

DOING HISTORY

The background of the cover is a composite image. The upper portion shows a classical Greek temple with many columns, overlaid with a faint, circular architectural diagram or map. The lower portion shows a modern computer workstation on a desk, including a monitor displaying a website, a keyboard, a mouse, a stack of papers, and a mug. The entire image has a reddish-brown color cast.

Research and Writing in the Digital Age

Michael J. Galgano • J. Chris Arndt
Raymond M. Hyser



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MICHAEL J. GALGANO

J. CHRIS ARNDT

RAYMOND M. HYSER

James Madison University

THOMSON

WADSWORTH

Australia • Brazil • Canada • Mexico • Singapore
Spain • United Kingdom • United States

WHAT IS A PRIMARY SOURCE?

A **primary source** is any record contemporary to an event or time period. Primary sources may be written, oral, visual, or physical. Some of these sources were produced with the intent of being preserved for the future. Such **intentional sources** include government documents, church records, autobiographies, or memoirs. On the other hand, many primary sources were produced without any intent of future use. Such **unintentional sources** may include private correspondence not originally meant for posterity but which later are deposited in archives and libraries. Physical evidence such as buildings, clothing, tools, and landscapes may also be labeled as unintentional sources.

Identifying a primary source is far simpler than analyzing such sources effectively. The most common sources used in historical research are written; any discussion of primary evidence must begin with them. Before the analytical process can begin, however, researchers must read the source closely to make absolutely certain they understand its content, language, meaning, and thesis—if it has one. Only then is it possible to begin to analyze. Beginning historians must learn to adopt a critical or skeptical approach to thinking about evidence and go beyond basic issues of factual content (who, what, when, where). Such an approach helps begin an active dialogue with the evidence. All researchers initiate their analyses of primary written evidence with questions to help them understand particular documents and how groups of these fit together within the context of other primary sources.

When analyzing primary evidence, certain questions are standard. Who authored the source? How long after the event is it being described? Is the author an eyewitness? Who was the intended audience? What is the audience's relationship to the author? What is the purpose of the source? What is the tone of the language used? Does an obvious point of view color the evidence? How reliable is the evidence? How does the source fit into the historical context established by other primary sources and secondary accounts? What new information does it provide? Does the source help explain causal or other relationships? Is the source significant? How can the source be used to advance the research project?

SOURCE TYPES AND THEIR APPLICATIONS

Primary sources are often categorized in several ways. The first group comprises those sources that are **unpublished**. Such sources can only be found in one particular location, such as an archive, or the special collections section of a research library, or a particular local library or historical society. These materials do not circulate; thus the historian must visit the facilities to view these documents.⁴

The second group is **published**. These primary sources include presidential papers, government documents, memoirs, autobiographies, and newspapers that are widely available at archives, research libraries, public libraries, and websites.

A third group is **edited** or **selected**. These sources are similar to those previously mentioned; however, edited or selected collections of the writings of Mao Zedong would include very different documents from the complete works of the same individual. In these instances, an editor has culled most of the writings and organized them in a special way (around a theme or chronologically, for example). The active researcher should know the nature of the collection being examined and the role played by an editor, compiler, or even the group digitizing.

Correspondence

Personal correspondence has traditionally been one of the most widely used primary sources. Because such correspondence was between individuals and not intended for public examination, it frequently provides a clearer understanding of the mind of the author and sometimes the recipient of the letter. Correspondence often includes the date when they were written; they are often specifically focused, and sometimes address issues raised in earlier letters. They may offer insights into what a person was thinking or experiencing, what they have observed, and what they have chosen to convey to their reader. They may either inform or persuade and they often offer insights into an individual's point of view. Correspondence may also be official, as letters may be used to convey the wishes of an agency or a government authority. Official letters are more formal in their language and tone and may provide less insight into the individual writer than informal correspondence. While most collections of correspondence remain in archives or special collections, digitized letter collections abound on many topics and are easily accessible in manuscript or typescript formats.

⁴Many previously unpublished manuscripts are being digitized and posted to websites.

