

# Historian's Tools: Primary and Secondary Sources

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If you wanted to create an exhibit or a documentary on the Civil War battle of Bentonville, how would you do it? You might begin by reading your textbook or looking at an encyclopedia article. But you also might review photographs from the period or read the diary of a soldier who was there.

Historians must use a variety of tools when constructing a research project. These tools, known as *sources*, fall into two categories: *primary* and *secondary*. The historian must seek out different types of sources and piece information together in order to create the big picture. By doing this, he or she can draw conclusions about what happened in history and why it is important.

The researcher may start with *secondary* sources like the textbook or encyclopedia. Such sources were created by people who did not experience the historical event firsthand. Secondary sources can be very important because they can provide the researcher with valuable background information for understanding the topic. These sources also give the researcher access to different points of view about a subject. Secondary sources should not be neglected or overlooked.

But this issue of *Tar Heel Junior Historian* focuses on *primary* sources. A primary source is one created or in use during the time period being studied. Primary sources allow the researcher to draw his or her own conclusions about historical events. They help take us back in time to see how people lived and what they thought. These sources are sometimes called “pure” sources, because they remain unchanged by time or by another person’s interpretation. However, it is important to remember that a primary source is not perfect. Someone did create the source, and we must evaluate it—like any other source—for errors or a particular bias, or prejudice.

Primary sources come in many different forms. One easily identified type of primary source is a diary or journal. In studying North Carolina in the Civil War, researchers might read the “*Journal of a Secesh Lady*”: *The Diary of Catherine Ann Devereux Edmondston, 1860–1866* to discover one Halifax County woman’s firsthand views of the war and the hardships at home. Other documents that may be useful primary sources for studying history include newspapers and magazines from the era, maps created at the time, or letters written to or about people involved in the event. *The Papers of James Iredell* offers an example of a published documentary series that features letters to and from family members providing insight into life and thought in early America. (Iredell became the first North Carolinian to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court.)

Private citizens or institutions may possess unpublished letters from different eras. Government documents—such as wills, deeds, and legislative statutes—can be primary source materials. So,

too, could meeting notes and records from organizations and businesses. *Records of the Moravians* are published accounts describing life in the Moravian community over three centuries. Many organizations also house unpublished records that researchers might be able to access by visiting the facility.

Documents represent only one form of primary sources. Photographs can be excellent primary sources that capture moments of history. One of the most famous primary sources in the world is the photograph of Orville Wright’s first flight at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, on December 17, 1903. Before the invention of photography, people used paintings, drawings, and sketches to illustrate daily life and historic events. These depictions, too, could prove valuable as primary sources.

Museums and historic sites abound with *artifacts*, or human-made objects, that tell stories about how people lived and worked in the past. A person studying early American Indian heritage, for example, can visit the North Carolina Museum of History and see some of the actual tools that these Native peoples used in everyday life. Someone researching North Carolina in the American Revolution can travel to Historic Halifax State Historic Site to learn about the town where key events related to our state’s role in that war took place.



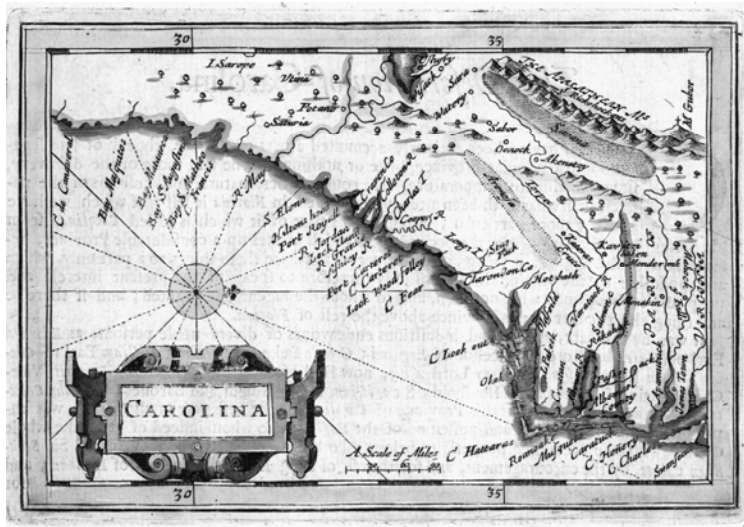
An artifact, or human-made object, is one example of a primary source that has stories to tell about history. This artifact is associated with a turning point in the Civil War. The Eighteenth Regiment North Carolina Troops was carrying this flag when it accidentally shot Confederate Lieutenant General Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson at Chancellorsville, Virginia on May 2, 1863. The next day during the Battle of Chancellorsville, Union soldiers captured the flag, which includes “battle honors” showing where the regiment fought. Severely wounded, Jackson died of pneumonia a week after being shot. *Image courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of History.*

Works of fiction, movies, and music can be primary sources, too. The novel *The Grapes of Wrath* represents a work of fiction, but author John Steinbeck traveled with people driven from their homes by drought and economic hardship to conduct his research. The book gives an excellent description of migrant life during the Great Depression. Movies, also, can function as primary sources. *The Birth of a Nation*, a silent film, equates to a study of white supremacy during and after Reconstruction. It was based on the novel *The Clansman*, written by North Carolinian Thomas Dixon. Students of World War I can find opposing viewpoints in the songs “I Didn’t Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier” and “Wake Up America.” Regional music, such as Appalachian folk songs, can help transport listeners to a different time and place. In listening to or viewing such sources, the researcher must determine how correct he or she believes them to

be, compared with knowledge gained from other sources.

Certainly, people who participated in or lived through historic events can be great primary sources. Students of World War II learn a lot by talking to veterans who served in the war or to people who contributed to the home front effort. Researchers interested in the Civil Rights movement can interview adults who participated in protests, as well as people who remember what it was like to attend segregated schools or eat in segregated restaurants.

But keep in mind that not every oral history interview falls under the category of primary sources. An expert on a subject may not be a primary source unless he or she actually experienced the event. For instance, a student may interview a professor noted as an expert on the Battle of Bentonville. The professor would be an excellent secondary source, but because he was not born until many years after the Civil War, he would not rank as a primary source. So, where can you find primary sources? They exist all around us. Libraries and archives—places where public records and historical documents are preserved—will hold many documents and photographs. Local historical societies, organizations, and businesses will keep primary records relating to their work. Universities can be excellent places to conduct research. Museums and historic sites can be, too. The people in our communities have also made history. They could have a great deal of information to share.



Maps can serve as primary sources for historians. What might you discover from this map, created in 1675 by John Speed? What precautions should you take when working with primary sources? *Image courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of History.*

And yes, the Internet also contains some excellent primary sources. Many universities and state historical organizations offer collections online, as do the National Archives and the Library of Congress. One useful online source, Documenting the American South, was created by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The State Archives has several online projects, including one titled “Treasures of the Archives,” which includes many digital images of valuable documents preserved there. But while the Internet can be a useful tool, researchers should remember that many other sources exist that are not posted online. Researchers also should be particularly careful when using secondary sources from the Internet. Be mindful that open-source sites like Wikipedia often contain errors. Knowing who created a site is important in judging its accuracy.

Take advantage of the interesting and varied sources available in places throughout the state. Primary sources can make learning historical facts exciting. By using such sources, researchers can solve the mysteries and puzzles of history.

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