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An Introduction to U.S. History Research Online

The Internet has become the largest and most diverse repository of historical primary sources in the world. Millions of resources covering almost any subject of historical inquiry are readily available and can be used to examine the complexities of the past across time and space. You can explore European perspectives of the New World without leaving your computer by visiting the *Archive of Early American Images* [56] website and viewing fifteenth- and sixteenth-century maps of the Americas (Fig. 1). Or enter the Salem, Massachusetts, courtroom in 1692 via the *Salem Witch Trials: Documentary Archive and Transcription Project* [66] that provides full-text versions of the three-volume, verbatim witch trial transcripts, as well as a host of related narratives, pamphlets, and sermons. You can listen to President Roosevelt ask Congress to declare war on Japan on December 8, 1941, at the *Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Digital Archives* [195], a website offering 10,000 documents pertaining to Roosevelt's presidency,

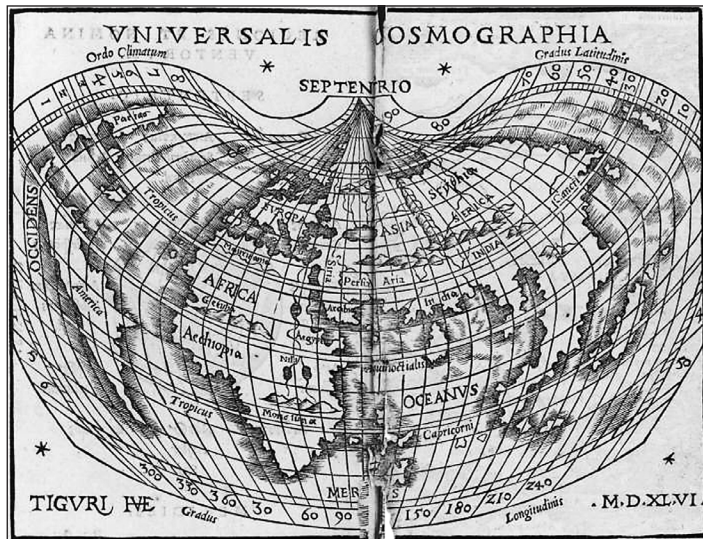


Fig. 1 Map, Spanish America, *Vniversalis cosmographia*, 1546 [56]. (The John Carter Brown Library at Brown University.)

including formerly classified correspondence, reports, and memoranda, as well as images and audio clips.

Perhaps your research topic centers on the lives of African Americans in the United States before and after the Civil War. You could visit websites on slavery, abolition, legal history, and popular culture, such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture* [106], *Historical New York Times Project—The Civil War Years, 1860–1866* [102], or the *Freedmen's Bureau Online* [101]. Or maybe you were asked to discuss how artifacts of women's lives from the first half of the twentieth century fit into larger themes in U.S. history. Materials from *Votes for Women: Selections from the National American Woman Suffrage Association Collection, 1848–1921* [137] could be used to investigate political activism and changing roles of women, as could resources from the *Margaret Sanger Papers Project* [164] (Fig. 2) or the *Emma Goldman Papers* [154]. You could examine photographs of Zora Neale Hurston at the *Florida State Archives Photographic Collection* [19] or view advertisements reflecting the rise of a highly gendered consumer market at *Ad*Access* [185].

We now experience the Internet as a vast, rich, and primarily free library. Not all websites are created equal, though, and the resources available online are, at best, uneven in quality. A *Yahoo*, <http://www.yahoo.com>, search on “U.S. history” returns more than 1.5 billion results, led by <http://www.SuperDeluxe.com>, a Turner Broadcasting System website of original comedy video clips with no relation to United States history, and <http://www.MyCreditSearch.info>. A *Google* search on “colonial American history” also yields more than 1.5 million results, including syllabi, textbooks, and hotels located close to historic sites such as Colonial Williamsburg. So how do you wade through this enormous and sometimes confusing online world to find reliable information and resources? How can you avoid advertisements or personal pages with questionable stan-

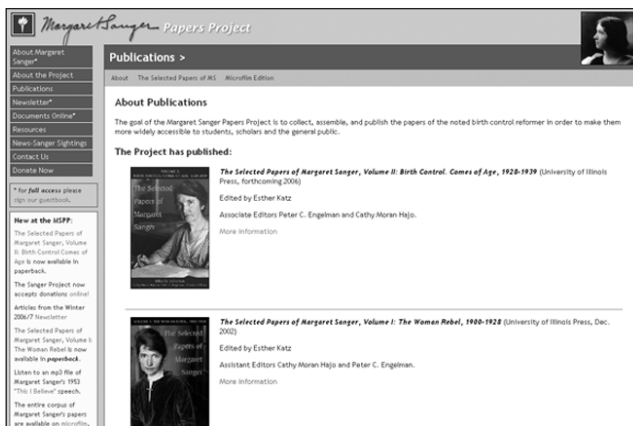


Fig. 2 Screenshot from *Margaret Sanger Papers Project* [164].
(Reprinted by permission of the *Margaret Sanger Papers*, New York University.)

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I was at home all Day now I have here I was not at Soap
was called at a little past 12 in noon by Mr Edson to go
to his wife being in travel he said to get 3 new ones for her
point was given by Edson & was lowly the being a sign
but could not get through giving protection
11
at 4 in noon Mr Edson was delivered of
13
a son which was 7 1/2 lb and at 6 in afternoon
of another son which was 8 3/4 lb left her at
about 10 in evening Ballard coming there at that time
Chib
Dren
two
sons
X
John Towns who last thing day was drunk
happend yesterday at 8 in the noon
on my return from Mr Edson's wife's (and
we in the morning being sick & starved with her -
this night left the child much better

Fig. 3 Page from Martha Ballard's diary, *Do History: Martha Ballard's Diary Online* [71]. (Diary entry, Martha Ballard, April 9-16, 1785. *Do History* (<http://dohistory.org>). Reprinted with permission from the Center for History and New Media, George Mason University.)

dards of historical analysis? Being web savvy does not automatically translate into critical use of online resources.

