

UNCOVERING OUR HISTORY



Teaching with Primary Sources

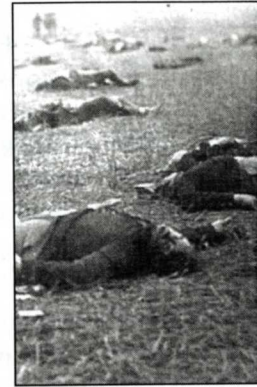
SUSAN H. VECCIA

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Primary Sources: Magical Moments of Insight



I remember Miss Crivelli. She was a tall, buxom woman with clear creamy skin, bright red lipstick, and thick black hair piled high on her head. With a stentorian voice that bounced off the walls of the high school classroom, she would boom out questions and expect quick replies. She gazed theatrically beyond the front row to canvass the entire room. As a survival technique, I sat in the front row and hunkered down, hoping not to be noticed. I was a good student, but timid. I showed up on time and always did my homework. Homework consisted of memorizing mimeographed lists of names, historical events, and dates for the inevitable quiz the following day. Each night after dinner, I would retreat to my bedroom and memorize what I had to know. I excelled in the course but learned almost nothing about world history. Why? Apart from being scared stiff, nothing connected. Nothing was relevant to anything I knew or cared about. There were no “stories” in Miss Crivelli’s classroom—only names, facts, and dates. And, certainly there were no primary sources! In fact, I didn’t even know what primary sources were then . . . and I was a high school senior.

Fortunately, things have changed. Nearly every state in the nation requires the use of primary resources at some level in K–12 instruction. New York, for example, requires primary sources from kindergarten through twelfth grade. In Virginia, primary sources are introduced in the fourth grade. Sometimes these requirements surface in state history or social studies frameworks; sometimes in the library and information literacy competencies. Sometimes both. Increasingly, teachers are obliged to teach to these standards across the curriculum.

Primary sources by themselves seem dull and boring. Why, then, should they be *required* in K–12 instruction? In the hands of a creative teacher, primary sources add a human backdrop to the study of history and extend the focus from what happened to its meaning—what it meant then, what it means now, and what

it might mean in the future. When used creatively, primary sources can personalize the learning process, helping students to understand their own history and connect it to larger issues.

Primary sources can provide the framework for spirited classroom discussions, debates, and projects that will engage students in memorable ways. Primary sources inevitably evoke more questions than answers. Think for a minute about Miss Crivelli's classroom. Where were the questions? The memorization she demanded required only answers and provided no relevance to my life. Powered by mindless repetition, it skipped the "story" in history, the colorful threads that weave many shapes and textures of experiences into an expressive, memorable whole. The classroom was focused on the teacher. Miss Crivelli very effectively taught a number of important skills—reading, organization, test taking—but she did not teach history. I wonder what she would have done if she had had access to the wealth of primary-source materials available to teachers today. Would her teaching techniques have changed?

FINDING AND UNDERSTANDING PRIMARY SOURCES

The requirement to use primary sources poses a dilemma for many educators. While required to use primary sources, until the mid-1990s it was difficult to find appropriate primary sources. Those teachers who wanted to use primary sources would dig into their personal materials or buy individual replicas for use in the classroom. Without easy access to appropriate materials, many other teachers just didn't use primary sources in their classrooms at all.

How do teachers who now have unprecedented access to primary sources know the "good" from the "bad," having had little firsthand experience? How do they recognize what viewpoints are represented? How do they identify primary sources that fit curriculum objectives? Having never used primary sources, how do teachers know what to do with them? It is not like picking up a textbook or teaching a ready-made curriculum. Primary sources are different. Unlike working with many other teaching resources, using primary sources requires significant research and critical-thinking skills.

Before teachers can effectively use primary sources, they must understand the nature of primary sources, which is often not taught in teacher education or library schools. In recent years, a few books have been published that have helped educators—both teachers and library media specialists—better understand primary sources. Of particular note is the September/October 2000 issue of the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) professional journal *Knowledge Quest*. The entire issue is devoted to primary sources and should be on every teacher's professional reading shelf. It provides short articles written by teachers and school library media specialists.