Diaries, Memoirs, and Autobiographies

Diaries are among the most useful primary sources for examining the inner thoughts of past individuals. Although some may be subsequently published, all diaries offer the historian the advantage of an internal view into the mind of the author. Diaries are especially useful since they are rarely intended for the public, and as a result, are more likely to contain the private thoughts and views of an individual. Diarists often recount the day's events and their activities with candid thoughts. Clearly, a historian must analyze a diary in much the same way as any other primary source, but since the audience for any diary is the individual who wrote it, the author is much less likely to guard his or her comments. Although some diaries may be published, it is useful to locate and use the original diary since published diaries often are edited and sanitized for public consumption. For example, an unexpurgated version of *The Diary of Anne Frank* offers graphic insight into the life of a young Jewish girl hiding from Nazi occupiers in the Netherlands during World War II.

The private nature of a diary offers clear advantages over memoirs and autobiographies as a primary source. Although all such sources are useful, the memoir or autobiography is generally written for a public audience; as a result, it is more likely to cast the author in a favorable light. For example, Richard M. Nixon's memoirs say little about his involvement in Watergate. They are also reflective pieces produced after the events they describe.

Government Documents

Government documents offer perhaps the widest array of source types. The records kept by international, national, state, and local authorities over the centuries are voluminous and varied. These materials include, but are not limited to, legislation, resolutions, debates and speeches by government officials, records of government agencies, meeting minutes, cables, intelligence, court records, and census and statistical materials—which will be discussed later in this chapter. Increasingly, government documents are being made available digitally. For example, records of the United States Congress from 1774 to 1875 can be

found in the American Memory website: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/lawhome.html>. The United Nations' website provides excellent documentation of its activities: <http://www.un.org/documents/>. Laws and resolutions help show an official position on a particular issue that often reflects underlying tensions within a society. An examination of laws may indicate emerging issues in a society, or may help to reveal power relationships during a time or place. For example, Dutch law requires the maintenance of their extensive system of dikes, largely as a result of the massive floods that inundated the Netherlands in 1953.

Speeches by government officials not only reveal how one individual viewed an important issue of the day, but they may also say much about the audience he or she is addressing. When used in conjunction with other documents, a speech may offer insights into the strength or weakness of a particular government or political figure. The partially opened Soviet archives offer a very different perspective of government operations from those released at the time events were taking place. Because of their very nature however, all government records must be used with great care.

Court records are especially useful for providing a window into the lives of people who may not have left written records. Some court records detail the activities of individuals who have run afoul of the law. They tend therefore to be hostile accounts or to present their subjects in a less than favorable light. Despite their potential difficulties, the types of cases prosecuted offer a useful window into the issues of concern in a particular age. ... When used in conjunction with other sources, court proceedings add an important dimension to understanding the lives of everyday people.

Wills and Inventories

Wills and inventories provide a unique glimpse into the world of those who did not usually write. Since wills were often written shortly before death, they offer insights into what occupied a person's mind at that moment. Wills can provide information about family, religious attitudes, and what an individual valued and, if accompanied by an inventory, reveal useful information about possessions and debts. Inventories were official lists of possessions on hand at the time of death with an estimate of their value. Some inventories are particularly helpful because they provide a room-by-room listing of possessions. Such evidence is extremely useful for determining an individual's wealth, social status, and lifestyle. Comparing a number of inventories in the same place over time can reveal rising or declining standards of living in a certain community. Like so many other primary sources, wills and inventories only give a snapshot into an individual's life. They are imperfect; however, they are a vital primary source.

Statistical Records

Another important, and underutilized, primary source is statistical data, such as census and tax records. Such sources offer a measure of precision unavailable in other forms of written evidence. Knowing how many people were infected by a disease or migrated to a region, or how much they owned, is far more valuable than falling back on looser terms such as “some” or “many.” Examining changing literacy levels or levels of employment in the same region over an extended period of time adds a dimension to understanding the past that is difficult to discern from other primary sources. Moreover, comparing statistical evidence of factors, such as demography, gender balance, ethnic makeup, and per capita income, can reveal trends over time not readily observable in other forms of evidence. Like other primary sources, statistical information must be carefully scrutinized. Researchers must know who generated the data and for what purpose. Who is the intended audience? Is there a point of view? What other evidence permits full conclusions from statistical data? How complete is the evidence? That is, were specific groups ignored? Underrepresented? What does the data reveal about the officials who gathered it or the society that generated it?