While the Web can offer valuable U.S. history material previously unavailable to most students, it can also be the purveyor of misinformation, poorly excerpted texts, or biased narratives. Online coverage of U.S. history crosses a broad range of regions, topics, and time periods, but is far from even or complete. For example, there are more websites covering topics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries than there are with materials in the pre-colonial era. This is due, in part, to access and availability of materials. Copyright legislation also plays a role. Materials created before 1923 fall into the public domain and can be digitized and shared; materials created later in the twentieth century are restricted. So materials from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are often more freely available than those in more recent decades. It is relatively easy to find online photographs, newspapers, and personal accounts for studying U.S. history; it is more challenging to find archaeology, music, or quantitative evidence. A wealth of websites address Native Americans, family life, popular culture, and military history, while fewer deal with Latinos, the environment, or the history of sexuality.

Numbers alone, however, do not tell the whole story. The key is finding quality materials that relate to your specific theme or topic. If you are researching women's history, you will find a wealth of resources within the subscription-based Alexander Street Press [2] website *North American Women's Letters and Diaries: Colonial to 1950*. This resource provides full-text letters and diaries from more than 1,000 women—totaling more than 21,000 documents and approximately 120,000 pages. If you are interested specifically in the medicinal practices of women in colonial America, however, *Do History: Martha Ballard's Diary Online* [71] presents the entire diary of eighteenth-century midwife Martha Ballard as handwritten pages and in transcription (Fig. 3), as well as a host of resources and tools for

understanding Ballard’s diary within the context of her world. Depending on the course and the project, a smaller website like this one may prove more valuable.

To help you find the best websites for your project, *History Matters* provides a roadmap for locating reliable sources quickly as well as a series of important questions to ask when you find them. Whatever your assignment or research topic, you are sure to find interesting and relevant resources awaiting further exploration.

Evaluating Websites

One of the greatest strengths of the Internet is its egalitarianism—anyone can post anything online. When it comes to historical research, this egalitarianism is both a strength and a weakness. On the positive side, it means that a rich, diverse pool of historical primary sources is widely available. On the negative side, far too many websites containing primary sources are of questionable quality. This situation places more responsibility on you, the user. There are several essential questions to ask when assessing a website’s reliability—questions you need to answer before you start to use the primary sources found within.

Who Created the Website?

There is some basic information you should look for when you first visit a history website, starting with the author. Who created the website? Who wrote, gathered, or posted the materials presented? Sometimes this is straightforward, as you can see in this screenshot of the American Memory Project (Library of Congress) collection, *The African-American Experience in Ohio, 1850–1920* [110] (Fig. 4).

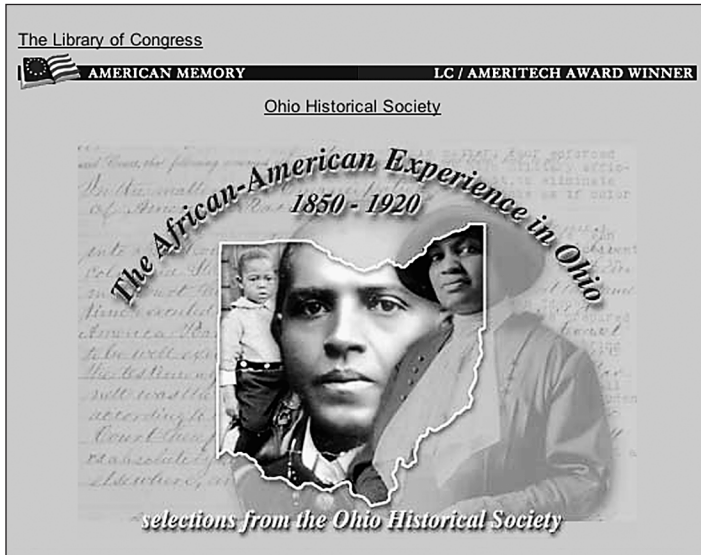


Fig. 4 Screenshot from *The African-American Experience in Ohio, 1850–1920* [110]. (Courtesy of the Ohio Historical Society.)

This website prominently displays its affiliation with the Library of Congress, as well as with the Ohio Historical Society, the organization that provided the materials for digitization. “American Memory” identifies the website as part of a rich body of digital primary source materials relating to the history and culture of the United States, including the papers of George Washington [76] and Abraham Lincoln [98], Civil War photographs [104], early motion pictures [140], and music and stories collected from many parts of the country [117, 120, 174, 203, 207].

Information concerning a website’s author or creator is particularly important when the website presents historical interpretation. A good researcher will try to determine the point of view of the author and then evaluate how that perspective might affect the interpretation of sources presented. For example, conservative and liberal scholars would likely view the presidencies of Richard Nixon or William Clinton differently, just as Israelis and Palestinians likely interpret the history of the Middle East from different perspectives. Point of view can also affect online collections of primary sources since someone strongly committed to one interpretation of the past might select primary sources that largely support that position.

A related question is, Who hosts or publishes the website? Sometimes an “About,” “Credits,” or “Background” page offers information on who created or sponsors a website and why. An email address or contact information may provide clues as well. Knowing the affiliation of a website’s author can help determine the reputability of a source. Is the author, webmaster, or main contact affiliated with a museum, library, or college?

