

# ENGAGING STUDENTS WITH PRIMARY SOURCES



Smithsonian  
National Museum of American History  
Kenneth E. Behring Center

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# Table of Contents

<b>1. What Are Primary Sources &amp; Why Use Them?</b>	
■ Introduction.....	3
■ What is a Primary Source? .....	5
■ Why Use Primary Sources? .....	5
■ Primary Sources, Learning Styles, and Multiple Intelligences.....	6
<b>2. Documents</b>	
■ Introduction to Documents .....	8
■ General Documents: Strengths and Limitations Chart .....	9
■ Newspapers: Strengths and Limitations Chart .....	10
■ Advertisements: Strengths and Limitations Chart .....	11
■ Tips for Reading Documents .....	12
■ Where to Find Documents .....	15
■ Analyzing Documents Activity: The Sioux City Ghosts .....	17
<b>3. Photographs</b>	
■ Introduction to Photographs .....	24
■ Photographs: Strengths and Limitations Chart .....	25
■ Tips for Reading Photographs.....	26
■ Where to Find Photographs.....	29
■ Analyzing Photographs Activity: A Salmon Cannery .....	30
<b>4. Oral Histories</b>	
■ Introduction to Oral Histories.....	35
■ Oral Histories: Strengths and Limitations Chart.....	36
■ Tips for Analyzing Recorded and Transcribed Oral History Interviews .....	37
■ Where to Find Oral Histories .....	39
■ Analyzing Oral Histories Activity: Spud Campbell, Liberty Ships, and The Second World War .....	40
■ Creating an Oral History Source: Tips for Designing and Conducting an Interview .....	44
■ Other Data to Collect During Oral History Interviews .....	45
<b>5. Objects</b>	
■ Introduction to Objects .....	46
■ Objects: Strengths and Limitations Chart .....	47
■ Tips for Reading Objects.....	48
■ Where to Find Objects.....	52
■ Analyzing Objects Activity: An 18th-Century Fat Lamp .....	54
<b>6. Bibliography and Web Sites featuring Primary Sources .....</b>	<b>59</b>

# What Are Primary Sources & Why Use Them?

## Introduction

Primary sources are the pieces of evidence that historians use to learn about people, events, and everyday life in the past. Just like detectives, historians look at clues, sift through evidence, and reach conclusions. Students can use primary sources, too. By focusing on the evidence itself—documents, objects, photographs, and oral histories—students can get a glimpse into the past beyond what a textbook can provide. Introducing your classes to primary sources and making them a regular part of classroom lessons help student develop critical thinking and deductive reasoning skills that will be useful throughout their lives.

This reference guide is designed to highlight the benefits of using primary source materials in any classroom and to provide you, the teacher, with practical suggestions and examples of how to do this. It also includes a bibliography and links to other sites on the Internet that feature primary source materials.

Whether in a museum or in the classroom, the study of primary sources is crucial to the study of history. They provide tangible links to the past that help students build personal connections to history. Yet, primary sources need not be limited to history class. A math class can examine a slide rule and discuss the invention and impact of calculators. A science class can study a page from a famous scientist's logbook or journal and get insight into the thought process. A literature class reading John Steinbeck can examine photos by Dorothea Lange. Primary Sources are an effective way to communicate the look, feel, and spirit of a different time.

**Whether in a museum or in the classroom, the study of primary sources is crucial to the study of history.**

## What Are Primary Sources & Why Use Them?

The National Museum of American History is committed to helping teachers use primary sources effectively in the classroom. The Museum provides opportunities for teachers and their students to make personal connections to America's history through its Web site, which features various primary source materials and teacher manuals, on-site programming that focuses on collections, and teacher workshops.

<http://www.historyexplorer.si.edu>

**Sections 2 through 5 of this guide provide classroom-ready activities designed to provide practical lessons on using primary sources.** Each activity focuses on an object or objects from the collections of the National Museum of American History.

### General Outline of Activities:

1. Project or hand out copies of the introduction for each type of resource and read it as a class.
2. Use the charts as part of a brainstorming activity in which students define, give examples of, and compile lists of, strengths and weaknesses for that type of resource.
3. Use the tip sheet as a work sheet to answer questions based on looking at images of the provided objects.
4. End the activity with a class discussion in which the students compare their answers to background information provided for the teacher.
5. The introduction, charts, and tip sheets from each section can then be copied and given to the students to keep in their notebooks.

# What is a Primary Source?

## **Primary Source:**

A first-hand, original account, record, or evidence about a person, place, object, or an event. Oral histories, objects, photographs, and documents such as newspapers, ledgers, census records, diaries, journals, and inventories, are primary sources.

## **Secondary Source:**

An account, record, or evidence derived from an original or primary source. Textbooks are secondary sources.

# Why Use Primary Sources?

## **Benefits for Students and Teachers**

### **Develop Skills:**

Primary sources help students develop and refine cognitive, investigative, deductive reasoning, and problem-solving skills. Students draw conclusions from information they have found through deciphering primary source materials.

### **Address Various Learning Styles:**

Through use of a variety of primary sources, teachers address the whole spectrum of learning styles. For example, oral histories for the auditory learner, and photographs and objects for the visual learners. Students experience primary sources according to each student's own learning style.

### **Appeal to Students:**

Students of any age find primary sources appealing because they are tangible and real.

### **Make Learning Active:**

Primary sources engage students in active learning. By drawing their own conclusions from primary sources, students construct meaning and direct their own learning.

### **Provide Different Perspectives:**

Different kinds of primary sources provide students with varying perspectives on a person or event and offer a sense of balance.

# Primary Sources, Learning Styles, and Multiple Intelligences

**Using primary sources in the classroom enables you to reach all types of learners.** Howard Gardner and others developed a highly accepted model of multiple intelligences. The application of primary sources in the classroom provides teachers with an avenue in which to address the eight forms of intelligence:

## **Linguistic:**

Think in words, using language to express and understand complex meanings; reading, writing, speaking skills

## **Logical/Mathematical:**

Think of cause-and-effect connections and understand relationships among actions, objects, or ideas; problem solving, calculation skills

## **Bodily-Kinesthetic:**

Think in movement; physical skills such as balance, dance, acting, and working with one's hands

## **Spatial:**

Think in pictures and perceive visual world accurately; artistic design and construction skills

## **Musical:**

Think in sounds, melodies, rhythms, and rhymes; musical ability, vocal and instrument ability

## **Interpersonal:**

Think about and understand other people; group interaction skills and sensitivity to people's motives, intentions, and moods

## **Intrapersonal:**

Think about and understand oneself; skill in self-assessment

## **Naturalist:**

Think in terms of the natural world, understanding patterns of life and natural forces; skill in animal and plant care

## Primary Sources, Learning Styles, and Multiple Intelligences

### Lessons using primary sources appeal to multiple intelligences:

According to the multiple intelligences theory, everyone possesses each intelligence to one degree or another. A well-developed lesson addresses more than one intelligence. By using a variety of primary sources, teachers can ensure that they address all intelligences. Below are some examples:

- Students in a literature class reading a novel set in the 1920s listen to the music of the era and learn the Fox Trot, Charleston, or other dances. **(Linguistic, Musical, Bodily-Kinesthetic)**
- Students in a geometry class studying circles investigate photographs of different types of high-wheel bicycles from the 1870s and 1880s. Students use rings of different sizes to discover why the bikes were designed with one big wheel in the front and a small wheel at the back. **(Logical-Mathematical, Spatial)**
- Students in a science class interview a local scientist about his/her work, learn how to prepare for oral history interviews, and videotape the interview for the class archives. **(Linguistic, Intrapersonal)**
- Students in a geography class use photographs of various types of architecture and blueprints of buildings to draw conclusions about how architects adapt buildings to specific climates and geographic features. **(Spatial, Logical-Mathematical, Naturalist)**
- Students studying the moon read books about the moon **(Linguistic)**, calculate its distance from the earth **(Logical-Mathematical)**, examine photos of the different phases of the moon **(Spatial)**; listen to songs about the moon **(Musical)**; reflect on their earliest childhood memories of the moon **(Intrapersonal)**, build a model of the moon revolving around the earth **(Bodily-Kinesthetic)**; conduct a moon-watch via telescope **(Interpersonal)**; and/or investigate the geographic terrain of the moon **(Naturalist)**.

*[from Thomas Armstrong,  
[www.thomasarmstrong.com/  
multiple\\_intelligences.htm](http://www.thomasarmstrong.com/multiple_intelligences.htm)]*

# Documents

## Introduction to Documents

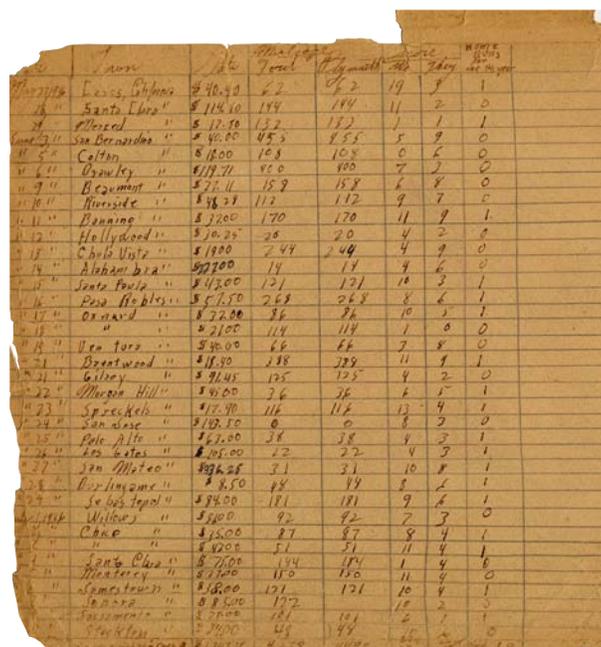
Every piece of paper that people leave behind is full of clues. From diaries and letters to newspapers and census reports, documents tell us about the circumstances of everyday life and about significant events. Historians spend a lot of time in archives studying all kinds of documentary evidence and glean rich information from the written word.