Some of the most readily accessible statistical evidence for any nation is census information. In the United States, census data has been compiled since 1790 and much of it is now available in online formats. The Geostat Center (<http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/>) provides easy access to this rich collection of data.

Newspapers and Periodicals

Newspapers are among the most commonly used primary sources. Part of their appeal is their availability in print, microform, and online formats. Most local libraries have actual copies or microfilm copies of area newspapers; major research libraries have substantial collections of historical newspapers. Many historical newspapers are online with the capability of searching for a specific article, or showing an entire newspaper page. One example of these online historical newspapers is *Harper's Weekly*, a mid-nineteenth-century serial: <http://app.harperweek.com/>. Despite their usefulness and widespread availability, newspapers should be used by beginning historians with caution. Although these sources provide a popular view into a time period, the fact that newspapers often report on events based on the evidence a reporter has collected gives newspapers and magazines some of the characteristics of a secondary source.

Many newspapers also have a point of view, which in some cases may be muted, but in other times and places this point of view is quite pronounced. Nineteenth-century United States newspapers were often mouthpieces for political parties, religious organizations, or social movements. The historian must rigorously apply the same critical evaluation about the author, the audience, and the historical context employed for other sources. When using newspapers to understand an event, it is best to corroborate with other primary sources on the same event.

Oral Interviews

Oral interviews open another avenue to help historians understand and explain the past. They represent an exciting addition to existing primary source collections. Oral testimony, created with the assistance of a trained scholar, preserves individual recollections of past events. Because this source falls into the category of a created source—one intentionally generated through a planned and orchestrated oral interview—knowledge of the interviewer, intended audience, purpose, and point of view are critically important in weighing the value of the testimony. These oral sources must withstand the rigor of a critical evaluation like any other primary source.

One of the richest oral history collections began in the 1930s and sought to gather the accounts of former slaves, whose stories had largely been ignored as a source for the history of slavery in the United States. Housed in American Memory, *Voices from the Days of Slavery: Former Slaves Tell Their Stories* (<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/voices/>) gives a unique glimpse into the

world of the former slaves. The interviewers are identified in the collection and there is information about each of them, as well as about each interview subject.

Photographs and Maps

Visual evidence, like oral testimony, is an intentionally created primary source that requires careful scrutiny. When working with this form of evidence, researchers ask similar questions about **authorship, intended audience, purpose, perspective, and point of view** that they would of any other primary source. Paintings and photographs are the creations of the artist; yet, the pictures

⁷Interview with Alice Gaston, Gee's Bend, Alabama, 1941, *Voices from the Days of Slavery*, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/voices/>. Another excellent oral history collection is *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writer's Project, 1936–1938*, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html>.

they produce offer another type of evidence of great use to researchers. These sources not only reveal important images; they also provide insights into the mind and world of the artist and the times. The composition of crowds at events may offer unique glimpses of different cultures and present information not intended by the artist or photographer.

A useful example of photographic evidence is found in a digital archive in American Memory. Ansel Adams, the preeminent American photographer, photographed the Japanese-American Manzanar Relocation Center in California and his works have been gathered and preserved digitally. They record aspects of daily life and experiences of the families interned during World War II. The following photograph captures Japanese Americans in line for lunch in 1943.⁸



Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ppprs-00173; Photograph by Ansel Adams

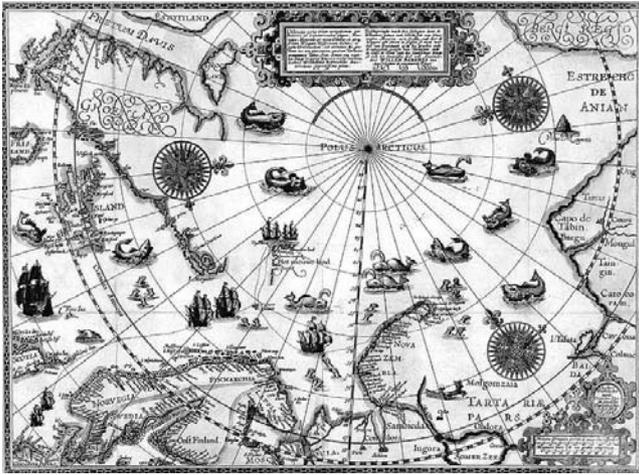
The black-and-white photograph illustrates the starkness of the camp and the regimented lives of its residents. It suggests the camp's isolation and documents a daily occurrence. The people seem comfortable in their surroundings and do not appear to be closely guarded. The visual evidence corroborates written accounts from those who lived in the camps, government accounts, contemporary newspapers, and other forms of evidence. The photographs also reveal what appealed to Adams. Photographs, moving pictures, and paintings provide researchers with an additional perspective on a topic under analysis.