If you do not find any useful information this way, you can try shortening the URL (Uniform Resource Locator). Start by removing the last characters of the URL, stopping before each forward slash (/), and pressing ENTER. If you receive an error page, remove another section of the URL. Sometimes this takes you to a larger subheading within a project. For example, material located at <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB103/index.htm> offers documentation of the efforts of President John F. Kennedy, shortly before his assassination, to establish a dialogue with Cuban President Fidel Castro. The materials are presented by the *National Security Archive*, a non-governmental institution that publishes declassified government materials. If you remove “index.htm,” you find yourself on the same page. Removing the next section of the URL leaves you with <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB>, a webpage that presents a list of all “Electronic Briefing Books” offered by the National Security Archive. Truncating once more to <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv> leads to the project’s homepage where you can click “About” to learn more about the website’s creator, host, and purpose.

The National Security Archive is an independent non-governmental research institute and library located at The George Washington University in Washington, D.C. The Archive collects and publishes declassified documents acquired through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).¹

¹Thomas S. Blanton, National Security Archive, http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nsa/the_archive.html (accessed December 18, 2007).

Not all URLs work this way. To present vast quantities of material, website creators increasingly use databases to organize their resources. This structure has many advantages, often making it easier to search the full text of documents and to access specific evidence, but it can result in URLs that are long and may not be permanent. In some cases, unwieldy URLs make it difficult to cite and share valuable resources. For example, this URL appears when you read *The Ballot and the Bullet*, a publication compiled by Carrie Chapman Catt in 1897 to challenge the claim that women should not be allowed to vote because they did not serve in the military:

[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/naw:@field+\(SOURCE+@band\(rbnawsa+n2415\)\):@@\\$REF\\$](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/naw:@field+(SOURCE+@band(rbnawsa+n2415)):@@REF)

The URL is complicated and would be difficult to retype. To share the resource or locate the book at a later date, you may need to reference the main webpage that offers this material, *Votes for Women: Selections from the National American Woman Suffrage Association Collection, 1848–1921* [137], <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/naw/nawshome.html>, and browse or search by title (*The Ballot and the Bullet*) or author (Carrie Chapman Catt) (Fig. 5).

In contrast, the *Avalon Project* [8], a collection of more than 600 full-text documents in law, history, economics, politics, diplomacy, and government, offers static webpages, pages not generated by a database, with permanent URLs. For example, you can read the *Mutual Defense Treaty Between the United States and the Republic of Korea* (1953) at <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/diplomacy/korea/kor001.htm>. This structure also offers advantages and disadvantages. It may mean that the full text of the documents is not searchable as it would be with a database. On the other hand, the URL in this case offers information about the creator as well as the location of the document within the project under the headings “Diplomacy” and “Korea.”

Shortening the URL to <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/diplomacy/korea> or to <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/diplomacy> does not reveal anything about the website’s creator, but shortening a bit further takes you to the main page of the *Avalon Project*, <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon>. Shorten again, and you find the Yale University School of Law, the website’s sponsor. If you remove “lawweb,” you reach the Yale University homepage.

Yale University and its School of Law are well-respected institutions that lend credibility to the *Avalon Project* and the material it provides. Not every URL that ends in “yale.edu,” however, is necessarily officially sanctioned by Yale University. Students and faculty often have access to URLs that include an institutional name. So <http://www.ucla.edu/~jones> might be the URL for someone named Jones who is affiliated with University of California at Los Angeles, but this does not equal an official university website. The *Alger Hiss Story* is a good example. The URL <http://homepages.nyu.edu/~th15> identifies New York University as the host server. If you truncate the URL to <http://homepages.nyu.edu>, though, you find the following, strongly worded disclaimer, “Welcome to the home of the personal pages of faculty, staff, and students of NYU. These pages do not in any way con-

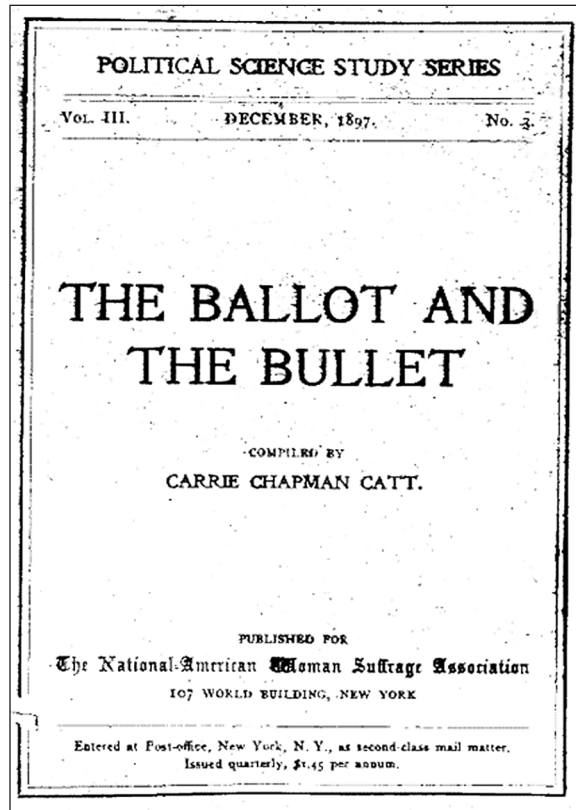


Fig. 5 Title page of *The Ballot and the Bullet*, December 1897, from *Votes for Women: Selections from the National American Woman Suffrage Association Collection, 1848–1921* [137]. (Library of Congress, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, National American Woman Suffrage Association Collection.)

stitute official New York University content. The views and opinions expressed in the pages are strictly those of the page authors, and comments on the contents of those pages should be directed to the page authors.”²

To identify personal pages hosted on large institutional servers, you can look for personal names, a tilde (~), or words such as “home,” “user,” or “people.” Commercial servers, such as *AOL*, *Yahoo*, and *Geocities*, also host many personal websites. On these servers, there are no definite rules regarding author and content quality. Some personal pages provide valuable historical resources, and at the same time, websites designed or hosted by large institutions sometimes offer flawed or incomplete information. A good researcher will approach all websites with skepticism and ask questions about why this material is available and who

²Homepages, New York University, <http://homepages.nyu.edu/> (accessed December 18, 2007).

funded and created the website. As a rule of thumb, though, websites created by museums, libraries, and colleges are created to present historical resources for educational purposes. Personal websites are often created to share an individual's passion for a certain topic and may or may not offer credible content.