To be most useful, documents must be studied carefully and critically. While it might be clearly stated who the writer is and who the audience is, the intended message may not be obvious. Researchers, whether student or professional, must look beyond the intended meaning to consider hidden agendas, unintended meanings, and bias or point of view of the creator of the document. Other elements to analyze include tone, grammar, word choice, and style. This information will enable the researcher to interpret the document with a critical eye.

Like all other primary sources, documents must be studied in conjunction with other evidence. While documents often reveal information, it is important to verify the information with photographs, objects, oral histories, or other available sources.

**To be most useful, documents must be studied carefully and critically.**

This section can be used as reference material and as a practical lesson on using primary sources. The activity focuses on three archival resources from the collections of the National Museum of American History related to a traveling African American softball team named the Sioux City Ghosts.



Ledger from Scrapbook, 1936 compiled by Ghosts' player Reginald Williams

# General Documents: Strengths and Limitations

## Primary Source

**Documents:** Printed or written material relied upon to communicate, record, or prove something.

Examples include:

Diaries, letters, certificates of birth, death, or marriage, deeds, contracts, constitutions, laws, court records, tax records, census records, wills, inventories, treaties, report cards, medical records, passenger lists, passports, visas, naturalization papers, and military enlistment or discharge papers.

## Strengths

- + Provides information on the who, what, where, when, why, and how of an event
- + Provides written, printed, or graphic information
- + Can clarify the purpose of the communication or transaction
- + Can be a clue to the level of education of the author
- + Sometimes offers evidence of emotion
- + Can stimulate the personal involvement of the reader

## Limitations

- Not a thoroughly objective source
- Generally a verbal, not a visual, record
- Often more to the story than what is presented
- Bias and agenda of the author to be considered
- Identity of the author often unclear (especially true in the case of government documents)
- Author often no longer living and therefore unavailable to consult or verify
- Possibly difficult to read: handwriting difficult to decipher; words or phrases that are unfamiliar; their meaning changed over time
- Must be evaluated in conjunction with other evidence to determine whether the document presents information that is exceptional or conforming with previously established patterns.

# Newspapers: Strengths and Limitations

## Primary Source

**Newspapers:** A publication, usually issued daily or weekly, containing current news, editorials, feature articles, and advertising

### Strengths

- + Many different types of information in one place: news articles, editorials, ads, columns, sports scores
- + Generally factual
- + Quick way to get basic info: who, where, when, what, why
- + Provides larger context of information
- + Written for a mass audience—easy to understand
- + Often has visual content: photographs, editorial cartoons, comics, ads
- + Addresses current events
- + Especially good for local information

### Limitations

- Shows the bias of the publisher/owner, editor, writer
- Subject to political and economic pressures
- Fact checking not always thorough—written to meet deadlines
- Newsprint is hard to preserve
- Most newspapers not indexed; need to know dates to use
- Varying ideas of what is considered newsworthy by locale and time

# Advertisements: Strengths and Limitations

## Primary Source

**Advertisements:** Printed communication between seller/manufacturer and potential/ intended buyer/consumer; often with visual elements

### Strengths

- + Visual element often primary
- + Widespread availability, familiar to us today
- + Record specific moments in time
- + Address human desire and aspirations on many levels
- + often include some information on manufacturer, manufacturing technology, product materials, content and use
- + Reflect prevailing social standards and values of the time

### Limitations

- Often undated
- Creator of ad (writer, artist, ad agency) often unknown
- Main function to sell; the information provided with that end in mind
- Text entirely controlled by sponsor of ad
- Often conveys prejudices and biases of the time (this can also be valuable to historians)
- Often present a rosy, ideological view in which all problems are solved by the product
- Images possibly altered
- Older ads containing contemporary references that are not obvious to a modern viewer
- Many segments of society are found in ads



# Tips for Reading Documents

1 of 3

Use this guide to help you analyze primary source documents. Answer as many of the questions as you can, using evidence from the document. Write your answers to as many questions as possible, based on what you see and what you may already know.

## First Impressions

What are your first impressions?

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What kind of document is it (letter, ad, newspaper, etc)? How do you know?

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## Looking More Closely

Read through the document carefully. Make a list of any unusual words or phrases.

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Is there a date on it? If so, what is it?

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If not, are there any other clues that might indicate when it was written?

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## Tips for Reading Documents

2 of 3

Is there a location indicated? What is it?

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Who wrote or created the document? How can you tell?

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For whom was the document written or created? How do you know?

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What is the purpose of the document? What made you think this?

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### Thinking Further

What do you think the writer thought was the most important information to convey? Why?

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## Tips for Reading Documents

3 of 3

Does the document convey a certain tone?

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What does it imply without stating directly?

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Can you tell the point of view of the writer? Is it objective?

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What is the relationship between the writer and the audience? How can you tell?

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# Where to Find Documents

**The documents you use in your classroom do not need to be faded letters, congressional reports, or other official papers in order to provide a rich learning experience for your students.** Documents are any written or printed material used to communicate something. Use the documents around you: report cards, a page from a phone book, letters to parents, student writings, school rules, recipes, and even print advertisements. Remember, yesterday's events are history.

- local historical society or history museum archives
- local library
- city or county administrative offices
- newspaper archives (called the morgue)
- government agencies (state, local, and federal)
- law offices
- courts
- churches
- schools, colleges, and universities
- many national documents available through the National Archives and Records Administration, both on their Web site and in various publications (see bibliography at the end of this kit)

**The National Museum of American History** includes documents in these online exhibitions:

*A More Perfect Union:*

*Japanese Americans and the U. S Constitution*  
<http://americanhistory.si.edu/perfectunion/experience/index.html>

*Abraham Lincoln: An Extraordinary Life*

[http://americanhistory.si.edu/exhibitions/small\\_exhibition.cfm?key=1267&exkey=696](http://americanhistory.si.edu/exhibitions/small_exhibition.cfm?key=1267&exkey=696)

*America's New Birth of Freedom:*

*Documents from the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum*

[http://americanhistory.si.edu/documentsgallery/exhibitions/americas\\_new\\_birth\\_of\\_freedom\\_1.html](http://americanhistory.si.edu/documentsgallery/exhibitions/americas_new_birth_of_freedom_1.html)

*The American Presidency:*

*A Glorious Burden*

<http://americanhistory.si.edu/presidency/>

*America on the Move*

<http://americanhistory.si.edu/onthemove/>

*The Gettysburg Address*

[http://americanhistory.si.edu/documentsgallery/exhibitions/gettysburg\\_address\\_1.html](http://americanhistory.si.edu/documentsgallery/exhibitions/gettysburg_address_1.html)

*July 1942: United We Stand*

<http://americanhistory.si.edu/1942/index.html>

*Produce For Victory:*

*Posters on the Home Front, 1941–1945*

<http://americanhistory.si.edu/victory/index.htm>

## Where to Find Documents

*Separate Is Not Equal:  
Brown v. Board of Education*  
<http://americanhistory.si.edu/brown/>

*The Star-Spangled Banner:  
The Flag that Inspired the National Anthem*  
<http://americanhistory.si.edu/starspangledbanner/>

*The Price of Freedom:  
Americans at War*  
<http://americanhistory.si.edu/militaryhistory/>

*Vote: The Machinery of Democracy*  
<http://americanhistory.si.edu/vote/>

*West Point in the Making of America*  
<http://americanhistory.si.edu/westpoint/index.html>

*Whatever Happened to Polio?*  
<http://www.americanhistory.si.edu/polio/index.htm>

*Within These Walls*  
<http://americanhistory.si.edu/house/>

### **The National Museum of American History Archives Center**

also has many documents available online at [www.americanhistory.si.edu/archives/ac-i.htm](http://www.americanhistory.si.edu/archives/ac-i.htm) for downloading.

# Analyzing Documents Activity: The Sioux City Ghosts

## Objective

Students naturally find diaries, journals, and other personal documents appealing because the writer's emotions and intentions are often clear. However, they may find other documents less engaging. Legal documents, for example, may have a style or stilted language that is unfamiliar to students. Or, documents from a past century might have vocabulary that seems strange. Other documents such as census reports or tax lists might seem dry or boring. Yet, when used in conjunction with other primary sources, all documents can be vital and unique sources of information. When using documents, it is important for teachers to introduce students to a variety of types, making sure to include documents with visual appeal like advertisements, maps, or editorial cartoons.

