

Hello. My name is Jessica Ellison, and I'm a teacher educator at the Minnesota Historical Society. I have also been working with the Inquiry in the Upper Midwest grant from the Library of Congress. And the basis of this grant is using primary sources. So, we're going to talk a little bit today about primary sources, and why we should use them in the classroom.

So first, what is a primary source? In general, it's a first-hand account from someone who was an eyewitness, or it's a record from a historical time period, which can mean a lot of different types of sources.

And so, why should we use these types of sources in social studies classrooms? They're an amazing insight to the past, to historical individuals, to events, different eras, and different ideas. They're a very particular snapshot at a time. They're really imperfect because they were created by humans. And so, they are full of old language that really show an emphasis of the past and what was important to people at that time. Which means they can also be sometimes difficult for students to unpack if the language is unfamiliar or the subject matter is unfamiliar. But ultimately, they can transform students' understanding of the past, and make it much more engaging and much more interesting as they learn about history and geography in social studies classrooms.

There's a lot of different types of primary sources. So, you're not just limited to one different type of source. For younger students, students who are just learning to read, or just learning about the past, using visual sources are really important. So, things like photographs or objects, maps, audio recordings like music and sound recordings, things like buildings, and then also advertisements. It's important for younger students that they are highly visual, that there's not as many words, and that they are something that students recognize. Certainly, advertisements are something that students see all the time.

Now for older students, you can use the same ones that are in the list for younger students. But then you can start add things like newspapers, diaries and journals, personal letters, government documents, propaganda, and political cartoons. For older students, we can include sources that have more text, that require students to access more prior knowledge, and start to introduce more complex ideas.

So, why should we use primary sources? Well, there's a couple of different reasons. They tell an incredible story. So for example, if you're teaching about Reconstruction and the reconstruction amendments after the Civil War, and you start talking about the Fifteenth Amendment which granted African American men the right to vote, you could certainly use the Fifteenth Amendment. But take a look at this political cartoon. The caption says: Of course he wants to vote the Democratic ticket. And it's from 1876. And it shows two white men holding pistols to the head of a black man. And then off in the distance in the doorway, you can see that there are two horses with men dragging along another black man. So, what does this say about what actually happened when the Fifteenth Amendment was passed? Did African Americans have the freedom to vote as they chose? In some cases, not, as this cartoon would show. But what was the reason then why white men, in particular white southerners, were limiting blacks' access to the vote? That question might lead you to another source to try to answer, what was the fear?

So, you could bring in this map. This is a map, it's called the Proportion of the Colored to the Aggregate Population. This is from 1890. All of the red show where the black Americans lived in 1890. So, when you're talking about why the Fifteenth Amendment wasn't necessarily effective, and why some white

southerners might have been afraid of blacks voting as they chose, it was because there was a huge population of African Americans living in the south. And so, these two sources paired together can really tell a fascinating, engaging story about the impact of the Fifteenth Amendment.

Another way that primary sources are really useful is that they can be used to connect to students. And any time that you can use sources that show children, children's lives, the way that they played, the way that they worked, will really relate to kids because they like to see other kids.

And so, this is an image from 1935 of an Arkansas family headed west. So this is during the Great Depression when a lot of families were moving from the Midwest and the middle part of the country to California, because of the Dust Bowl. And in this car, it's a family of seven children, the parents, and then the oldest child's spouse and child. And they are barefoot, and they're crowded into this vehicle, and it's really engaging for students to try to think about, what was life like for these kids, living in this truck, headed out west with all these other people? It gives a different perspective on the Great Depression.

And then, this map is really wonderful because it's very simple. And so, this is a map of California, showing the migrant camps in also the same year, 1935. And it's, I love it because it shows exactly what crops were being grown in different parts of California. So, you can look at this picture of the Arkansas family, and think, "Well, they're headed west. Is this what they're headed west for? And what was grown in these different places?" And you can talk about the geography of California, the agriculture of California, and why so many people were headed out that way.