Once upon a time in the history of the Internet it was possible to make some judgments about a website based upon its domain name. URLs issued in the United States that ended in *.com* signified commercial purposes, those ending in *.org* were intended for non-commercial purposes, and those ending in *.net* were intended for network providers. Today, however, any organization or individual can purchase a *.com*, *.net*, *.org*, *.biz*, *.tv*, or *.us* domain name, so these suffixes do not necessarily indicate who is responsible for a website. Outside the United States, domain names end with a two-letter code signifying the country where the website is based—or at least where the domain name was sold. Thus, an address ending in *.uk* is based in the United Kingdom and one ending in *.ch* is based in Switzerland. The exceptions to this free market in domain names are those based in the United States that are reserved for specific uses: *.edu* for educational institutions in the United States; *.mil* for the U.S. military; and *.gov* for the U.S. government. So, for instance, websites based at American colleges, universities, and schools all end in *.edu* and those at government institutions, such as the Department of State or National Archives, end in *.gov*.

Where Did the Sources on the Website Come From?

The next important question to ask is about the origin of the materials provided. The website *Geography of Slavery in Virginia* [75], created by the Virginia Center for Digital History and Thomas Costa at the University of Virginia College at Wise, offers transcriptions and images of more than 4,000 newspaper advertisements for runaway slaves and indentured servants between 1736 and 1803. The “About” page clearly states that this collection includes transcriptions and images of “all runaway and captured ads for slaves and servants placed in Virginia newspapers from 1736 to 1790,” providing key information on the scope of the collection and the kind of information available. In addition, the full source information is provided making further research possible. For example, if you are especially interested in the advertisement for a slave named “Lewis” who was rumored to have “enlisted as a soldier,” you could seek out the newspaper (*Virginia Gazette*) on microfilm for that particular day (July 12, 1780), and study the advertisement in its original context.

How Current Is the Website?

Information about when a website was created or updated can also be a valuable indicator of a website's reliability, although an archive of primary sources need not be updated frequently to remain useful. The website *Indian Affairs: Laws and Treaties* [29], created by the Oklahoma University Library between 1996 and 2000, offers the digitized contents of a seven-volume collection of treaties, laws, and executive orders relating to U.S.-Indian affairs. This website provides

a fixed set of historical materials so it does not need to be edited or updated on a regular basis.

Websites that provide links to online resources, however, do require regular updating. The Kingwood College Library, for example, hosts a website named *American Cultural History, 1960–1969*, <http://kclibrary.nhmccd.edu/decade60.html>. Created by reference librarians, the website offers links to other websites and primary sources related to major events, individuals, and cultural developments of the 1960s. Brief essays help contextualize specific trends in art, film, books, fashion, and music, but many of these links are no longer functional. A useful concept and once a valuable resource, in its present state this website is not the best place to find high-quality materials quickly.

Does the Website Present a Particular Perspective, Bias, or Agenda?

Content can also be revealing. What is the purpose of the website? Does it present facts or opinions? Does it have a particular bias or point of view? An openly biased website can still provide useful information, but it is most valuable when it clearly identifies its goals and distinguishes between fact and opinion. Is there a clear presentation or selection of materials? Is the website selling something?

There are more than one hundred websites sponsored by or affiliated with the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) that cover topics in U.S. history, from medicine in early America to Tupperware to Jimmy Carter's presidency. PBS is a trusted source for reliable information, but many of these websites are created to promote PBS videos and offer little of historical significance beyond a description of the videos, a timeline, and classroom discussion questions. The *American Experience: Hawaii's Last Queen* is a good example, offering only these basics plus a quiz and a bibliography.³

A small number of PBS websites, however, offer a wealth of primary sources and tools for historical analysis. *Africans in America* [1], <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia>, for example, created as a companion to the television series of the same name, traces the history of Africans in America from the fifteenth-century slave trade to the Civil War (Fig. 6). The website offers close to 300 primary documents, including images and maps. Knowing that an online resource is hosted or created by PBS lends credibility, but does not provide enough information about the depth and content of the website. Further investigation is needed to determine if the material offered is valuable for historical research.

Other questions include intended audience and purpose. The answers can provide insight into whether or not a website is appropriate for your project. The *Philip Morris Advertising Archive*, created by Philip Morris Incorporated, provides a good example. Created as part of the Master Settlement Agreement with the tobacco industry, this website offers more than 55,000 color images of

³PBS, *American Experience: Hawaii's Last Queen*, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/hawaii> (accessed December 20, 2007).

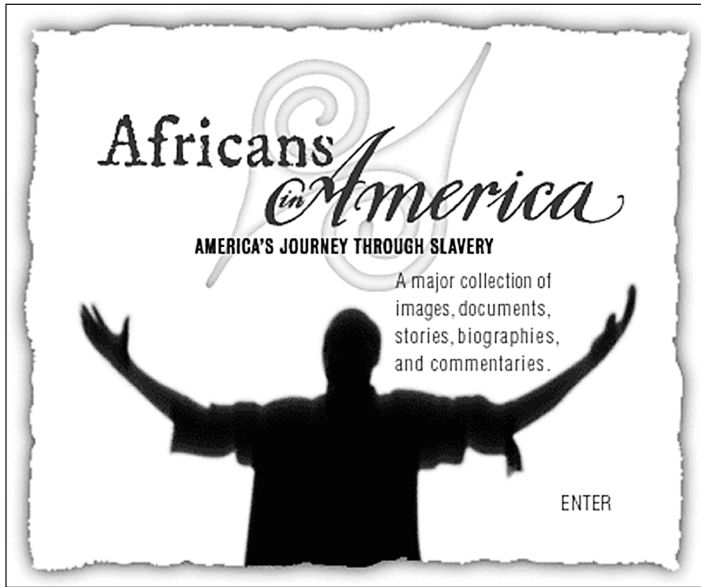


Fig. 6 Screenshot from *Africans in America* [1]. (From the WGBH Educational Foundation. Copyright © 1998 WGBH/Boston.)