After completing this activity, students will be able to identify and assess the strengths and weaknesses of using different types of documents as primary sources and analyze documents for factual information.

## Time

50 minutes

## Skills

Analyzing Documents as Primary Sources

## Grades

7–12

## Content Area

U.S. History, 20th-Century History, Great Depression, Black History, Segregation, Sports History

## Materials

- [Introduction to Documents](#)
- [General Documents: Strengths and Limitations Chart](#)
- [Newspapers: Strengths and Limitations Chart](#)
- [Advertisements: Strengths and Limitations Chart](#)
- [Tips for Reading Documents](#)
- A blank piece of paper and a pencil or pen
- Copies of the three archival resources about the Sioux City Ghosts that are included: an advertisement, a newspaper article, and a ledger page

# Analyzing Documents Activity: The Sioux City Ghosts

## National Center for History in the Schools—National History Standards

### Historical Thinking:

#### Grades 5–12:

- 2A** Identify the author or source of the historical document or narrative and assess its credibility.
- 2F** Appreciate historical perspectives.
- 3D** Draw comparisons across eras and regions in order to define enduring issues.
- 4B** Obtain historical data from a variety of sources.
- 4C** Interrogate historical data.
- 4F** Support interpretations with historical evidence.

### Historical Content:

#### Grades 5–12:

##### Era 7 Standard 3

How the United States changed from the end of World War I to the eve of the Great Depression

##### Era 8

The Great Depression and World War II (1929–1945)

## Directions

1. Read and discuss the [Introduction to Documents](#) page together as a class.
2. Split the class into groups of three or four students. Assign each group one of the following types of primary sources: general documents, newspapers or advertisements. If needed, more than one group can work on a document type.
3. On a sheet of paper, ask each group to write a definition and/or provide examples of the primary source type that they have been assigned and then brainstorm its strengths and weaknesses.
4. Have each group report their thoughts out to the class. Write the results for the entire class to see.
5. Hand out all three [Strengths and Limitations Charts](#) to each group: [Documents, Newspapers](#) and [Advertisements](#). As a class, compare them to the student-generated information that was shared and written after the brainstorming session.
6. Give each group a copy of the [Tips for Reading Documents](#) and a copy of the document type that they were assigned: the advertisement, newspaper article, or the ledger page. The ledger page is the general document.
7. Have each group answer the questions on the Tips Sheet while analyzing their document. **Be careful not to reveal the answer to the question in step 9 to the**

# Analyzing Documents Activity: The Sioux City Ghosts

**students!** Asking the students to record their first impressions is important because this shows how previous knowledge, experiences, and personal bias can affect the analysis of primary sources.

8. Ask the students to share their assigned resources and answers with the class. At this point, you may want to give one copy of each of the three documents to every group or project an image of each resource for the entire class to see.
9. Ask the students this question: **Are all of these documents related to the same event?**
10. Discuss the answers as a class and compare the students' answers to the information given in the Background Information for Teachers (p. 20).
11. You may also want to give each student a copy of the [Introduction to Documents](#) page, all three [Strengths and Limitations Charts](#), and the [Tips for Reading Documents](#) for their notebooks or files so that they can use them later.

## **If you have limited time:**

- Skip the brainstorming section of the activity (steps 3 and 4).

## **Extension Activity**

Have the class brainstorm ideas about how to determine whether the newspaper article and the advertisement refer to the same game.

## Analyzing Documents Activity: The Sioux City Ghosts

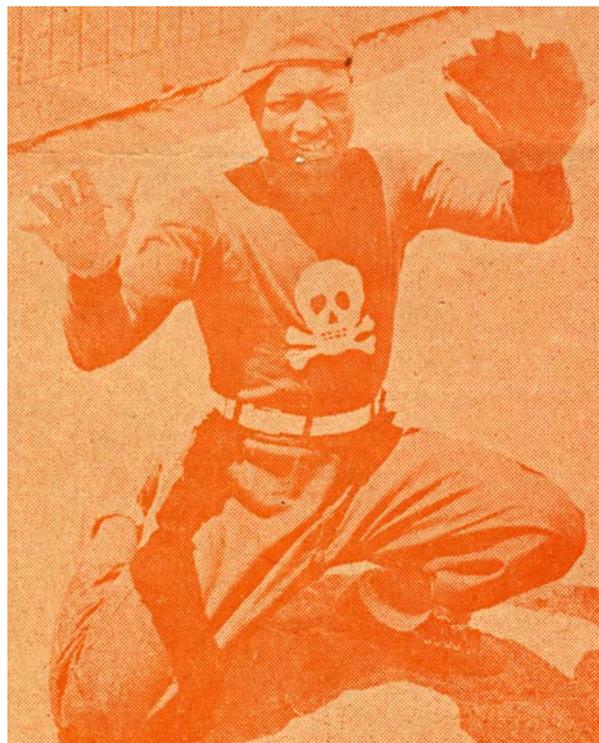
### Background Information

The Sioux City Ghosts were an African American fast-pitch softball team that toured the country during the 1920s and 1930s. Often compared to the Harlem Globetrotters, the Ghosts' players were entertainers who would interrupt games by playing pranks, singing songs, or playing "Ghost Ball," a simulated game in which they pretended to play an inning without using a ball. At a time when segregation did not allow African American athletes to be well recognized, the Ghosts gained renown and drew large crowds while traveling and playing on the West Coast, Mexico, and Canada. The team disbanded when World War II began, and many members served in the armed forces. After the war, few original members rejoined, but the team kept going until 1956.

Although these documents all are related to softball games between the Sioux City Ghosts and the Sebastopol All-Stars, they are not about the same event. You can see by looking at the dates on the advertisement and the ledger that they refer to games that took place on different dates (July 8 and June 29). The advertisement and the article may refer to the same event because they both mention a specific day of the week, Monday, but since neither document includes the year, we cannot be sure.

For more information, visit this Web site:

[www.americanhistory.si.edu/archives/d9634.htm](http://www.americanhistory.si.edu/archives/d9634.htm)



Detail, Advertisement, July 1935

# Analyzing Documents Activity: The Sioux City Ghosts

LAUGH SCREAM HOWL

# Soft Ball

HENRY FISHER'S

## NEGRO GHOSTS

OF SIOUX CITY, IOWA



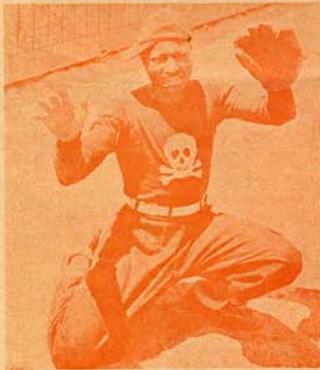
VS.

## SEBASTOPOL ALLSTARS

Preliminary--Santa Rosa 20-30 vs. Sebastopol 20-30, 7:30 p. m.

# Monday Night, July 8

At Sebastopol



LAUGH AT THE ANTICS  
OF  
MICKEY MOUSE  
FUJI FULTON  
OTHO FIELDS  
and the Entire Array of  
LOUDER, FASTER and  
FUNNIER Ghosts

