descry only groups of military wandering in all directions, as if there was a lack of arms, or of spirit to fight for their own firesides!

Three O'clock. Will you believe it, my Sister? We have had a battle or skirmish near Bladensburg, and I am still here within sound of the cannon! Mr. Madison comes not; may God protect him! Two messengers covered with dust, come to bid me fly; but I wait for him. . . . At this late hour a wagon has been procured, I have had it filled with the plate and most valuable portable articles belonging to the house; whether it will reach its destination; the Bank of Maryland, or fall into the hands of British soldiery, events must determine.

Our kind friend, Mr. Carroll, has come to hasten my departure, and is in a very bad humor with me because I insist on waiting until the large picture of Gen. Washington is secured, and it requires to be unscrewed from the wall. This process was found too tedious for these perilous moments; I have ordered the frame to be broken, and the canvass taken out it is done, and the precious portrait placed in the hands of two gentlemen of New York, for safe keeping. And now, dear sister, I must leave this house,

or the retreating army will make me a prisoner in it, by filling up the road I am directed to take. When I shall again write you, or where I shall be tomorrow, I cannot tell!!

On page three of Dolley Madison's letter, she mentions the painting of "Gen Washington." View page three, obtained from the *Library of Congress (SEE APPENDIX, p. 12)*:

Dolley Madison to Mary Latrobe, December 3, 1814

Two hours before the enemy entered the city, I left the house where Mr. Latrobe's elegant taste had been justly admired, and where you and I had so often wandered together; and on that very day I sent out the silver (nearly all) and velvet curtains and General Washington's picture, the Cabinet Papers, a few books, and the small clock - left everything else belonging to the public, our own valuable stores of every description, a part of my clothes, and all my servants' clothes, etc., etc. In short, it would fatigue you to read the list of my losses, or an account of the general dismay or particular distresses of your acquaintance.

I confess that I was so unfeminine as to be free from fear, and willing to remain in the Castle! if I could have had a cannon through every window; but alas! those who should have placed them there fled before me, and my whole heart mourned for my country!

I remained nearly three days out of town, but I cannot tell you what I felt on re-entering it "such destruction" such confusion. The fleet full in view and in the act of robbing Alexandria! The citizens expecting another visit - and at night the rockets were seen flying near us.

[Source: Anthony, Katharine, Dolley Madison: Her Life and Times, p. 230]

Next Page Image Caption:

Dolley Madison to her sister (page 3) – August 23, 1814

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military wandering in all directions, as if
there was a lack of arms, or of spirit to
fight for their own sides!

Three o'clock. — Will you believe it, my
sister? We have had a battle or skirmish
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me fly; but I wait for him. x x x

Oh this late hour, a wagon has been procured
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This process was found too tedious for them

Putting Historical Documents to Work: Bibliography Worksheet

Title _____ Author _____

Date Published _____

1. The letter is used (circle as many as apply):

In its entirety An extract of one or two sentences only Dialogue

Several passages throughout the text Other _____

2. How is the passage described or referred to in the body of the text? (circle)

A letter to (name) _____ A letter to her sister Not mentioned

Other _____

3. How is the passage cited in the footnotes and in the bibliography?

Enrichment and Expansion

Should the Federal Government Stay in Washington?

In addition to the White House, the fire in Washington severely damaged many buildings including the Capitol, the Treasury and the War Department. Almost immediately after the fire, calls went out for the government to move to another location, ostensibly, until the city could be rebuilt. Both the cities of Philadelphia and New York made attractive offers. Fearing that a temporary move might ultimately result in a permanent relocation of the government, representatives of the southern states objected. Prominent local residents and businessmen also objected to moving the government, fearing that they would lose their investments. President James Madison, determined to keep the government functioning in Washington, rejected any move at all. He also planned to rebuild the White House according to its original design.

1. Relocating the government to a new city made sense to certain individuals, particularly members of Congress from New York and Pennsylvania. To others with roots in Washington or southward, a move further north was considered disastrous.
2. Make a list of the reasons for and against keeping the federal government in Washington after the fire destroyed so many buildings and livelihoods. You may need to do additional research to learn more about the debate.
3. After creating the list, characterize the reasons as political, economic, psychological, and/or symbolic.

Consider what might have happened to the nation had the capital moved to another city, such as New York or Philadelphia. Extra credit: Hold a classroom debate. Select an equal number of students to represent each side of the debate: stay or go? After holding the debate, allow the rest of the class to vote on the question of relocation.

Lady of the House: The Role of First Ladies

Dolley Madison was an extraordinary woman of her time. As first lady she set a precedent for the role of presidential spouse. She partnered with her husband in a very public way. Her outgoing nature and prominence on the social scene contrasted with the quiet personality of predecessor Martha Washington, who first filled the role. Mrs. Madison's weekly White House receptions were fashionable but not too formal. She also visited Washington neighborhoods and called upon prominent local families.

Because Dolley Madison understood the value of cultivating both the political and social communities of Washington, she brought the two together whenever possible. The first couple appeared together at local events and Dolley supported charities that were

important to her friends. She supported the work of Marcia Burnes Van Ness, who organized the Washington Female Orphan Asylum. The first lady's participation, including a financial contribution, generated publicity and support for the cause.

