



Big Idea 1

Learning from Primary Sources

Historians use a variety of materials to learn about the past. Some of the most important are primary sources.

What is a Primary Source?

Sources are materials from which historians and other researchers get information. A *primary* source is one that was created during the historical moment that the historian is studying. It can relate directly or indirectly to the historian's topic of research.

Why Study Primary Sources?

Primary sources are the evidence on which historians base their ideas. Careful analysis of them allows us to better understand the past.

What Kinds of Materials Can Primary Sources Be?

Primary sources can be any materials that are created within a historical moment, from hand-written documents to objects to works of art to electronic media like videos, music, social media posts, and more. A journal entry in a notebook, a newspaper article, a mug, a cereal box, a music video, a movie, a blog post, or a tweet — all can be primary sources depending on the information the researcher is looking for.

What Types of Primary Sources Does *Finding Freedom* Use?

Finding Freedom focuses on the stories of five **people of African descent** in the late-1700s: Andrew, Deborah, Eve, Jack, and London. Finding primary sources created by or about people of African descent during this period can be challenging, because so many people of African descent were considered first and foremost as property, and slavery meant that many did not have the chance to learn to write.

However, many primary sources do exist, they just require more digging and creative research to find them. The historians at the Museum of the American Revolution were able to use these records to better understand the lives of the five people highlighted in *Finding Freedom*.

First, there are documents that mention Andrew, Deborah, Eve, London, and Jack specifically by name. These materials include letters, a **runaway ad** in a newspaper, an estate inventory created to catalog someone's belongings after their death, court records, applications for a military **pension**, and more. You can find many of these primary sources both within the *Finding Freedom* interactive, or under the Primary Sources tab.

Second, there are objects that can help us to understand their lives generally, because those objects tell us about the experiences of soldiers, camp followers, farm laborers, enslaved people, and others who lived during the Revolutionary Era. For example, we know what kind of buttons London probably wore on his uniform because archaeologists have found buttons worn by Loyalist regiments at battlefield sites. Historic buildings that still stand, or remnants of architecture that archaeologists have studied, can also help us understand what life might have been like a long time ago. For example, exploring George Washington's Mount Vernon can allow us to envision — to some extent — what Deborah would have seen and done there, and the same with Eve at Colonial Williamsburg.

Third, there are works of art from the time period that give us a sense of what the lives of Andrew, Deborah, Eve, London, and Jack may have looked like. For example, paintings by British artists reveal what the British Army officers and soldiers that these individuals interacted with wore in America. Other sketches and paintings also suggest the types of clothing that enslaved people wore and the tools they used in their daily life.

In addition to using primary sources that have direct connections to Andrew, Deborah, Eve, Jack, and London, we also used primary sources that mention people like them and the experiences those people had. These sources gave us a much clearer picture of what their lives were like. We made informed assumptions based on those primary sources — as well as the research of other historians — to draw conclusions about these historical figures' lives. With access to these primary sources, and through your own research, we encourage you to tell us: did we get it right?

How Do You Analyze Primary Sources?

Historians and researchers try to understand primary sources by asking a series of questions as they examine them. Try asking these questions as you look at the primary sources in *Finding Freedom*, and note that while they use the word "document," you can ask these same questions of objects and works of art as well.

- Who created this document?
- When was this document created?
- Where was this document created?
- Why was this document created?
- Who was the intended audience for this document?
- Does this document contain facts, opinions, or a mixture of both?
- If facts, where did those facts come from?
- If opinions, what perspective is being shared?
- How was this document created? Is this the original document, a copy of the original document, a transcription of the original document, or even a translation of the original document?

These are the basic questions you can ask, but you can dig even further. For example:

- Is there anything unusual about this document? What, if anything, sets it apart from other, similar documents?
- Why does this document still exist today? How was it preserved?

- What was the **chain of custody** (also known as the “provenance”) for this document? Who held onto it between its creation and your access of it today?
- What other related documents may have been created at the same time?
- What questions does this document answer? Which questions does it leave unanswered?

Asking these questions help historians know if, how, and why a particular document — or object or work of art — may be useful to their research. They also help researchers to know the limitations of the materials they have as well as the types of materials they still need to gather.

Historians, archaeologists, librarians, and museum curators ask these same questions before they collect or display historical materials. Explore our Virtual Museum (<https://museumvirtualtour.org/>) or our Multimedia Timeline of the American Revolution (<https://www.amrevmuseum.org/timeline/>) to see examples of this, or try it with documents, objects, and works of art in your own home!

Perhaps most importantly, you can ask these questions when you examine documents, objects, and works of art today, and you can use many of these questions to analyze not just the material itself but the perspectives and opinions being shared with you in your daily life. Practice using them and you’ll be thinking — and reading — like a historian.