COME EARLY--See Ghostball Work Out  
**MORE FUN Than a CIRCUS**

Admission - - - - - 25c

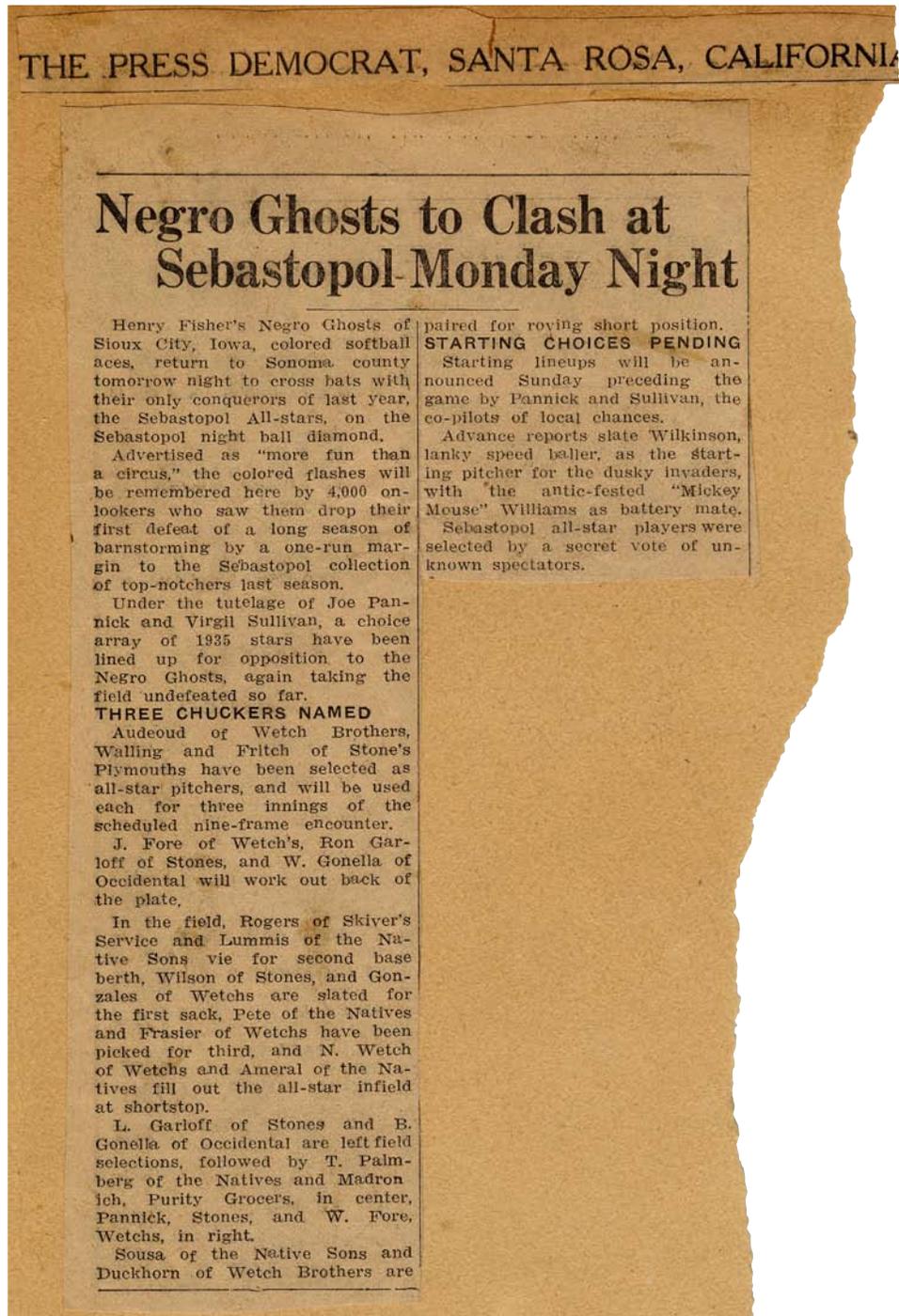
Advertisement, July 1935

# Analyzing Documents Activity: The Sioux City Ghosts

Year	Town	Date	Mortgage Total	Pay month	Mo	They	NOTE POINTS for the 1st year
1936	Lexes, California	\$ 40.40	62	62	19	3	1
"	Santa Clara "	\$ 114.10	144	144	11	2	0
"	Merced "	\$ 12.50	132	132	1	1	1
Same	San Bernardino "	\$ 40.00	455	455	5	9	0
"	Colton "	\$ 18.00	108	108	0	6	0
"	Drawley "	\$ 119.71	400	400	7	3	0
"	Beaumont "	\$ 27.11	158	158	6	8	0
"	Riverside "	\$ 48.28	112	112	9	7	0
"	Banning "	\$ 32.00	170	170	11	9	1
"	Hollywood "	\$ 30.25	20	20	4	2	0
"	Chula Vista "	\$ 19.00	244	244	4	9	0
"	Alhambra "	\$ 27.00	14	14	4	6	0
"	Santa Paula "	\$ 43.00	121	121	10	3	1
"	Paso Robles "	\$ 57.50	268	268	8	6	1
"	Oxnard "	\$ 32.00	86	86	10	5	1
"	" "	\$ 21.00	114	114	1	0	0
"	Ventura "	\$ 40.00	66	66	3	8	0
"	Brentwood "	\$ 18.40	388	388	11	9	1
"	Gilroy "	\$ 91.45	125	125	4	2	0
"	Morgan Hill "	\$ 45.00	36	36	6	5	1
"	Spreckels "	\$ 17.90	116	116	13	4	1
"	San Jose "	\$ 143.50	0	0	8	3	0
"	Palo Alto "	\$ 63.00	38	38	4	3	1
"	Los Gatos "	\$ 105.00	22	22	4	3	1
"	San Mateo "	\$ 36.25	31	31	10	8	1
"	Burlingame "	\$ 8.50	48	48	8	2	1
"	Sebastopol "	\$ 84.00	181	181	9	6	1
1936	Willows "	\$ 51.00	92	92	7	3	0
"	Chico "	\$ 35.00	87	87	8	4	1
"	" "	\$ 42.00	51	51	11	4	1
"	Santa Clara "	\$ 75.00	184	184	1	4	0
"	Monterey "	\$ 27.00	150	150	11	4	0
"	Samstowen "	\$ 58.00	121	121	10	4	1
"	Sonoma "	\$ 85.00	122		10	2	0
"	Sacramento "	\$ 25.00	101	101	6	1	1
"	Stockton "	\$ 34.00	48	48			0
	Wants added 76 - Oct 9	\$ 1747.35	4179	4179	10	28	19

Ledger from Scrapbook, 1936, compiled by Ghosts player Reginald Williams

## Analyzing Documents Activity: The Sioux City Ghosts



Newspaper article, from scrapbook compiled by Ghosts player Reginald Williams

# Photographs

## Introduction to Photographs

Photographs provide us with images of past events. Today, historians study the content and the meaning of these visual images to locate information about a particular topic, time, or event. Photographs can convey countless details about life. For historians and for us, “A picture is worth a thousand words.”

**Photographers have the ability to manipulate, intentionally or unintentionally, the record of the event. It is the photographer—and the camera’s frame—that defines the picture’s content.**

Historians who study the everyday lives of anonymous people find photographs are an invaluable source. Sometimes photographs are the only means of reconstructing the material world and behavior of people who did not leave many written records.

Yet, photographs, like other primary sources, must be studied carefully and critically. While they appear to be the most objective and accurate of all primary sources, they MAY not be. Photographs are the product of many variables, including, the photographer’s intention, the user’s need, the viewer’s interpretation and the equipment’s technical abilities.

Photographers have the ability to manipulate, intentionally or unintentionally, the record of the event. It is the photographer—and the camera’s frame—that defines the picture’s content. Thus, the photographer chooses what will be in the picture, what will be left out, and what the emphasis will be.

The first steps in using photographs as a primary source are to identify the subject and content of the photograph, and the contextual information that may not be in the photograph, such as learning about the photographer. What was the photographer’s intention? Was the photographer hired for a specific purpose? Was the photographer a partial or seemingly impartial observer, an insider or an outsider?

Like all other primary sources, photographs must be studied in conjunction with other evidence. One must look at many photographs, related documents, and oral histories to determine if a photograph’s information is unusual or part of a larger pattern.

# Photographs: Strengths and Limitations

## Primary Source

**Photographs:** Visual records obtained through photography

### Strengths

- + Visual records of a moment in time
- + Convey many details about people, places, objects, and events
- + Convey information about everyday life and behavior that is best communicated in visual terms (hair and clothing styles, interior design)
- + Sometimes provide evidence of attitude
- + Important to the study of people who did not leave many written records
- + Can stimulate the personal involvement of the viewer
- + Do not require fluency in a particular language to understand
- + Can be used to stimulate the memory of people

### Limitations

- Not a complete or objective source: the image that serves as the lasting record does not equate directly with the reality of the event itself
- Relationship of the photographer to those being photographed often difficult to determine
- Reflect the bias or perspective of the photographer including choices about:
  - what is included in the frame of the camera
  - the moment in time recorded in the photograph
  - the subject matter that the person present at the event thought was important to record
  - whether or not to manipulate the people or objects in the picture
- People, place, date, and the name of the photographer are often not identified.
- The emotions and thoughts of those involved often are not evident.
- Information from this kind of source is often suggestive rather than definitive. Photographs must be studied in conjunction with other evidence. One must look at many photographs and/or other source materials such as documents and oral histories to determine if the information is unusual or part of a larger pattern.



# Tips for Reading Photographs

1 of 3

Use this guide to help you analyze photographs. Answer as many of the questions as you can using evidence from the photograph. Write your answers to as many questions as possible based on what you see and what you may already know.

## First Impressions

What are your first impressions?

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**Take a closer look . . .** make sure to examine the whole photograph.

Make a list of any people in the photograph.

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What is happening in the photograph?

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Make a list of any activities you see going on in the photograph.

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Make a list of any objects in the photograph.

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Make a list of any animals in the photograph.

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# Tips for Reading Photographs

2 of 3

## Looking More Closely

Are there any captions? A date? Location? Names of people?

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What kind of clothing is being worn?

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Is there any lettering on signs or buildings?

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What time of year is pictured? Time of day? Cite your evidence.

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Where was the photograph taken? Cite your evidence.

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## Thinking Further

If people are in the photograph, what do you think is their relationship to one another?

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---

Can you speculate on a relationship of the people pictured and someone who is not in the picture?

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## Tips for Reading Photographs

3 of 3

What do you think happened just before the picture was taken?

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What do you think happened just after the photograph was taken?

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Who do you think took the photograph? Why?

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What does this photograph suggest to you? Describe your reaction in a statement.

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What questions do you have about the photograph? How could you try to answer them?

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What is the one thing that you would remember most about this photograph? Why?

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What questions do you have about the photograph that you cannot answer through analyzing it? Where could you go next to answer these questions?

