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# Using Primary Sources in School History and Social Studies Courses

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Primary sources can make history come alive for students who believe that the past is what they encounter in dry textbooks. Records that effectively reveal the lifestyles and thoughts of real people who lived in a student's community or state add a dimension of realism to abstract concepts. Imaginative teachers who take the time to select primary sources that complement textbook readings open doors to critical thought, useful research skills, and a firmer grasp of the past. With the cooperation of librarians, archivists, and the keepers of local records, this exciting method of instruction can be utilized by teachers everywhere.

Students profit in several ways. They learn to think critically, by analyzing and interpreting the meaning of a particular letter, diary entry, or photograph, by judging the quality of the source as evidence pertaining to an event or trend, and by using the item to test accepted theories of history. In answering the plethora of questions that can emerge from an original document, students often acquire valuable experience in using a library's reference materials. Because carefully selected documents can bring historical trends into focus on a local level, young minds who study them usually consider their courses more interesting. They learn about *their* past and often become interested in continuing their research or getting involved in their community. They realize that our knowledge of the past is largely based on the creation, preservation, and use of original records.

These sources are varied and widely available. Manuscript repositories, libraries, and historical societies preserve a variety of personal papers, including letters, diaries, financial records, broadsides, maps, and photographs, created by or belonging to notable individuals and average families. Business records—ledgers, daybooks, receipts, and other material—also find homes in many institutions. Such records as deeds, estate papers, and tax lists can be found at county

courthouses or at the State Archives in Raleigh. Many libraries maintain microfilm of the federal census records.

A teacher's creativity is the only limit to how these sources can be adapted for classroom use. Once documents have been selected, they usually should be carefully examined by the instructor. The teacher should not, however, feel compelled to understand every facet of a document; even trained historians often are puzzled by obscure references or archaic terminology. Instead, teachers should be prepared to *guide* students in finding answers and to help them understand that there is not necessarily a "right" way to interpret a document. Although many manuscripts are protected by copyright legislation, most repositories allow them to be photocopied, if doing so would not result in damage to the document. Additional copies for use by students could be laminated or placed in binders.

A variety of techniques for discussion and research have been successfully utilized. One educator prefers to compile sets of primary sources pertaining to such topics as "Women in the Profession of Teaching," "Immigration and Education, 1830-1900," and "The Freedmen's Bureau and the Development of Black Schools after the Civil War."<sup>1</sup> The set might include illustrations and articles culled from issues of *Harper's Weekly*, a teacher's examination certificate, and letters that discuss the topic. An archivist who works closely with teachers recommends selecting single items and developing lists of "questions to ask/points to consider." She points out that extended activities can be assigned to students who seek additional information related to the themes they discovered in the document.<sup>2</sup> One writer recommends that the teacher use the inquiry or discovery approach to facilitate an atmosphere of sharing in the classroom. A teacher using this technique might select a manuscript that, although appropriate as an illustration of a topic being studied, would not pertain to events widely discussed in textbooks. Rather than undertake extensive background research, the instructor would guide the pupils

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in asking appropriate questions and seeking answers for themselves at the school library or other institutions. Because the teacher would not know the answers to questions arising from study, the pupils would be more likely to learn research and interpretation skills.<sup>3</sup>

The current emphasis on the study of North Carolina history in the public schools provides a marvelous opportunity for teachers who wish to experiment with primary sources. Librarians and archivists who are responsible for manuscript and archival collections should work closely with teachers in choosing and copying items from

their holdings. The enthusiasm of students who are exposed to a new and fascinating way of viewing the past should make the extra effort worthwhile.

#### References

1. Joseph W. Congleton, Jr., Department of Education, East Carolina University, Greenville.
2. Kathleen Roe, *Teaching with Historical Records* (Albany: New York State Education Department, 1981).
3. Victor W. Shapiro, "The Castleman Letter: A Classroom Exercise in Critical Thinking," *Social Education* 45 (January 1981): 40-44.

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