

Understanding and Using Primary and Secondary Sources in History

Objectives: Students will understand the difference between primary and secondary sources. They will also be able to explain the importance and limitations of using primary sources for historical research.

Time: 90 minutes

Skills: Analyzing Primary Sources

Content area: Social Studies- United States history

Materials:

- ◆ Photo-copies of 2 or more primary resources (6 are attached)

Standards:

NCHS History Standards

5-12 Historical Thinking Standards

2A: Identify the author or source of the historical document or narrative and assess its credibility.

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

2E: Read historical narratives imaginatively.

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.

The Star-Spangled Banner Project

Activity:

This activity requires the use of at least two of the six primary sources included at the end of the document. Select two or more articles based on the perspectives they offer, the number of students per group, or the students' reading levels. The *Letter from Caroline Pickersgill Purdy* and the *Account by Midshipman Robert J. Barrett* are particularly well-suited for comparison.

1. Before beginning, students should look up the words “primary” and “secondary” in the dictionary or online. Have a student write the definitions on the board.
2. Establish the difference between primary and secondary sources. A wide range of documents and objects can serve as primary sources. A primary source is written or created by someone who experienced events at the time they took place. A court record is a good example of a primary source.
3. Explain to the students that a secondary source is written by a person or group of people who did not witness an event. A good example of a secondary source is an encyclopedia.
4. Have your students cite other examples of primary sources and secondary sources.

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Written Assignment Based on Primary Sources:

Six primary resource documents are attached. Students should pick one of the documents to analyze for this assignment. After reading their copy of the document, they should answer the questions below, in class or as a homework assignment. Students should share their answers during class time.

1. What is the title of your document?
2. Who wrote it? When?
3. Where is it currently located?
4. How old was the author when the document was written? How old was the author when the event described took place?
5. What important pieces of factual information did you find in this document?
6. What personal opinions does the author express?
7. Why did the author write the document? What were his or her motives?
8. Do you think this document is a reliable primary source? Why or why not? What type of sources would you research to learn more?
9. What questions does this document raise?

Classroom Discussion Questions: (students should cite concrete examples where applicable)

1. Why do many historians begin researching an event with secondary sources? What can secondary sources provide that primary sources generally don't include?
2. What are the limitations of using secondary sources alone? What if you only used primary sources?
3. What makes every primary source unique?
4. Can you always rely on primary sources for accuracy? Can eyewitnesses make a mistake? What about an eyewitness who records his or her recollections several years after an event — will that make a difference? Sometimes people are very biased in their account of an event or of another individual. How can you separate opinion from fact in history?
5. Many primary sources are written documents like letters, diaries, and legal documents. But many people in American history did not leave records like that. For example, because African-American slave were not allowed to read or write, their eye-witness accounts are quite rare. How does this affect our understanding of history? What or who gets left out?
6. If a historian cannot find written primary sources, what other sources can he or she look for? What about buildings, archeological finds, artwork, or craft tools? What do these types of objects tell us about the past? What do they leave out?

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

“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.

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.

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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.

Account by Midshipman Robert J. Barrett, age 15, aboard HMS Frigate Hebrus during the bombardment of Fort McHenry, September 13-14, 1814 (as related many years later in 1841).

The following narrative account was published by “Naval Recollections,” *United Service Journal*, April 1841, page 464. It is the only known reference to the flag by a British naval or military person who was present during the bombardment.

“Thus, after bombarding the forts and harbour of Baltimore for twenty-four hours, the squadron of frigates weighed, without firing a shot, upon the forenoon of the 14th, and were immediately followed by the bombs and sloops of war. In truth, it was a galling spectacle for the British seamen to behold. And, as the last vessel spread her canvas to the wind, the Americans hoisted a most superb and splendid ensign on their battery, and fired at the same time a gun of defiance....”

Midshipman’s account appears courtesy of Fort McHenry National Monument Library, National Park Service.

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.”

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

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From the History Channel’s interview with Spencer Crew, Executive Director of the National Museum of American History, June 15, 1998:

“Our task is really to preserve American history. And the flag project sort of symbolizes all the other projects that are part and parcel of the work that we do here....It’s really our task as the caretaker of the flag to make sure that any steps we take in terms of examining it and trying to make sure that it continues to exist are done thoughtfully and carefully and in the best possible way.”

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.”

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