Through the voices of educators who have effectively used primary sources, *Uncovering Our History* provides a practical introduction to the value of these materials in elementary and secondary education. It provides sample activities and lesson plans for elementary, middle school and high school teachers, and school media specialists. It will be useful for professional development as well. It provides

frameworks for conducting workshops on the nature of primary sources from the Library of Congress online collections and how to use them in K-12 education.

WHAT ARE PRIMARY SOURCES?

Primary sources are manuscripts, first-person diaries, oral histories, letters, interviews, photographs, maps, films, sound recordings, music, song sheets—fragments of history, incomplete in themselves, but when assembled, analyzed, and researched, they can provide personal insights, human drama, and deep historical understandings. Primary sources can also be places and people. They are resources that speak directly to the viewer, the reader, and the listener without explanatory context. They evoke a sense of time and place. They often carry a point of view and thus, by definition, are not always neutral or objective. This means that one primary source can contradict another—or corroborate another. Educators must understand how to work with these ambiguities and help students construct the context for deeper understandings. This can be done even with very young children.

Personal Stories

When you think about the personal nature of primary sources, you begin to understand their power to unleash fascinating stories that will engage student interest. For example, the Vietnam Memorial is one of the most frequented tourist destinations in Washington, D.C. The massive black marble wall slopes deeper and deeper into the ground, symbolizing the nation's becoming more involved in the war. The wall is unadorned except for the names of American servicemen and women killed in action, year by year. The names are engraved in simple and uniform lettering on each successive panel as the years progressed. Visiting the wall and observing friends and family who gather by the wall to trace their loved one's name from the wall or to leave personal tokens behind personalize history in hundreds, if not thousands, of poignant ways. Those items left at the wall are collected at the end of each day and held at the Smithsonian Institution. Think about how visiting the wall or examining some of the primary sources left at the wall—letters, poems, photographs—could inform today's students who are trying to understand the heart-felt, tragic issues that my generation remembers about Vietnam. This is part of my history; perhaps it is a part of yours as well. But it is not part of our students' remembered history. Primary sources can tell so many stories from so many human perspectives. Taken together, they provide a different kind of experience and understanding from what can be acquired from reading a textbook.

Until recently, many educators' concept of primary sources had been limited to historical documents such as the Declaration of Independence or the U.S. Constitution, both of which can be found in textbooks. While documents such as these are important in the understanding of American history, the printed texts of these documents are not necessarily the kind of materials that excite students. Consider instead a handwritten text—an electronic replica of the “first draft” of the Declaration of Independence, with tatters, tears, and marginalia in Jefferson's hand.

This document shown (see figure 1-1) is found on the Library of Congress website and raises many interesting questions.¹ The document was written by Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Benjamin Franklin; others amended it. What does this tell us about democracy and the art of compromise? Are there any parallels in today's government? What does this facsimile tell us about the differences between Jefferson, and, for example, John Adams? How would you research this further? What can the document tell us about the writing process? About collaborative writing theory?

How would you modify this type of lesson to interest younger children? Ask Monica Edinger, a fourth-grade teacher at Dalton School. Monica worked not with the Declaration of Independence, but with the Constitution. She asked her elementary school students to annotate the Constitution, building a glossary of unfamiliar words, historical images, and background information that would be helpful in answering other children's questions.² "What does tranquility mean, Ms. Edinger?" her students inquire.

Once you start using primary sources with students, one of the things you will discover is that the students will soon have more questions. Many questions! While primary sources can be used to illustrate a point, the questions they raise are possibly more important. Sometimes you don't have enough information from the primary source to answer the specific question you are researching. But, the item may stimulate many more questions that *can* be researched. Often the value of the primary document, the term "document" used here in the broadest sense, depends upon the questions that it generates and the resulting inquiries.

Ongoing Investigations

Apart from the fact that primary sources are required by most states, teachers who use primary sources report that students begin to think like historians and enjoy the discovery process. They look at history as ongoing investigations that they are directing. They learn to consider many different kinds of sources, not just books, but diaries and interviews of family members who may have experienced an important historical event. Listen to this high school student in Missouri interviewing her grandmother about World War II:

As I conducted this interview, I learned a great deal about the war. Much of what we learn in school is about memorable battles and special dates. What I learned from my Grandma is that a lot changed on the home front during the war, more than what is documented in history books. She experienced the war through the eyes of a nine-year-old child. It is not likely to be something that she forgets nor is this interview.