tobacco advertisements, dating back to 1909. It is part of a larger online resource that offers more than 26 million pages of documents on the research, manufacturing, marketing, and sale of cigarettes from four tobacco companies and two industry organizations. The website presents an unparalleled amount of material for researching tobacco and cigarettes in American life, yet the search engine is confusing and materials are difficult to access. The settlement agreement mandated that companies make this information available, but did not require a user-friendly format.⁴

Who Else Considers This a Reliable Website?

Considering all of these factors will help provide a good sense of the quality of a website and the materials it presents. An additional way to assess the reliability of a website is to investigate its reputation. Which other websites and organizations find it valuable? Run a “link check” with *Google* by typing “link” and the complete URL into the *Google* search field as follows:

link:<http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/ftrials.htm>

This link check on *Famous Trials* [18], a project created by University of Missouri-Kansas City Law Professor Douglas Linder, returns 321 results. More than 300 websites link directly to this archive. Even more promising, many of these links come from library, teaching, and university websites, indicating that an academic

⁴Philip Morris Incorporated, *Philip Morris Advertising Archive*, <http://www.pmadarchive.com> (accessed December 18, 2007).

audience has favorably reviewed these materials. You can also look for reviews of a website in web or print publications that research and evaluate websites for educational use, such as the *Merlot Project*, <http://www.merlot.org>; the *Scout Report*, <http://scout.wisc.edu>; or the website *History Matters* [24].⁵

Web 2.0

Now that we have covered the main questions to ask as you evaluate historical resources online, we want to discuss two recent developments in digital history related to Web 2.0. Web 2.0 refers to a new generation of web applications, such as wikis and social-networking websites, that encourage collaboration and active participation among users. Web 2.0 developments impact history classrooms and historical research in many ways, and as with the Internet in general, are most valuable when we understand and assess their strengths and weaknesses.

The first development is the advent of websites based on *wiki* technologies. Wikis (the word comes from the Polynesian phrase *wiki-wiki* or *quick-quick*) are software platforms that allow anyone to add or edit content on the website at any time. The most heavily trafficked website with historical information is *Wikipedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org>, providing background information on close to two million English-language topics (Fig. 7). It is commonly used for historical background research by students, either with or without approval from their teachers. But it is important to remember that each entry in *Wikipedia* is the collective work of multiple authors. You can see the screen name or IP address of the various authors and editors for a given entry by looking at the history tab, a list of all versions of the entry and the changes made (Fig. 8). You may or may not be able to verify the identity or credentials of a given author with this information, however, making it difficult to validate the authority of the entry. How do you know if an author is sharing knowledge, repeating rumors, or purposely posting incorrect information?

Critics reject *Wikipedia* outright as inaccurate because its entries, unlike those in traditional encyclopedias, are the work of non-experts. Supporters argue that *Wikipedia* produces a collective wisdom that is, for the most part, accurate, and that having multiple authors increases the likelihood that someone will catch errors. Both sides raise valid points. Comparisons of entries in *Wikipedia* to those in more traditional encyclopedias like the *Encyclopedia Britannica* do turn up errors, but the errors appear in both the traditional print encyclopedias and *Wikipedia*. *Wikipedia* entries on popular topics—such as Charles Darwin or the Monroe Doctrine, for instance—are often just as accurate as those in conventional encyclopedias.⁶

⁵*Merlot Project* (Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and Online Teaching), <http://www.merlot.org>; Internet Scout Project, University of Wisconsin-Madison, *Scout Report*, <http://scout.wisc.edu>; CHNM and ASHP, *History Matters*, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/browse/wwwhistory/> (all accessed December 18, 2007).

⁶Roy Rosenzweig, “Can History Be Open Source? Wikipedia and the Future of the Past,” reprinted from *The Journal of American History* 93, no.1 (June 2006), <http://chnm.gmu.edu/resources/essays/d/42> (accessed July 13, 2007).

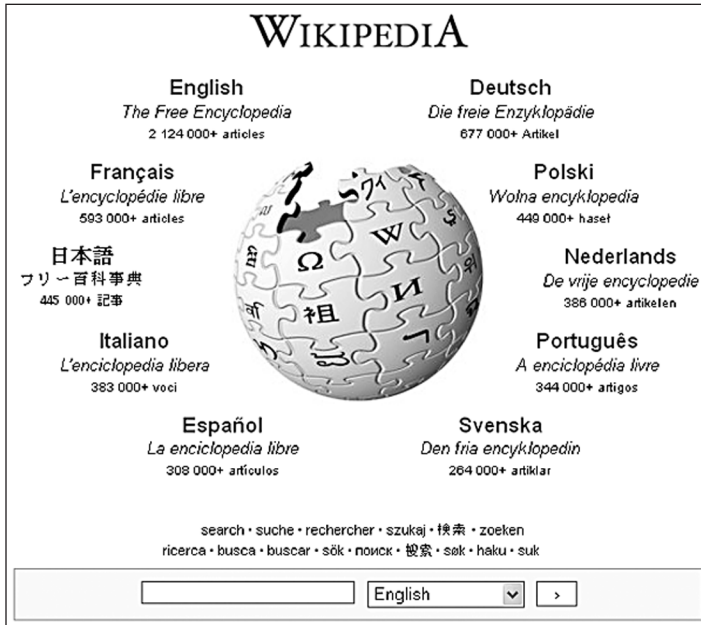


Fig. 7 Screenshot from Wikipedia. (Wikipedia.org)