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# Where to Find Photographs

**As with documents and objects, photographs do not have to be old to be a valuable source in the classroom.** Some of the best photographs for educational purposes are family photographs. If older photographs suit the particular needs of a lesson, here are some places to look:

- archives of local newspapers
- historical photograph books (news magazines such as Time Life and American Heritage have compilations)
- books of photos by famous American documentary photographers such as Mathew Brady, Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, Lewis Hine, or Margaret Bourke White
- textbooks
- archives of national newspapers and news magazines
- school newspapers and yearbooks
- photograph collections in your local historical society or museum
- photograph collections at local colleges and universities
- special collections at libraries

**Most of the online exhibitions from the National Museum of American History contain a wealth of photographs:**

<http://www.americanhistory.si.edu/exhibitions/category.cfm?category=online>

**The exhibitions below focus on photography and photographs:**

*Portraits of a City: The Scurlock Photographic Studio's Legacy to Washington, D.C.*

<http://americanhistory.si.edu/archives/scurlock/index.html>

*The 1896 Washington Salon & Art Photographic Exhibition*

<http://americanhistory.si.edu/1896/index.htm>

*Freeze Frame: Eadweard Muybridge's Photography of Motion*

<http://americanhistory.si.edu/muybridge/index.htm>

*Magic Lanterns, Magic Mirrors: A Centennial Salute to Cinema*

<http://americanhistory.si.edu/cinema/index.htm>

*Photographing History: Fred J. Maroon and the Nixon Years, 1970–1974*

<http://americanhistory.si.edu/maroon/index.htm>

*A Visual Journey: Photographs by Lisa Law, 1964–1971*

<http://americanhistory.si.edu/lisalaw/index.htm>

You can also find photographs online at the Library of Congress American Memory Web page <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html>

# Analyzing Photographs Activity: A Salmon Cannery

## Objective

Photographs are especially significant for students. They give a visual image of the past that is valuable for young people whose personal memories may extend only into the last decade. Photographs can stimulate students' visual sense, as well as their mental abilities, as they pursue an understanding of the American past.

Much like using objects in the classroom, the study of photographs can be very beneficial for English Language Learners, or those with learning disabilities. Photographs speak a thousand words—in any language.

After completing this activity, students will be able to identify and assess the strengths and weaknesses of using photographs as primary sources, and analyze photographs for historical information.

## Time

50 minutes

## Skills

Analyzing photographs as primary sources

## Grades

3–12

## Content Area

Salmon fishing; maritime history; westward expansion; business history; immigration; geography; invention and innovation; industrial revolution

## Materials

- Pencil or Pen
- A piece of paper
- Photograph of Salmon Cannery
- [Introduction to Photographs page](#)
- [Photographs: Strengths and Limitations Chart](#)
- [Tips for Reading Photographs](#)

# Analyzing Photographs Activity: A Salmon Cannery

## National Center for History in the Schools—National History Standards

### Historical Thinking:

#### Grades K–4:

Standard 4B: Obtain historical data from a variety of sources

Standard 4C: Interrogate historical data.

Standard 4D: Marshal needed knowledge of the time and place, and construct a story, explanation, or historical narrative.

Standard 5A: Identify problems and dilemmas in the past.

Standard 5B: Analyze the interests and values of the various people involved.

#### Grades 5–12:

Standard 4B: Obtain historical data from a variety of sources

Standard 4C: Interrogate historical data.

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

Standard 5A: Identify issues and problems in the past.

### Content:

#### Grades K–4:

##### Topic 1 Standard 2:

The history of students' own local community and how communities in North America varied long ago.

##### Topic 2 Standard 3C:

The student understands the various other groups from regions throughout the world who came into his or her own state or region over the long-ago and recent past.

##### Topic 3 Standard 5A:

Demonstrate understanding of the movements of large groups of people into his or her own and other states in the United States now and long ago.

##### Topic 4 Standard 8A:

The student understands the development of technological innovations, the major scientists and inventors associated with them and their social and economic effects.

#### Grades 5–12:

Era 6: The Development of the Industrial United States

# Analyzing Photographs Activity: A Salmon Cannery

## Directions

1. Read and discuss the [Introduction to Photographs](#) page from this guide together as a class.
2. Divide the class into groups of 3 or 4 students.
3. On a sheet of paper, have each group brainstorm the strengths and weaknesses of using photographs as primary sources.
4. Have each group report their thoughts out to the class. Write the results for the entire class to see.
5. Hand out the [Photographs: Strengths and Limitations Chart](#). As a class, compare it to the student-generated list of strengths and limitations.
6. Project the photograph of the salmon cannery for the entire class to see, or give each group a photocopy of the image.
7. Give each group a copy of the [Tips for Reading Photographs](#) and have them answer the questions on the tip sheet while analyzing the photograph. Asking the students to record their first impressions is important because this shows how previous knowledge, experiences, and personal bias can affect the analysis of primary sources.
8. Discuss the answers as a class and compare the students' answers to the information given in the Background Information for Teachers (p. 33).

9. You may also want to give each student a copy of the [Introduction to Photographs](#), the [Photographs: Strengths and Limitations Chart](#), and the [Tips for Reading Photographs](#) for their notebooks or files so they can use them as references later.

## Modified Activities

- If you have limited time, it is possible to skip the brainstorming section of the activity (steps 3 and 4).
- For younger students, a simplified activity can include looking at the photograph as a class and asking modified versions of the questions on the tip sheet that are more appropriate for the age group.

## Extension Activity

This photograph raises questions about the impact of salmon fishing when canning became possible. Have the students research canning and the history of salmon fishing. Here are some questions regarding the photograph to help your students get started:

- Why was canning fish desired? Who caught the fish? Who worked in the cannery? There are two Asian men on the left. What is their relationship with the cannery? Where did the canned fish go? Is this the way fish are canned today?

# Analyzing Photographs Activity: A Salmon Cannery

## Background Information for Teachers



928. *Unloading Salmon at a Cannery*  
By S. J. Thompson, New Westminster,  
B.C.  
Albumen print, about 1889

This photograph by Stephen Joseph Thompson has a purplish hue because of the photographic process. Albumen prints have a base coat that uses egg whites, giving the paper a smooth shiny surface. The paper is then coated with a silver nitrate solution to make it light sensitive. After exposing and fixing the print, it will appear reddish. But if it is toned (helping to preserve the image), often with gold, it will have a range of brown and purplish tones.

The photograph shows fish at a cannery, presumably in the Northwestern United States or Canada's British Columbia. It was probably photographed as documentation for the Canadian Deputy Minister of Marine and Fisheries. It shows some of the tools and the people who worked in the first stages of the canning process.

There are many salmon lying about, and the men are careful not step on the fish; see the boards to the left. One man on the left and two men in the center hold up fish, which gives us a better sense of just how big these fish are. The photographer had a camera that held an 8x10-inch glass plate that was held stable by a tripod. He would have had a lot of heavy wooden boxes that carried glass plates and other equipment.

## For more information, go to these Web sites:

Three sections of the online exhibition *On the Water: Stories from Maritime America* focus on salmon fishing:

The Salmon Coast

[http://americanhistory.si.edu/onthewater/exhibition/3\\_2.html](http://americanhistory.si.edu/onthewater/exhibition/3_2.html)

Commercial Fishers: Columbia River Salmon

[http://americanhistory.si.edu/onthewater/exhibition/3\\_6.html](http://americanhistory.si.edu/onthewater/exhibition/3_6.html)

Modern Maritime America

[http://americanhistory.si.edu/onthewater/exhibition/7\\_1.html](http://americanhistory.si.edu/onthewater/exhibition/7_1.html)

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19th-Century American Fisheries

<http://www.photolib.noaa.gov/nmfs/index.html>

Columbia River Salmon

<http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/anth481/sal/crintrol.htm>

Chinese Immigration to the United States

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/learn/features/timeline/riseind/chinimms/chinimms.html>

Chinese Immigration and the  
Chinese in the United States

<http://www.archives.gov/locations/finding-aids/chinese-immigration.html>

The Story of Pacific Salmon

<http://whatscookingamerica.net/salmon.htm>

Wild Salmon Spotlight

<http://www.goldseal.ca/wildsalmon/history.asp>

## Analyzing Photographs Activity: A Salmon Cannery



928. *Unloading Salmon at a Cannery*  
By S. J. Thompson, New Westminister, B.C.  
Albumen print, about 1889

# Oral Histories

## Introduction to Oral Histories

Oral histories are the collections of people's reminiscences, accounts, and interpretations of the past in their own words. They are a record of an individual's direct feelings and opinions about the events in which he or she was involved. Often, oral histories provide information about significant events that may otherwise lack documentation in written or archival records. Oral histories are obtained through interviews and are preserved on audio and video recordings, in films, and in written transcripts.

**Oral history presents challenges in its analysis. Memory is fallible. The reliability of the informant's information may be in question.**

Historians study oral histories as primary sources and recognize the advantages they have as source materials. Many times, oral histories record the experiences of individuals who were not able, or who lacked the time, to leave written accounts. The interviewer's questions often create spontaneity and candor that might not be present in a personally written account. Moreover, in a recorded interview, the informant's voice may reveal unique

speech characteristics and tone that could not be captured in other sources.

Oral history presents challenges in its analysis. Memory is fallible. The reliability of the informant's information may be in question. One must ask, is it consistent with the informant's previous recollections? Or the informant may, intentionally or unintentionally, distort the event or their role in it, thereby compromising the record's validity. One must ask, does this concur with other sources? Further, informants may be reluctant to discuss certain topics, resulting in an inaccurate or an incomplete record. As with all sources, oral histories must be evaluated along with other documentation to determine whether they present information that is exceptional or conforms to previously established patterns.