Primary sources provide human interest—the incentive for students to want to learn more. If students are to appreciate the significance of these personal stories, prior knowledge is often required. For example, students may or may not know that Walt Whitman was a nurse during the Civil War and that he visited the wounded in a barn, which had been converted into a field hospital. Armed with this knowledge, however, when students find an image of that barn *and* handwritten notes of Whitman's hospital visits in the Library of Congress online

A Declaration by the Representatives of the UNITED STATES
OF AMERICA, in General Congress assembled.

When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for ^{one} people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth the ~~separate~~ ^{separate and equal} station to which the laws of nature & of nature's god entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to ~~break the~~ ^{the} separation.

We hold these truths to be ~~self-evident~~ ^{self-evident}, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with ~~unalienable~~ ^{unalienable} rights, that among these are ~~life, liberty, & the pursuit of happiness~~ ^{life, liberty, & the pursuit of happiness}; that to secure these ~~rights~~ ^{rights}, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government ~~shall~~ ^{shall} become destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, & to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles & organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety & happiness. Prudence indeed will declare that governments long established should not be changed for light & transient causes: and accordingly all experience hath shewn that mankind are more disposed to suffer while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. but when a long train of abuses & usurpations [began at a distinguished period, & proceeding invariably, the same object, evinces a design to reduce them ^{under absolute Despotism} ~~to a complete~~ ^{to a complete} it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such a government, & to provide new guards for their future security. such has been the patient sufferance of these colonies; & such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter ^{alter} their former systems of government. the history of the present ^{King of Great Britain} ~~is~~ ^{is} a history of unrelenting injuries and usurpations, [among which, ^{appears no solitary fact} ~~appears no solitary fact~~ to contradict the uniform tenor of the rest, ^{in all} ~~all of which~~ ^{all of which} have in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over these states. to prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world, for the truth of which we pledge a faith not unallied by falsehood.]

Figure 1-1
The "first draft" of the Declaration of Independence shows marginalia in Jefferson's hand. From the online exhibition *American Treasures of the Library of Congress*.

collections they will no doubt experience a sense of “Wow!” The immediacy of first-person written or spoken accounts coupled with a visual image of “place” is compelling to many students. One teacher noted, “In sharing the Whitman hospital [notebooks], I clearly saw a sheen of tears in students’ eyes and noted an avid interest in Civil War soldiers as ‘people,’ not simply as pallid historical figures.”

On a basic level, developing chronological skills is an important part of understanding history, which can be enhanced by using primary sources. One Michigan student commented, “I learned that in order to do history, one must be objective and be able to look at a puzzle of historical events and put them in order.” Seeing themselves in this chronological, historical continuum helps children understand that we all participate in the making of history—every day—and that each of us in the course of our lives leaves behind materials that could become part of the “historical record.” When students grasp this, they better understand the nature of primary sources—their strengths and their limitations.

Look at the “Mindwalk Activity” on the Library of Congress website for an excellent exercise to use with teachers and students first learning about primary sources.³ Designed by James Giese, then director of the National Consortium for Social Studies Education, this activity asks students to reconstruct their day, listing what items might be found as evidence of their daily life—things like telephone or e-mail messages, diary entries, photographs, calendars, school records, etc. This activity walks students through a close observation and evaluation process by which they will come to understand that the historical record is both vast *and* limited because of the sometimes ephemeral and personal nature of primary sources.

As everyday evidence of life, primary sources can provide a glimpse into popular culture. Consider, for example, this early twentieth-century baseball card (see figures 1-2 and 1-3). Distributed in cigarette packs, these baseball cards were the forerunners to modern trading cards.

On another level, to make sense of primary sources, students learn to think more critically—to be observant and objective before they can draw inferences from an item or a set of items. One inference that can be drawn is point of view. What is the intent of the speaker, the photographer, the writer? How do you interpret this point of view within the time period? Working with primary sources is not always neat and tidy. In fact, it is often quite messy. Listen to this student’s observation:

Simple topics have a tendency to head toward complicated quickly. Something that seems crystal clear always becomes hazy; especially when primary sources contradict themselves. As a historian, you can never let yourself be absorbed by one thing.

This student has learned something very important that is not always recognized even by today’s professional news media. Important issues have many points of view that must be considered for true understanding.