After the city burned, Mrs. Madison continued her active social life. She enthusiastically and staunchly supported the rebuilding of Washington and the White House. The weekly parties resumed after the Madisons settled in their replacement homes, first at Octagon House and later at what was known as "Seven Buildings."

Behind all of the socializing, the parties, and the decorating lay Dolley Madison's primary responsibilities, her devotion to her husband and country. Her goal was to provide an atmosphere in which James Madison could be a successful president and thus the country would flourish.

Modern first ladies have called Mrs. Madison a role model. Choose at least two other first ladies, one contemporary and one historical, and examine how they viewed their role as first lady. Using the worksheet as a guide (*p.13*), compare their activities to those of Dolley Madison. You will find brief biographies on this WHHA website's *First Ladies Timeline*.

A first lady's work is exciting and challenging, yet the president's wife is not elected to the post nor is she paid for her efforts. Based on what you know about the achievements of first ladies, today and in the past, write a job description for the "position." Go further and describe the desirable qualifications for a first lady.

Bibliography and Links

Books:

Allgor, Catherine. *Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000.

*Anthony, Katherine. *Dolly Madison: Her Life and Times*. New York: Doubleday and Company, 1949.

*Jensen, Amy. *The White House and Its Thirty-Five Families*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1958.

*Leish, Kenneth W. *The White House: A History of the Presidents*. New York: Newsweek, 1972.

*Phelan, Mary Kay. *The Burning of Washington: August 1814*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1975.

*Pitch, Anthony S. *The Burning of Washington: The British Invasion of 1814*. Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1998.

*Seale, William. *The President's House, Volume I*. Washington, D. C.: White House Historical Association, 1986.

*_____ *The White House: The History of An American Idea*. Washington, D.C.: The American Institute of Architects, 1992.

* Book includes reference to Dolley Madison's letter of August 23-24, 1814.

Journals:

Bushong, William. "Ruin and Regeneration," *White House History*. Fall, 1998. Washington, D.C.: White House Historical Association, 24-32.

*Mattern, David. "The Famous Letter: Dolley Madison Has the Last Word," *White House History*. Fall, 1998. Washington, D.C.: White House Historical Association, 38-43.

Pitch, Anthony S. "The Burning of Washington," *White House History*. Fall, 1998. Washington, D.C.: White House Historical Association, 6-17.

Links:

White House Historical Association. White House History, Journal Article I: "Reminiscence of Madison," by Paul Jennings. (This article is a complete reprint of the 1865 memoir of Jennings, a slave who worked in the White House during Madison's presidency.)

White House Historical Association. White House History, Journal Article IV: "The Burning of Washington," Anthony Pitch.

Transcript of: A British Account of the Burning of Washington by George Robert Gleig - <http://www.nationalcenter.org/BritishBurnWashington1814.html>

First Ladies Library - <http://www.firstladies.org>

Virginia Center for Digital History, The Dolley Madison Project - <http://moderntimes.vcdh.virginia.edu/madison/index.html>

Transcript of newspaper article, "Official British Account of the Capture of Washington," *Columbian Centinel*, December 7, 1814 - <http://www.warof1812.net/>

Hillsdale College History Department, Military Documents Online - <http://www.hillsdale.edu/dept/History/Documents/War/FR1812.htm>

National History Standards

This lesson and accompanying activities meet the following National Standards for United States History, Grades 5-12:

Era 3, Revolution and the New Nation (1744-1820s)

Standard 3: The institutions and practices of government created during the Revolution and how they were revised between 1787 and 1815 to create the foundation of the American political system based on the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

Era 4, Expansion and Reform (1801-1861)

Standard 3: The extension, restriction, and reorganization of political democracy after 1800.

Historical Thinking Standards

2. Historical Comprehension.

- A. Identify the author or source of the historical document and assess its credibility.
- B. Reconstruct the literal meaning of a historical passage.
- C. Identify the central question(s) the historical narrative addresses.
- D. Evidence historical perspectives.
- E. Read historical narratives imaginatively.
- F. Appreciate historical perspectives.

3. Historical Analysis and Interpretation

- B. Consider multiple perspectives of various peoples in the past.
- H. Hold interpretations of history as tentative, subject to changes as new information is uncovered.

4. Historical Research Capabilities

- A. Formulate historical questions from encounters with historical documents, eyewitness accounts, letters, and diaries.
- C. Interrogate historical data by uncovering the social, political, and economic context in which it was created.
- F. Support interpretations with historical evidence in order to construct closely reasoned arguments rather than facile opinions.

5. Historical Issues-Analysis and Decision-Making

- A. Identify issues and problems in the past and analyze the interests, values, perspectives, and points of view of those involved in the situation.
- D. Evaluate alternative courses of action, keeping in mind the information available at the time.
- E. Formulate a position or course of action on an issue by identifying the nature of the problem.
- F. Evaluate the implementation of a decision by analyzing the interests it served; estimating the position, power, and priority of each player involved.