# Oral Histories: Strengths and Limitations

## Primary Source

**Oral Histories** The record of an individual's reminiscences, accounts, and interpretations of the past in his/her own spoken words obtained through planned interview(s) and preserved through the use of audio and video recordings, film, and/or written transcription.

The **Oral History Informant** is the individual being interviewed.

## Strengths

- + Personalize history by recording an individual's remembrances (or opinions) about his/her life or an event in which he/she was involved
- + Provide information about a topic or time period that may otherwise lack documentation in written or archival records
- + Often convey emotion clearly
- + Contain a story element appealing to students
- + Contain spontaneity and candor not always present in a personally written account
- + May contain unusual dialect or speech patterns
- + If the informant is living, they may be consulted for clarification or additional information.

## Limitations

- The fallible memory of the informant
- May include intentional or unintentional distortion of an event or one's role in an event, thereby compromising the validity
- May contain inaccurate or incomplete record because of the informant's reluctance to discuss certain topics
- The informant's testimony may be inconsistent from one interview to the next.
- May be influenced by the bias, goals, and/or the relationship of the interviewer to those being interviewed
- Interviewer's questions may exert intentional or unintentional influence on the informant's response.
- May contain unfamiliar words or phrases from another time that are not clarified by the informant
- The bias of the historian/interviewer may become evident in the edited version of the interview(s), compromising the permanent record.
- Oral histories are the mutual creation of the historian and the person being interviewed—the historian defines the topic or problem to be studied and the subject provides the information.
- Always important to evaluate oral histories along with other evidence to determine whether they present information that is exceptional or conforms to previously established patterns



# Tips for Analyzing Taped and Transcribed Oral History Interviews

1 of 2

## Before You Begin

Find out and write down as much as you can about the informant: name, date of the interview, location, personal circumstances, and the topic of the interview. If possible, also note the interviewer's name and affiliation.

## First Impressions

Who is speaking?

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What people, places, and dates does the informant mention?

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What topics is the informant discussing?

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Does the informant reveal any emotions about these topics such as excitement, sadness, or happiness?

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# Tips for Analyzing Taped and Transcribed Oral History Interviews

2 of 2

## Listening More Closely

What kinds of words or phrases does the informant use? Are any of these unusual? If so, write them down and find definitions for them using a dictionary. Do they tell you anything about the informant's character or history?

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What was the informant's role in the events he or she describes?

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## Thinking Further

How was the informant affected by the events he or she describes?

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How does the informant and his or her unique story fit into the broader history you are studying?

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How could information obtained from other primary sources reinforce the informant's story?

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Does the informant mention any previously unknown aspects of the event that deserve further exploration?

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# Where to Find Oral Histories

## These online exhibitions from the National Museum of American History include oral histories:

*A More Perfect Union:*

*Japanese-Americans and the U. S. Constitution*

<http://americanhistory.si.edu/perfectunion/experience/index.html>

*America on the Move*

<http://americanhistory.si.edu/onthemove/>

*Whatever Happened to Polio?*

<http://www.americanhistory.si.edu/polio/>

*Bon Appétit! Julia Child's Kitchen at the Smithsonian*

<http://americanhistory.si.edu/juliachild/>

*Invention at Play: Inventor's Stories*

[http://inventionatplay.org/inventors\\_main.html](http://inventionatplay.org/inventors_main.html)

*Photographing History: Fred J. Maroon and the Nixon Years, 1970–1974*

<http://americanhistory.si.edu/maroon/index.htm>

*On the Water: Stories from Maritime America*

<http://americanhistory.si.edu/onthewater/>

## You can also find oral histories online at:

- Archives of American Art, Oral History Collections Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Art  
<http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/>
- The Library of Congress American Memory  
<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html>
- History Matters: Oral Histories Online  
<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral/online.html>
- Tips for recording oral histories and great questions online at: Storycorps: The conversation of a lifetime  
<http://www.storycorps.org/record-your-story/>
- Modern Inventors Documentation Program  
[http://invention.smithsonian.org/resources/MIND\\_about.aspx](http://invention.smithsonian.org/resources/MIND_about.aspx)

# Analyzing Oral Histories Activity: Spud Campbell, Liberty Ships, and the Second World War

## Objective

Analyzing oral history material can be a rewarding experience for students. It enables them to see the events of history from an individual's perspective—one that they can hear in the individual's own words and intonation, as though they were talking directly with the informant. Even more rewarding is for students to conduct their own oral history interviews. A project such as this will teach students that they can learn history from people they know and that they can personally collect and preserve information that may be useful to historians in the future.

Unlike using objects and photographs in the classroom, oral histories can be challenging for English Language Learners, students who are deaf or hard of hearing, or those with certain learning disabilities. It is important to always provide transcripts of any oral histories that are used in the classroom or any other setting.

After completing this activity, students will be able to identify and assess the strengths and weaknesses of using oral histories as primary sources and analyze oral histories for factual information.

## Time

50 minutes

## Skills

Analyzing oral histories as primary sources

## Grades

3–12

## Content Area

United States History, World War II, Maritime History, Veteran's Day

## Materials

- [Introduction to Oral Histories](#)
- [Oral Histories: Strengths and Limitations Chart](#)
- [Tips for Analyzing Taped and Transcribed Oral History Interviews](#)
- Paper and pencils or pens
- Six parts of the Spud Campbell oral history [http://americanhistory.si.edu/onthewater/exhibition/6\\_3.html#PerilsOfWar](http://americanhistory.si.edu/onthewater/exhibition/6_3.html#PerilsOfWar)
- Computers with Internet access, ability to play MP3 files, and speakers or headphones

# Analyzing Oral Histories Activity: Spud Campbell, Liberty Ships, and the Second World War

## National Center for History in the Schools—National History Standards

### Historical Thinking:

#### Grades K–4:

- 1B: Identify the temporal structure of a historical narrative or story.
- 2A: Identify the author or source of the historical document or narrative.
- 2B: Reconstruct the literal meaning of a historical passage.
- 2C: Identify the central question(s) the historical narrative addresses.
- 3A: Formulate questions to focus their inquiry or analysis.
- 3H: Explain causes in analyzing historical actions
- 4A: Formulate historical questions.
- 4B: Obtain historical data.
- 4C: Interrogate historical data.
- 5A: Identify problems and dilemmas in the past.
- 5B: Analyze the interests and values of the various people involved.

#### Grades 5–12:

- 1B: Identify the temporal structure of a historical narrative or story.
- 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.
- 2C: Identify the central question(s) the historical narrative addresses.
- 2D: Differentiate between historical facts and historical interpretations.
- 2F: Appreciate historical perspectives.
- 4A: Formulate historical questions.
- 4B: Obtain historical data from a variety of sources.
- 4C: Interrogate historical data.
- 5A: Identify issues and problems in the past.

### Historical Content:

#### Grades K–4:

- Standard 4B: Demonstrate understanding of ordinary people who have exemplified values and principles of American democracy.
- Standard 4D: The student understands events that celebrate and exemplify fundamental values and principles of American democracy (Veteran's Day).

#### Grades 5–12:

- Era 8 Standard 3B: The student understands World War II and how the Allies prevailed.
- Standard 3C: The student understands the effects of World War II at home.

# Analyzing Oral Histories Activity: Spud Campbell, Liberty Ships, and the Second World War

## Directions

1. Read and discuss the [Introduction to Oral Histories](#) page from this guide together as a class.
  2. Divide the class into groups of three or four students.
  3. On a sheet of paper, have each group brainstorm the strengths and weaknesses of using oral histories as primary sources.
  4. Have each group report out their thoughts. Write the results for the entire class to see.
  5. Hand out the [Oral Histories: Strengths and Limitations Chart](#). As a class, compare it to the student-generated list of strengths and limitations.
  6. Give each group a copy of the [Tips for Analyzing Taped and Transcribed Oral History Interviews](#) and read through the questions as a class.
  7. If possible, assign each group to a computer so that they can listen to the six parts of Spud Campbell's oral history. If only one computer is available, play the oral history for the entire class to hear.
  8. Have the students fill out the tip sheet as they listen to the [Spud Campbell oral history](#). (After following the link, [http://americanhistory.si.edu/onthewater/exhibition/6\\_3.html#PerilsOfWar](http://americanhistory.si.edu/onthewater/exhibition/6_3.html#PerilsOfWar), scroll down until you find the Spud Campbell oral history. It is divided into six parts.)  
Asking the students to record their first impressions is important because this shows how previous knowledge, experiences,
- and personal bias can affect the analysis of primary sources. After each section, students should record any information that they can on the tip sheet. Continue this process until they have listened to all six parts of the oral history.
9. Discuss the answers as a class and compare the students' answers to the information given in the Background Information for Teachers (p. 43).
  10. You may want to give each student a copy of the [Introduction to Oral Histories](#) page, the [Oral Histories: Strengths and Limitations Chart](#) and the [Tips for Analyzing Taped and Transcribed Oral History Interviews](#) for their notebooks or files so they can use them as references later.

## If you have limited time:

- Skip the brainstorming section of the activity (steps 3 and 4).

## Extension Activity

Have the students conduct research on Liberty Ships and report their findings to the class.