Consider, for example, this Timothy O’Sullivan photograph of the Gettysburg battlefield in the Matthew Brady Civil War collection from the Library of Congress. O’Sullivan was one of Matthew Brady’s field photographers whose job was to accompany the Union troops and document life on the battlefield. In a well-documented and researched case, this O’Sullivan photograph of the dead in



Figure 1-2
This early twentieth-century baseball card of "Jack" Quinn provides evidence of popular culture.

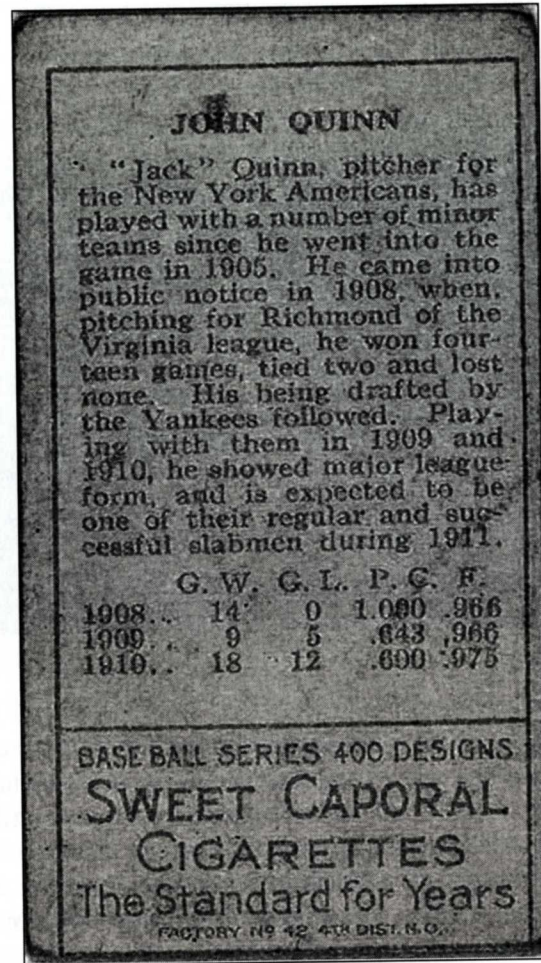


Figure 1-3
Verso of "Jack" Quinn baseball card.

Gettysburg was used by Alexander Gardner, a colleague and competitor of Brady's, to suggest atrocities by *both* the Union and the Confederate sides (see figure 1-4). While a photograph records an authentic image, what the photographer chooses to capture can be used to convey different messages.⁴

Raw and Unvarnished Materials

In addition to primary sources being messy, ambiguous, and sometimes contradictory, because they present themselves as seen through their creator's eyes, they are raw and unvarnished. If it is text, the language could be difficult to understand or considered rough and offensive in today's world. Likewise, visuals could be unsettling to some students, depending upon their backgrounds. Primary sources, thus,



Figure 1-4

“Does the Photographer Lie?” This Timothy O’Sullivan photograph is found in *Selected Civil War Photographs, 1861–1865*, American Memory collection.

require teachers to introduce them within the historical context of time. Things were different then. Materials emotionally difficult for today’s students are a part of the historical record and can be used to help students think more critically about the past. In this day of sensitivity to Internet content and filtering of websites in schools around the country, this is, I think, an important issue to address up front. For some firsthand advice, consult Frances Jacobson’s excellent article in *Knowledge Quest*, “The Dark Side of Primary Sources.”⁵ Teachers need to know that primary sources do not come with a *Good Housekeeping* seal of approval. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but it requires teacher and student preparation.

ACCESS TO PRIMARY SOURCE COLLECTIONS

Using primary resources leads into an almost endless research journey. The breadth of primary source materials is unlimited. How do teachers and students find appropriate materials? *Where* do they look? *How* do they look? How do they evaluate what they have found? Enter the school library media specialist.

A Team Approach: Teachers and School Librarian

Incorporating primary sources into the curriculum provides the ideal opportunity for library media specialists to work more closely with *all* teachers, particularly history and social studies teachers. Librarians trained in research methods can short-circuit some of the frustrations many teachers associate with finding appropriate resources online. (Chapter 3 addresses the intricacies of online searching in