

Historians are Detectives: Using Primary Sources to Understand the Past

Objective: Students will be able to explain the difference between primary and secondary sources, and explain how the value of using primary sources is important to the study of history.

Time: 50 minutes

Skills: Reading comprehension, critical thinking

Content area: Social Studies- United States history, Social Studies- History

Materials:

- ◆ Copies of *Letter from Caroline Pickersgill Purdy*
- ◆ Copies of *A Clipping from Benson J. Lossing's Magazine The American Historical Record*
- ◆ Copies of *A Letter from Eben Appleton to Charles Walcott*
- ◆ Copies of *From The History Channel's interview with Ronald Becker*

Standards:

NCHS National History Standards

K-4 Historical Thinking Standards

2A: Identify the author or source of the historical document or narrative

2B: Reconstruct the literal meaning of a historical passage

3E: Compare different stories about a historical figure, era, or event

3G: Consider multiple perspectives

4B: Obtain historical data from a variety of sources

4C: Interrogate historical data

5F: Identify the solution chosen by characters in the story or in the historical situation

K-4 Historical Content Standards

4E: The student understands national symbols through which American values and principles are expressed.

5-12 Historical Thinking Standards

2A: Identify the author or source of the historical document or narrative.

2B: Reconstruct the literal meaning of a historical passage.

2F: Appreciate historical perspectives.

3B: Consider multiple perspectives.

3F: Compare competing historical narratives.

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4D: Identify the gaps in the available records, marshal contextual knowledge and perspectives of the time and place.

5A: Identify issues and problems in the past.

5-12 U. S. History Content Standards

Era 4: Expansion and Reform (1801—61)

1A: The student understands the international background and consequences of the Louisiana Purchase, the War of 1812, and the Monroe Doctrine.

IRA/NCTE Standards for the English Language Arts

1. Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).

Directions for Teachers:

On the following page is a list of questions about the history and preservation of the Star-Spangled Banner. The page may be photocopied for your students. The answers can be found in the primary source selections on pages at the end of this document. Note: These selections are quite challenging for younger students and may be read together during class.

After reading and understanding the questions, students should read the four primary source selections and decide which primary sources answer the questions.

Students should write the name of the primary source that provides the answer to each question. This activity can be done during class time with discussion, or as written homework based on the reading skills of your class and your schedule.

For more research, images, and interactive opportunities related to the Star-Spangled Banner, visit the National Museum of American History's website at <http://www.americanhistory.si.edu/starspangledbanner>.

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Introduction for Students:

What is the difference between a **primary source** and a **secondary source**?

Primary sources in history are written by the people who witnessed events at the time they took place. A diary and photography are two examples of primary sources. Every day in the newspaper, you can find primary sources. Some primary sources include the writer's opinion, some include only simple facts. When a historian wants to study a certain time in the past, he or she looks for primary sources from that time. To learn about the Star-Spangled Banner, historians and curators at the National Museum of American History studied primary and secondary sources. Can you name other examples of primary sources besides the ones named here?

Generally, a secondary source is written by a person or group of people who did not witness or experience a certain event. One example of a secondary source is an encyclopedia. What is another example?

Here is a list of questions about the history and preservation of the Star-Spangled Banner. You may already know some of the answers, but you have to prove that your answer is right by providing evidence, just like a detective. Using the primary sources provided, find the answers to each question. Show which primary source you used by writing the number or name of the source next to each question. While you read the primary sources, think about what the author or speaker was thinking or feeling. Do secondary sources express emotions the same way primary sources can?

1. Who sewed the Star-Spangled Banner?
2. How did Caroline Purdy feel about her mother's work?
3. Who was the commander of Fort McHenry during the War of 1812?
4. In what type of building was the flag sewn? Why?
5. Was the flag damaged during the bombing of Fort McHenry? If so, how?
6. How did the Smithsonian obtain the Star-Spangled Banner?
7. Did Mr. Appleton believe that preserving the flag was important?
8. What is the connection between the flag we call the Star-Spangled Banner and our national anthem?
9. Why do you think the Star-Spangled Banner is important today?
10. What is the job of the National Museum of American History? Why does the Museum have the responsibility of preserving the flag?
11. What do the people at the Museum think about this responsibility?

Primary Resources for The Star-Spangled Banner

Letter from Caroline Pickersgill Purdy to Georgiana Armistead Appleton, Baltimore, (1876). Original letter is located at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

Students using this document for the “Historians are Detectives” activity need only read the first four paragraphs, ending with the sentence that reads, “The flag contained, I think, four hundred yards of bunting, and my mother worked many nights until 12 o’clock to complete it in the given time.”