To use *Wikipedia* wisely, there are two things to keep in mind. The first is that *Wikipedia* is a collectively authored *encyclopedia*. *Wikipedia* does not value original research; indeed, it prohibits it. Encyclopedias are useful for looking up facts, but they contain little or no interpretation of those facts. The second, given the ever-changing nature of *Wikipedia*, is that *when* you visit an entry matters. Five minutes after your visit, the information may be substantially altered and may even earn the *Wikipedia* warning, “The neutrality and factual accuracy of this article are disputed,” that is posted on entries for controversial topics. Re-

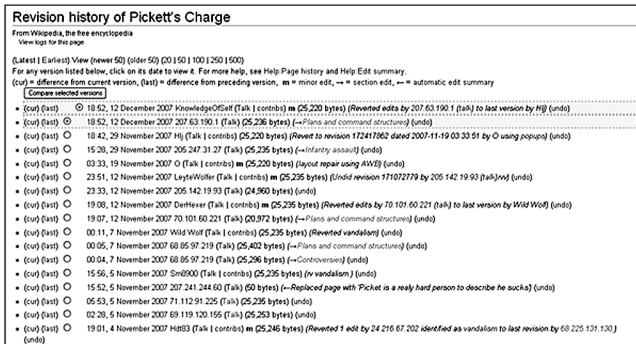


Fig. 8 Screenshot from Wikipedia. (Wikipedia.org)

cently disputed topics include the “Oklahoma land race” and the “American Mutoscope and Biograph Company.” To cite an entry from *Wikipedia*, include the date and time, available on the “History” tab, to identify which version you used.

A second Web 2.0 development is changing the way we do historical research online. Social networking databases such as the photo-sharing website *Flickr.com* or the video-sharing website *YouTube.com* include new historical content every day. Users of these websites with an interest in the past post historical images and films, such as World War II newsreels or photographs of memorial sites such as monuments or battlegrounds. One significant downside to using this kind of historical material is that it rarely includes any source information, making it difficult or impossible to locate originals or verify origin. On the other hand, these websites often contain material not commonly available. For instance, if you wanted to compare political graffiti across societies or over time, *Flickr.com* might be an excellent resource. Users around the world have made available more than 80,000 photographs of graffiti, including political and historical graffiti, that otherwise would be inaccessible without extensive travel, and are unlikely to be included in a traditional online archive (Fig. 9).

Most Web 2.0 sites allow users to interact with content and with each other by editing material directly (as in the case of *Wikipedia*) or by commenting on what they see, read, or watch. The commentary is unlikely to relate to your research, but on occasion, comments can help you make sense of an image or film clip or provide a personal experience connected with it. You may also find visitors to the website who share your interest or have expertise that could help you answer



Fig. 9 Political graffiti from *Flickr.com*. (“America Is Not the World,” courtesy of Spencer Eakin.)

a question. As with the sources themselves, though, proceed with caution and verify authenticity.

History students are taking part in these Web 2.0 developments every day and in the process are participating in the creation of historical content in new ways. Some instructors, for example, require their students to create and edit entries in *Wikipedia*, both because it teaches students about the pros and cons of this online encyclopedia and because it teaches them about the creation of historical information in a public forum. Other students create and edit *Wikipedia* entries on their own because they have an interest in the subject matter. In this way they are taking part in the creation of our common fund of historical knowledge.

Working with Online Primary and Secondary Sources

What is a primary source? What is a secondary source? Knowing the difference between the two categories of materials about the past is important. While both are valuable and useful, they provide different kinds of information and therefore are used, and useful, in different ways (see table below).

Primary Sources and Secondary Sources

Primary Source	Secondary Source
A photograph of Native American dancers in ceremonial dress taken in Alaska in 1895	Analysis of the photograph or the photographers in a history journal
A travel journal documenting eyewitness accounts of North American exploration	A book written by a leading historian in the twenty-first century about seventeenth-century travel writing
An official document such as the Peace Treaty of Versailles	A podcast of a college lecture about the end of World War I
A 1946 newspaper advertisement promising eight daily flights to Memphis, Tennessee	A website on the rise of advertising in the twentieth century or on transportation after World War II
A Work Projects Administration poster on getting tested for syphilis	A scholarly essay about public health in the 1930s
An audio recording of a New Mexican wedding song	Introductory material on a website about music sung by Spanish-speaking residents in New Mexico
An 1880s Sanborn insurance map of Salt Lake City, Utah	A scholarly review of websites presenting Sanborn maps
Data from the first U.S. Census	A study of how data categories have changed since the 1790 census
A child's toy from 1900	A textbook discussion of daily life and play in the United States

Primary sources are materials directly related to the past by time or participation—things created in the past by people living at the time. Historians build their analyses of people, places, and events from these pieces of the past. The category “primary source” includes photographs, prints, paintings, government documents, advertisements, religious symbols, musical recordings, speeches by politicians, films, letters (by ordinary as well as by famous people), newspaper articles, sermons, and material culture such as pottery, furniture, or tools. Primary sources provide the opportunity to engage directly with the past, to try to sort out what happened and why. Working with historical primary sources, however, is not easy. Evidence from the past represents individual experiences as well as social exchanges, and its meaning is rarely obvious at first glance.

Secondary sources are writings by historians and others who generally use primary sources to interpret the past. They provide analysis, interpretation, and summary, placing questions and evidence in a historical context and explaining their significance. Secondary sources invariably reflect the author’s point of view as the author shapes historical material, including primary and relevant secondary sources, into an interpretation of the past.