And then primary sources can make the past real, in a really interesting way. And so, these two sources talk about Jamestown, and the first permanent English settlement in North America. And so the map is John Smith's (so *that* John Smith, the John Smith who knew Pocahontas) map of Virginia. And Jamestown is in the little red square. And it's a lovely map. It's a map showing a lot of trees, and water, and friendly people. This is a map that was drawn to say: Come to Virginia. It's lovely. You can come and start a whole new life here.

But then we look at the other source, which is a skull found in Jamestown. Now, there's been talk for many, many years that there may have been cannibalism at Jamestown during the starving time. But there was never any real proof until 2012, when archaeologists at Jamestown, Virginia, were digging in the garbage for artifacts and information, and they found this skull and a few other human bones, that showed evidence of cannibalism. So, if you can see at the very top of the skull, there's four lines, kind of straight lines. So, this was the first actual proof that there was in fact cannibalism happening at Jamestown around the same time that John Smith drew this beautiful map of Virginia. So, we've got two very different stories here about what people wanted to believe about Virginia, and what was actually happening.

And so, this example shows that the past is not just something that's two dimensional or black and white. It's complicated, and we continue to learn more all the time about the past. And primary sources are a great way to make that past and those changes in how we understand the narrative much more real for kids.

So, why do they need you? Why do they need you if they can just go online and they can find the images, they can find sources? They need to learn how to analyze these sources. They need to know what questions to ask, to pull these great stories.

So, here's an example. If I showed you this image, what kind of things would you observe? Two kids. Cute little seersucker outfit. One's holding a stuffed animal. Seems like there's a wall of some kind behind them. They look like sweet little pleasant kids. OK? But what if I gave you another piece of information? Lewis and Lola question mark. Titanic survivors. Now, how does this change how you look at this image? Do you have new questions? Do you have new observations about these two kids? Probably. And so it's up to you as the educator to show the students how to take this new information and begin to say: Oh. Well now, this is a new part of the narrative. So, the story on these two kids is that they were Titanic survivors. That they came over with their father, unbeknownst to their mother. So their mother was in Europe, did not know that her two sons had left the country with their father. The father drowned with the ship, and these two boys ended up in New York all by themselves. And it was kind of an amazing story, that their picture ended up on the front page of the newspaper, and they were eventually then reconnected with their mother in Europe. It's a really interesting story that comes with the addition of new information.

Again, there are sources that we see that students can look at and pull information from just by glancing at it. But how do they know what's behind the story of that source? And that's up to you again, as a teacher. So, this image is one that a lot of Americans will recognize. It's an image of the Boston Massacre. And it was engraved by Paul Revere. And you can see the words "The Boston Massacre" on the top. And you can see very clearly that it's an image of the evil British taking down all those poor unarmed colonists. And this image has been seared into our national understanding of what happened that day, in March of 1770. But is that really what happened? Or is this propaganda? And again, those are questions that your students need to learn to ask so they don't just take this source at face value. They say, "What was happening at the time, and who made this image, and why did they make this image? What was their purpose?" And that's what's really, really fun about using primary sources, is getting kids to look a little bit harder and a little bit deeper, and be critical consumers of that information.

The great news about primary sources is that students of all ages, from kindergarteners all the way up to seniors in high school, can examine primary sources. They can be accessible to students of all reading levels, starting with visual images like photographs, and then moving all the way up to government documents, can show students that they are capable of looking at the past through the eyes of people who lived at the time.

If you'd like any further resources about looking at primary sources, you can visit the Inquiry in the Upper Midwest grant website to get some information and links to sources. Or please visit the Library of Congress. They have an amazing collection of primary sources, and a great teacher web page to help direct you to some specific topics that you might be teaching in your class. Primary sources are for everybody. And I hope that you'll have an opportunity to use them in your class. Thank you.