## Analyzing Oral Histories Activity: Spud Campbell, Liberty Ships, and the Second World War

### Background Information for Teachers

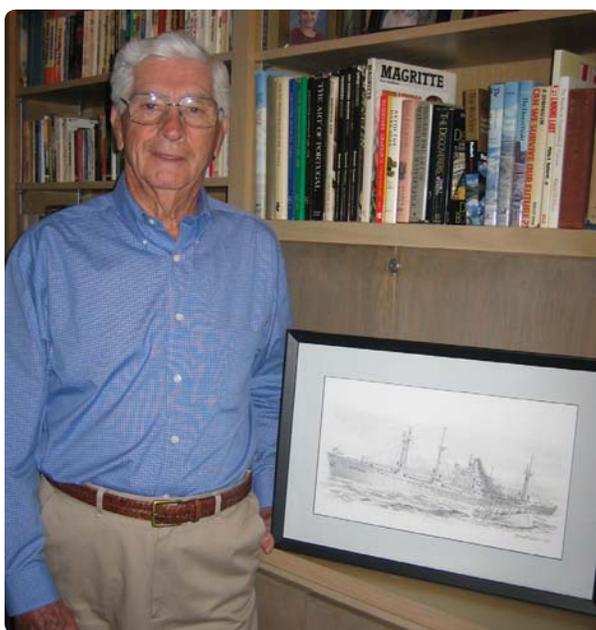
During World War II, the United States faced the challenge of having to support soldiers fighting thousands of miles away in North Africa, the Mediterranean, and Europe, and on islands in the Pacific Ocean. Nearly everything that U.S. and Allied troops needed for the war effort arrived via ship—troops, tanks, planes, ammunition, fuel, food, even toilet paper. Thousands of ships, many of them of a type known as “Liberty Ships,” were mass-produced in America’s shipyards. These ships were crucial to the Allied war effort. Civilians in the United States Merchant Marine served as crew members on these transport ships, traversing dangerous waters in the North Atlantic and the Pacific. Some 290,000 men served in the Merchant Marine during the war; and many thousands died.

One of those who served as a merchant mariner was Spud Campbell. Born Arnold Spurgen Campbell in Walker County, Alabama, in 1921, he was recruited and trained as a radio operator by the United States Coast Guard. Beginning in the spring of 1942, he worked on Liberty ships, crossing the Atlantic several times while supporting the invasions of North Africa, Sicily, and southern France. In the oral history included in this activity, he talks about his experience working on his fourth ship, the SS *Henry Bacon*.

### For more information, go to these Web sites:

<http://www.usmm.org/libertyships.html>

[http://americanhistory.si.edu/onthewater/exhibition/6\\_1.html](http://americanhistory.si.edu/onthewater/exhibition/6_1.html)



(left) Spud Campbell, First Radio Officer,  
SS *Henry Bacon*, Oct. 1944 to Feb. 1945  
(right) Liberty Ship, SS Samuel F.B. Morse  
and convoy

# Creating an Oral History Source: Tips for Designing and Conducting an Interview

1 of 2

## **Many steps are involved in creating a permanent record of an interview.**

A well-planned project will result in a clear, more useful product. The following tips may help in planning and conducting an interview.

### **I. Organizing Your Project**

- Determine the interview topic and write at least five basic questions relevant to the topic. Avoid simple YES and NO questions; ask open-ended questions to allow more discussion.
- Locate an informant through family, friends, community, and online resources. The informant should have experience with the topic you wish to discuss.
- Set a definite time and place for the interview. Also be sure to consider the time of day and the expected length of interview.
- Practice by interviewing someone else (students may practice interviewing each other as an in-class exercise).
- It is important to create an index that will allow you to find valuable passages from the interview later. See the [Other Data to Collect During Oral History Interviews](#) included on the next page.

### **II. The Interview**

- If possible, collect items that might help stimulate the informant's memory. Newspaper articles, family photos, and personal items are examples. (Or ask the informant to bring these materials).
- If using a video recorder, flash recorder, computer with microphone, or cell phone, check all equipment to be sure it is working. If taking notes, be sure that paper and writing utensils are in order.
- Begin the interview by stating the time, place, date, your name, and the name of your project. Ask the informant for his or her name, birth date, and early life history.
- Ask your questions. Allow the informant plenty of time to answer. If your informant says something that you do not understand, ask him or her to explain or clarify his or her comments.
- Always respect your informant and their wishes (if appropriate) during the interview.



## Creating an Oral History Source: Tips for Designing and Conducting an Interview

2 of 2

### III. After the Interview

- Thank the informant.
- Listen to the recording to be sure it is audible or read your notes for corrections. Note any points that need clarification.
- Transcribe the information as soon as possible (if you need a transcription).
- For storing your recording, burn a DVD or CD copy and attach a brief description of the project. Note why you chose your informant.

### Other Data to Collect During Oral History Interviews

- CD or DVD Number
- Informant's Occupation
- Informant's Address
- Date of Interview
- Length of Session
- Place of Interview
- Title or Subject
- Interviewer
- Interviewer's Address
- Others Present
- Interview  
List in order of subjects discussed, localities, dates, names of persons mentioned. Leave a blank column in your notebook so you can note each important statement's location on your recording.

# Objects

## Introduction to Objects

Historians study objects, the material culture that people from the past left behind, in order to understand history.



Because objects are the products of human workmanship—of human thought and effort—objects tell something about the people who designed, made, and used them.

Sometimes objects are the only evidence remaining from past peoples who, for various reasons, did not leave a written record of their lives. Some cultures did not have a written language. Others, like many enslaved African Americans in the early 19th century, were legally forbidden to learn to read and write. Still other cultures placed less emphasis on the written word and instead followed an oral tradition. In many cases, written evidence was not preserved. For example, what would we know about an 18th-century harness maker if we didn't have the stitching horse and tools that he left behind? We could only know of his existence through impersonal records like tax rolls or city directories, or through the possibly distorting view of a literate

**Sometimes objects are the only evidence remaining from past peoples who, for various reasons, did not leave a written record of their lives.**

contemporary who might have written about him in a letter or news account. Objects alone will not tell us the whole story, but they help us to understand parts of the story that other sources cannot. Like other primary sources, objects must be studied carefully and critically.



Baseball Catcher's Mask—Pirates catcher Steve Nicosia used this catcher's mask when he caught during Game Seven of the 1979 World Series.

# Objects: Strengths and Limitations

## Primary Source

**Object (artifact)** An object in the historical sense is called an artifact and is something that has been produced or shaped by human workmanship.

## Strengths

- + Can offer clues when no written documents exist
- + Can give insight into a people whose language the researcher cannot read or speak
- + Can give clues as to the materials that were available during the time period
- + Create a visual record through three-dimensional facts: size, weight, texture
- + Provide clues about function
- + Convey info of everyday life
- + Tell of ideas and information which either *are not* or *cannot* be expressed effectively in writing or speech (forms, colors, effects of visual arts; personal fantasies, idioms of taste, unspoken significance, customs, and prejudices)

## Limitations

- Do not usually give clues to the who, what, where, why, when, how of an event
- Do not always provide clues as to their designer and/or owner
- Cannot tell us about the frequency of their use
- Sometimes hard to tell the intended use
- Cannot know from a single type of object:
  - how typical the object is of its time or of its type
  - whether there are parts missing
  - whether decoration is sparse or elaborate



# Tips for Reading Objects

1 of 4

**\*If examining a picture of an object, you will not be able to answer all of these questions.** Write your answers to as many questions as possible based on what you see and what you may already know.

## First Impressions

What are your first impressions of this object?

---



---

Do you have any idea what the object might have been used for?

---



---

## Looking More Closely

### **Physical Features:**

What is it made of?

---

Why was this material chosen?

---

What is the texture and color?

---

What does it smell like?

---

Can it be held? Is it heavy or light?

---



## Tips for Reading Objects

2 of 4

Is it intact, or does it look like parts are missing?

---

Is it clean or dirty?

---

Does it make a noise?

---

Does it look old or new?

---

### **Construction:**

Is it handmade or made by machine?

---

Where was it made?

---

Who made it?

---

### **Function:**

How is this object used?

---

Does it have a practical use or is (was) it used for pleasure?

---

Has it been used? Is it still in use? Has the use changed?

---



## Tips for Reading Objects

3 of 4

Where can it be found? Where could it have been found?

---

What value does it hold to you and to others?

---

### **Design:**

Is it designed well?

---

Is it decorated? How is it decorated?

---

Is it aesthetically pleasing?

---

Would it make a good gift?

---

Does it remind you of anything else?

---

### **Who May be Connected with the Object?**

What type of person might have used this object?

---

What type of person might have made this object?

---

What does this object tell us about the maker and user?

---



## Tips for Reading Objects

4 of 4

### Thinking Further

Is this type of object still being made today? Is it still in use?

If not, why do you think it isn't used today?

---

---

Should this object be in a museum collection? Why or why not?

---

---

What questions do you have about the object that you can't answer from just looking at it?

---

---

# Where to Find Objects

The most important thing to remember when looking for objects to use in the classroom is that **they do not have to be old to be a learning tool**. You may find a contemporary object useful in discussion of a historical topic. For example, you can use a candle to talk about eighteenth-century lighting or tradesmen.