Primary sources are records of the past, the building blocks of history. They require you to be the historian, to investigate the past, interpret materials, and make sense out of the historical record. Primary sources are often incomplete, but they are invaluable because they offer an exciting opportunity to engage directly with the thoughts, ideas, and materials from a particular time period. They illustrate how complex the past can be, challenging you to grapple with uncertainties and to create your own historical arguments. They allow you to develop a convincing argument on historical questions such as whether or not the United States should have dropped an atomic bomb on Japan. Historians seek to do more than just express their opinions on such questions. They use documents, such as military records, newspaper articles, or diaries by Truman, his advisers, and Japanese leaders, some of which can be found at the *Truman Presidential Museum and Library* website [229] to build arguments about the past rooted in historical research.

The following example illustrates the differences between primary and secondary sources. Scholars who study the rise of consumer culture in the twentieth century have disagreed about the cause and effect relationship between advertising and consumer demand. Have advertisers shaped the desires and purchasing habits of consumers? Or have consumers controlled the market while advertisers struggled to follow popular trends?

Michael Schudson, a communications professor who specializes in American media and advertising, argues that advertising does not coerce consumers into buying products. He writes in his book entitled *Advertising, The Uneasy Persuasion* that “Advertising is much less powerful than advertisers and critics of advertising claim, and advertising agencies are stabbing in the dark much more than they are practicing precision microsurgery on the public consciousness.”⁷

⁷Michael Schudson, *Advertising, The Uneasy Persuasion: Its Dubious Impact on American Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), xiii.

In contrast, Susan Strasser, a history professor who writes about American consumer culture, opens her book *Satisfaction Guaranteed*, on the creation of an American mass market, with the story of Crisco, a new product introduced by Procter and Gamble in 1912. To exert greater influence in the cottonseed oil market, Procter and Gamble “attempted to design consumer demand to meet the needs of production and company growth.” They successfully “made Crisco in order to sell it.” Strasser argues that the company did not respond to consumer need or demand; they invented a product and through a host of new marketing strategies—grocery promotions, direct mail, free recipe books, recipe contests, and free samples—created a market.⁸

The authors of these two historical books, both secondary sources, present consumer culture and the role of advertising in American life in different ways. They provide examples based on primary sources and develop their analyses to support larger arguments about historical change and cause and effect, but they reach different conclusions. In the following quote from a U.S. history textbook (a different kind of secondary source), a description of the rising twentieth-century consumer culture provides a much broader overview and credits both advertising and consumers as active forces.

Mass production of a broad range of new products—automobiles, radios, refrigerators, electric irons, washing machines—produced a consumer goods revolution. In this new era of abundance, more people than ever conceived of the American dream in terms of the things they could acquire. . . . The advertising industry linked the possession of material goods to the fulfillment of every spiritual and emotional need. Americans increasingly defined their social status, and indeed their personal worth, in terms of material possessions.⁹

The textbook avoids controversy, stating both that the advertising industry “linked” possessions with needs while consumers “defined their social status” through consumer goods.

A primary source, such as an advertisement, in contrast, offers evidence about the past that you can use to build your argument. Although one primary source alone is not enough to help you answer larger questions about the relationship between consumer demand and market pressure, looking at a range of advertisements can be an excellent way to begin researching this question. Take, for example, this 1923 advertisement for Listerine mouthwash from *Good Housekeeping* magazine (Fig. 10). The text reads, “What secret is your mirror holding back? She was a beautiful girl and talented, too. . . . Yet in the one pursuit that stands foremost in the mind of every girl and woman—marriage—she was a failure.”

This advertisement shows how advertisers attempted to influence consumption and exemplifies several common marketing strategies, such as relying on

⁸Susan Strasser, *Satisfaction Guaranteed: The Making of the American Mass Market* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), 3–28.

⁹James L. Roark et al., *The American Promise*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2005), 836–38.



What secret is your mirror holding back?

NIGHT after night she would peer questioningly into her mirror, vainly seeking the reason. She was a beautiful girl and talented, too. She had the advantages of education and better clothes than most girls in her set. She possessed that culture and poise that travel brings.

Yet in the one pursuit that stands foremost in the mind of every girl and woman—marriage—she was a failure.

Many men came and went in her life. She was often a bridesmaid but never a bride. And the secret her mirror held back concerned a thing she least suspected—a thing people simply will not tell you to your face.

That's the insidious thing about halitosis (unpleasant breath). You, yourself, rarely know when you have it. And even your closest friends won't tell you.

Sometimes, of course, halitosis comes from some decepticated organic disorder that requires professional advice. But usually—and fortunately—halitosis is only a local condition that yields to the regular use of Listerine as a mouth wash and gargle.

It is an interesting thing that this well-known antiseptic that has been in use for years for surgical dressings, possesses these peculiar properties as a breath deodorant. It hals food fermentation in the mouth and leaves the breath sweet, fresh and clean. So the systematic use of Listerine puts you on the safe and polite side. You know your breath is right. Fastidious people everywhere are making it a regular part of their daily routine.

Your druggist will supply you with Listerine. He will also tell you it has been used different times in a wide variety of cases and has been found to be safe for both a century. Read the interesting little book that comes with every bottle—*and Listerine* Pharmaceutical Company, Saint Louis, U. S. A.

★

For HALITCSIS use LISTERINE



Fig. 10 Advertisement, Listerine, 1923.
(Listerine® is a registered trademark of Johnson & Johnson. Used with permission.)

guilt and feelings of inadequacy to influence purchases. According to the ad, this young woman's failures reflected her poor consumer choices (not using Listerine), which the advertisement directly connects to lack of hygiene. Only the use of Listerine, in this scenario, would ensure proper hygiene and, by further extension, social success. The advertisement also highlights the cultural norm that success for women equaled marriage; the advertisement connects being single with failure and further decrees that this is the "fault" of the young woman. Depending on your research question, the next step might be to examine Listerine ads in other publications or from the following year or to compare them with advertisements for other products in the same magazine.¹⁰

¹⁰*Good Housekeeping* (July 1923), 175.