Similar observations may be made about maps. All maps describing the world in 1600 are not necessarily the same. If the mapmaker was European, his

⁸“Mess line, noon, Manzanar Relocation Center, California,” photograph by Ansel Adams, “Suffering under a Great Injustice”: Ansel Adams Photographs of Japanese Americans at Manzanar,” Library of Congress, American Memory, <http://memory.loc.gov/ppp/ppprs/00100/00173v.jpg>.



Courtesy of the University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin



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perspective and focal points may have differed profoundly from a Chinese or Arab cartographer. The axis of the world differs from place to place and the knowledge of places may not be identical. Maps, like other forms of visual evidence, are sources that must be scrutinized according to the same standards of evaluation.

The two global maps published by Cornelius Wytfliet⁹ and Edward Wright¹⁰ in the late sixteenth century show the status of cartography at the time.

⁹Wytfliet's Map of the World 1598, Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection, The University of Texas at Austin, <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/>.

¹⁰Wright's World Map of 1598, reproduced from an 1880 facsimile, National Archives of Canada/NMC 0210063, <http://www.collectionscanada.ca/explorers/>.

Wytfliet's map is more detailed and speculates on the sizes and locations of land masses, while Wright's tends to focus more clearly on what has been explored and previously mapped. A comparison of these maps offers insight into the mapmaker's knowledge of the world. When evaluating these maps, the historian should consider **audience** and **perspective**. Furthermore, the historian should try to discern similarities between the maps as well as the differences to better understand the mapmaker's world. How do these maps compare with maps of today; what did the late sixteenth-century cartographers know and not know about the world? A close study of maps can enhance any research project.

Artifacts

Physical evidence, in the form of the built landscape or objects remaining from a given society, constitutes another seldom studied resource. This kind of evidence survives in many forms and can enrich the historian's understanding of individuals and societies. In a sense, all other forms of historical evidence are artifacts from the past; however, buildings, furnishings, clothing, tools, coins, and the like are normally classified as artifacts. Physical remains help historians understand texture, weight, size, scale, and a host of other elements that may not be knowable from written or other types of sources. They help historians understand popular conceptions of themselves, their society, and their beliefs. For societies who left no written records (and for many who did), their artifacts can help historians understand their place in the human past.

At Sutton Hoo in Suffolk, England, archaeologists uncovered a ship burial laden with Anglo-Saxon artifacts from the seventh century. One of them was



an iron helmet, covered with tinned copper alloy panels¹¹ that serves as a good example of the kinds of information that may be learned from an analysis of artifacts. The helmet and the other relics from the buried vessel are now housed in the British Museum in London.

Made of iron, decorated in bronze, the helmet is one of four known to have survived from Anglo-Saxon times. It protected the ears, eyes, and neck from attack and was reinforced to protect the skull and nose. The mask illustrates the level of military technology at the time. It is a valuable complement to extant codes of Anglo-Saxon law that imposed stiff fines on those who damaged the critical faculties of warriors. The mask also reveals the level and quality of artisan-ship available in seventh-century Anglo-Saxon society.¹²

¹¹Helmet from the ship burial at Sutton Hoo, Anglo-Saxon, early seventh century AD, from Mound 1, Sutton Hoo, Suffolk, England.

¹²The helmet may have been Scandinavian or produced by a Scandinavian craftsman. We are grateful to Dr. Sonja Marzinzik, Curator of Insular Early Medieval Collections, The British Museum, London, for her helpful commentary about the Sutton Hoo helmet.