“Mrs. Appleton. Dear Madam. I have lately seen in the newspapers that the noted flag which waved over Fort McHenry in the bombardment of Baltimore: is in your possession, and is to be sent to the Centennial.

I take the liberty to send you a few particulars about the “Flag”. It was made by my mother, Mrs. Mary Pickersgill, and I assisted her. My grandmother, Rebecca Young made the first flag of the Revolution, (under General Washington’s direction) and for this reason my mother was selected by Commo. Barney and General Stricker, (family connections), to make the “Star Spangled Banner: which she did, begin an exceedingly patriotic woman.

The flag being so very large, my mother was obliged to obtain permission from the proprietors of Claggetts brewery which was in our neighborhood, to spread it out in their malt house; and I remember seeing my mother down on the floor, place the stars: after the completion of the flag, she superintended the topping of it, having it fastened in them most secure manner to prevent its being torn away by (cannon) balls: the wisdom of her precaution was shown during the engagement: many shots piercing it, but it still remained firm to the staff. Your father (Col. Armistead) declared that no one but the maker of the flag should mend it, and requested that the rents should be merely bound around.

The flag contained, I think, four hundred yards of bunting, and my mother worked many nights until 12 o’clock to complete it in the given time.

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I would also state, the many of my ancestors were in the Revolution. My grandfather William Young was a captain in the war: my uncle Col. Flower was “Commissary General of Military stores:, and Colonel of Artillery” – these, both lost their lives by camp fever; I had another uncle taken prisoner by the British, and whipped through the fleet for attempting to escape: and my father in-law, Henry Purdy, served through the war.

For my character and position I could refer you to Miss Margaret Purviance, or any other reference you would require; I could further recall myself to your recollection, as I was a Manager of the “Aged Woman’s” Home at the same time your were, and was particularly fascinated with you, (both being Episcopalians) in the care of a Mrs. Jefferson, daughter of Ms. Whipple a signer of the Declaration of Independence.

Your kindness and prompt attention to her induced me to present my case to you.

I am widowed and childless, and now find myself, in my seventy sixth year, in feeble health, and with the barest pittance of support. My friends here in Balto. – have suggested that if these particulars, met with your approbation, and were placed on a card attached to the flag, they might excite among patriotic people, some compassion for my helpless condition; but I would leave this matter entirely up to your judgement.

I have not been able to write, on account of not having the use of my right arm, but thought it was better to put the signature in my own hand with kind regards. I trust in your sympathy.

(Sgd) C. Purdy
(full name Caroline Purdy)

Letter from Caroline Purdy appears courtesy of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

A clipping from Benson J. Lossing’s magazine The American Historical Record 2:13 (January, 1873):

“The Star-Spangled Banner: Late in the autumn of 1861 I visited Fort McHenry at Baltimore; and in company with the late Capt. John Peter, a veteran of the War of 1812, I went out to the battle ground of North Point... and other places connected with events which inspired Francis S. Key to write the song entitled “The Star-Spangled Banner”. On our return I called upon Mr. Christopher Hughes Armistead, son of Colonel George Armistead, the commander of Fort McHenry in 1814, who kindly showed me the identical flag of which Key inquired “O, say, does that Star-Spangled Banner yet wave o’er the land of the free and the home of the brave?” Mr. Armistead spread it out on his parlor floor. It was the regular garrison flag faded and worn by exposure to storms and missiles. It had eleven holes in it, made there by the shot of the British during the bombardment of Fort McHenry.”

From the History Channel’s interview with Ronald Becker, Associate Director of Capital Programs, at the National Museum of American History, June 15, 1998:

“[The Star-Spangled Banner] takes in our entire history. And so, in that way, this is an artifact that not only connects to all of us, but it ties us together. It’s a symbol of unity and I think for those reasons it’s extraordinarily powerful.”

A letter from Eben Appleton to Charles Walcott, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, 1912.

New York

December 12th, 1912

Mr. Charles Walcott, Secty
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C.

Dear Sir:

If agreeable to you and the authorities in charge of the National Museum, I shall be very glad to present to that Institution the flag owned by me, and now in possession of the Museum as a loan from me, and known as the Star-Spangled Banner.

It has always been my intention to present this flag during my life time to that Institution in the country where it could be conveniently seen by the public, and where it would be well cared for, and the advantages and appropriateness of the National Museum are so obvious, as to render consideration of any other place unnecessary...

Very truly yours,

Eben Appleton

32 Liberty Street
Box 44
New York

Letter from Eben Appleton appears courtesy of the National Museum of American History

Acknowledgements

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