Remember, the examination of objects is not limited to history classes. A science class could examine an 18th-century lantern while learning about the properties of light.

## Some great places to find objects:

- Yard Sales
- Auctions
- Going Out of Business Sales
- Antique Stores
- Thrift Stores
- Attics, Closets, and Garages
- Local and Regional Museums
- Flea Markets
- Storage Rooms in Schools and in Offices
- Historic Reproduction Companies

**All of the online exhibitions from the National Museum of American History contain** a wealth of objects from the museum's vast collections:

<http://www.americanhistory.si.edu/exhibitions/category.cfm?category=online>

**The exhibitions listed below also contain interactive collections searches:**

*A More Perfect Union: Japanese Americans and the U. S. Constitution*

<http://americanhistory.si.edu/perfectunion/collection/index.html>

*Bon Appétit! Julia Child's Kitchen at the Smithsonian*

<http://americanhistory.si.edu/juliachild/>

*The Price of Freedom: Americans at War*

<http://americanhistory.si.edu/militaryhistory/collection/>

*America on the Move*

<http://americanhistory.si.edu/onthemove/collection/>

*July 1942: United We Stand*

<http://americanhistory.si.edu/1942/search/index.asp>

*Artificial Anatomy: Papier-Mâché Anatomical Models*

[http://americanhistory.si.edu/anatomy/collection/nma03\\_collection\\_human.html](http://americanhistory.si.edu/anatomy/collection/nma03_collection_human.html)

## Where to Find Objects

*Legendary Coins and Currency*

<http://americanhistory.si.edu/coins/search.cfm>

*September 11: Bearing Witness to History*

<http://americanhistory.si.edu/september11/collection/index.asp>

*A Vision of Puerto Rico: The Teodoro Vidal Collection*

<http://americanhistory.si.edu/vidal/collection/?en=true>

*On the Water: Stories from Maritime America*

<http://americanhistory.si.edu/onthewater/>

**The Museum also has a searchable online collections database available at:**

<http://www.americanhistory.si.edu/collections/index.cfm>

The Museum's education Web site

**Smithsonian's History Explorer** also includes a collection of museum artifacts and features a new object every week:

<http://www.historyexplorer.si.edu>

United States, Jefferson  
Indian Peace Medal, 1801



# Analyzing Objects Activity: An 18th-Century Fat Lamp

## Objective

Students are fascinated by objects. Historic objects are real pieces of the past that exist in the present. We can look at them and touch them. Even the use of historically accurate reproductions in your classroom will stimulate students to look at everyday objects in a new way.

Everybody can “read” objects. Object-based learning is not age-specific—students of any reading level and at most stages of cognitive development can look at objects and draw conclusions. It is an easy skill to learn, but one that can take a lifetime to master. The study of objects can be especially beneficial for English Language Learners, or those with learning disabilities.

After completing this activity, students will be able to identify and assess the strengths and weaknesses of using objects as primary sources and analyze an historical photograph for factual information.

## Time

50 minutes

## Skills

Analyzing objects as primary sources

## Grades

K–12

## Content Area

United States History, Colonial America, Eighteenth-Century, Domestic, and Home Life, Social History

## Materials

- Pencil or pen
- A piece of paper
- Image of the 18th-century fat lamp
- [Introduction to Objects](#)
- [Objects: Strengths and Limitations Chart](#)
- [Tips for Reading Objects](#)

# Analyzing Objects Activity: An 18th-Century Fat Lamp

## National Center for History in the Schools Standards

### Historical Thinking:

#### Grades K–4:

Standard 4B: Obtain historical data from a variety of sources

Standard 4C: Interrogate historical data.

#### Grades 5–12:

Standard 4B: Obtain historical data from a variety of sources

Standard 4C: Interrogate historical data.

### Historical Content:

#### Grades K–4:

Topic One: Standard 1A:

The student understands family life now and in the recent past; family life in various places long ago.

#### Grades 5–12:

Era 2: Colonization and Settlement  
1585–1763

Era 3: Revolution and the New Nation  
1754–1820s

## Directions

1. Read and discuss the [Introduction to Objects](#) page from this guide together as a class.
2. Divide the class into groups of three or four students.
3. On a sheet of paper, have each group brainstorm the strengths and weaknesses of using objects as primary sources.
4. Have each group report their thoughts out to the class. Write the results for the entire class to see.
5. Hand out the [Objects: Strengths and Limitations Chart](#). As a class, compare it to the student-generated list of strengths and limitations.
6. Project the image of the fat lamp for the entire class to see, or give each group a photocopy of the image to look at. **It is important that the students do not know find out what the object is until the end of the activity.**
7. Give each group a copy of the [Tips for Reading Objects](#) and have them answer all of the questions **except for the Thinking Further section** of the Tips sheet while analyzing the image of the fat lamp. Asking the students to record their first impressions is important because this shows how previous knowledge, experiences and personal bias can affect the analysis of primary sources.

## Analyzing Objects Activity: An 18th-Century Fat Lamp

8. After the groups are finished with their analysis, discuss their answers as a class.
9. Finally, ask the class what they think the object is.
10. Discuss the answers as a class and compare the students' answers to the information given in the Background Information for Teachers (p. 57).
11. Either individually or as a class, have the students answer the Thinking Further section of the Tips Sheet.
12. You may also want to give each student a copy of the [Introduction to Objects](#) page, the [Objects: Strengths and Limitations Chart](#) and the [Tips for Reading Objects](#) for their notebooks or files so they can use them as references later.

### Modified Activities

- If you have limited time, it is possible to skip the brainstorming section of the activity (steps 3 and 4).
- For younger students, a simplified activity can include looking at the image of the lamp as a class and asking modified versions of the questions on the tip sheet that are more appropriate for the age group.

### Extension Activity

**What is it?** One of the best places to find objects is at home. You can extend this lesson by asking your students to scavenge their homes to find an object they don't think their classmates will recognize. Have the class examine the objects using the Tips for Reading Objects, and try to figure out what they are.

# Analyzing Objects Activity: An 18th-Century Fat Lamp

## Background Information for Teachers

In the 18th century, before the widespread use of whale oil lamps, fat lamps were commonly used as task lighting in homes and workshops in colonial America. Although these lamps were dim by modern standards, they were convenient for many families, and remained in service throughout much of the 19th century, especially in rural areas. They could burn materials that were readily available, such as tallow, lard, animal fat, fish or whale oil, or even kitchen grease. Usually made of iron or tinplate, fat lamps took many forms, including those with pear-shaped bowls that were called crusies.

Fuel was placed in the lamp and a wick, made of twisted cloth, moss, or any material capable of capillary action, lay in the oil with only the tip exposed at the point of the lamp. Excess oil from the wick made a mess by running over the point and dripping off the bottom of the lamp. The small wire wick-holder present on the **Choate house lamp** reduced this messy problem by keeping the wick away from the edge of the lamp, so that excess oil would drip back into the bowl to be reused. A hook attached to the handle on the back of the lamp could be used to hang the lamp from a wall or the back of a chair. This hook could also serve as a wickpick to expose just enough wick above the surface of the oil to give maximum light with a minimum amount of smoking.

## For more information, go to these Web sites:

<http://americanhistory.si.edu/house/families/choates.asp>

[http://www.ramshornstudio.com/early\\_lighting\\_2.htm](http://www.ramshornstudio.com/early_lighting_2.htm)

[http://www.wilsonmuseum.org/bulletins/summer2003\\_2.html](http://www.wilsonmuseum.org/bulletins/summer2003_2.html)

## Analyzing Objects Activity: An 18th-Century Fat Lamp



Fat Lamp, 1750–1800

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### Web Sites Featuring Primary Sources

*National Museum of American History*

<http://www.americanhistory.si.edu/>  
<http://www.historyexplorer.si.edu>

*Library of Congress*

<http://www.memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html>

This site that contains everything from photographs to documents to dance manuals.

*National Archives and Records Administration*

<http://www.archives.gov/>

The premiere repository for national documents includes an extensive collection variety of sources from America's history.

*Lemelson Center for the Study of Invention and Innovation*

[http://invention.smithsonian.org/resources/MIND\\_about.aspx](http://invention.smithsonian.org/resources/MIND_about.aspx)

## Bibliography and Web Sites Featuring Primary Sources

*National Museum of American Art*

<http://americanart.si.edu/>

The Web site includes various paintings, including American Indians by George Catlin, and photographs. It features advertisements for cars and phones.

*Learning Page of the Library of Congress: Lesson Ideas*

<http://learning.loc.gov/learn/lesson.html>

*Valley of the Shadow*

<http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/vshadow2/>

Features an extensive collection of primary sources relating to the years preceding and during the Civil War.

*Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage*

<http://www.folklife.si.edu/>

The Web site includes guidelines from Smithsonian folklorists on collecting folklore and oral history.

*The Avalon Project at the Yale Law School*

<http://avalon.law.yale.edu/default.asp>

This resource for teachers and students is for those who are interested in locating, reading, and researching important primary source documents that have had an impact on American history and political thought.

# Engaging Students with Primary Sources Credits

## **National Museum of American History**

Richard Doty

Rayna Green

Tim Grove

Paula J. Johnson

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Nancy McCoy

Paul Molholm

Howard Morrison

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