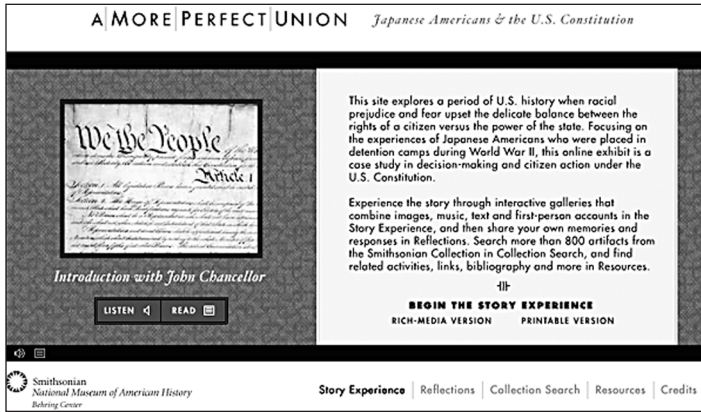


Fig. 11 Screenshot from *A More Perfect Union: Japanese Americans and the U.S. Constitution*. (Military History, Smithsonian Institution.)

The Internet offers a wealth of both primary and secondary sources for understanding the past. The most important thing to keep in mind when using these resources is which kind of source you are examining. Many websites offer either primary materials or secondary interpretations; other websites offer both. For example, the more than 150 websites in the Library of Congress's *American Memory Project* [4] are online archives of primary sources. They include limited contextual material, such as background or interpretive essays, because their central purpose is to offer free access to more than eight million primary sources that can help scholars and students engage with the past and develop their own historical interpretations.

By contrast, online exhibits organized by history teachers, museums, or historical societies often put more emphasis on secondary analysis; they have a particular story to tell and they organize relevant primary sources to tell it. For example, the Smithsonian Institution National Museum of American History website *A More Perfect Union* (Fig. 11) provides an overall narrative of the forced internment of 120,000 Japanese Americans living on the West Coast during World War II. Yet unlike most books on the internment, the exhibit also presents primary sources, including music, personal accounts, artifacts, and images. This website provides a secondary narrative as well as primary sources.¹¹

As with textbooks and history books, websites presenting secondary sources, such as explanatory essays or guides, have a point of view. They select certain sources or evidence to address a theme or argue a point. When the point of view is not strongly expressed or reflects widely held views, this bias may not be obvious. Another Smithsonian website, *George Washington: A National Treasure*, presents the first president favorably—a view that most Americans share. But

¹¹National Museum of American History, “A More Perfect Union,” <http://americanhistory.si.edu/perfectunion/experience> (accessed December 18, 2007).

one reviewer of the website writes that it views Washington in an uncritical manner that is more befitting a monarch than a president.¹²

In other cases, the interpretation presented on a website is more controversial, such as *The Alger Hiss Story: Search for the Truth*, created by author and journalist Jeff Kisseloff. In the 1930s, Whittaker Chambers, a former Communist, accused Alger Hiss, a former State Department official, of providing the Soviet Union with secret documents. Hiss was convicted of perjury and sentenced to five years in prison in a highly publicized case that fueled McCarthyism and spread fear of communism. Hiss's guilt is still debated by historians today. Kisseloff, however, clearly states his belief in Hiss's innocence as well as his goal of creating the website to present the "full facts" of Hiss's life. The secondary source material, in the form of essays, provides layers of analysis supplemented by brief trial excerpts, newspaper clippings, and news footage. This website offers an interesting introduction to the case, but not all historians share Kisseloff's viewpoint and additional research would be required to analyze Alger Hiss in historical perspective.¹³

Some websites present highly controversial viewpoints that are shared by few, if any, serious historians. For example, one can find websites created by those who deny that the Holocaust occurred—a position that no credible historian would embrace. The websites listed in this volume provide a reliable starting point for locating history on the Web.

In most cases, the distinction between primary and secondary sources is clear. In some situations, though, the lines are blurred. A textbook is generally considered a secondary source. In the twenty-first century, however, we might use a textbook from 1960 as a primary source to research what students learned about the Cold War or to what degree history textbooks discussed women's roles in historic events in past decades. Oral history presents another complicated case. Oral histories are usually collected years and even decades after the events being discussed. They are a history of the past and a record of how that past has been remembered as well as a document on how the subject reflects on that past. *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1938* [99], for example, presents oral histories with former slaves collected in the 1930s. The individuals interviewed were between one and fifty years old when slavery ended in 1865; most were more than eighty years old at the time of the interviews. It is important to keep the collection process, elapsed time, and role of memory in mind while analyzing these valuable resources.

When working with primary and secondary sources, it is important to understand that history is not a simple, fixed narrative. Historians debate, discuss, and even disagree about the meaning of various sources and interpretations of the

¹²Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, "George Washington, A National Treasure," <http://www.georgewashington.si.edu/portrait> (accessed December 18, 2007); David Steinberg, "Website Review: George Washington: A National Treasure," *History Matters*, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6500/> (accessed December 18, 2007).

¹³Jeff Kisseloff, "The Alger Hiss Story: Search for the Truth," <http://homepages.nyu.edu/~th15> (accessed December 18, 2007).

past. Many factors shape historical events and historians also look at how things might have happened given different circumstances or when seen through another pair of eyes. For example, our understanding of history changes when we look at the experiences of political leaders versus the daily lives of those who were not known nationally or internationally. Looking at multiple perspectives can provide a more complex understanding of the past. In addition, learning to understand the past, to connect it to a larger story, is key. Equally important is the skill of investigating the past carefully and with an open mind, allowing yourself to see things that may not fit with the larger narrative you have learned.

Here are several important steps historians take when analyzing a primary source:

Sourcing: Start by asking who created the source and what you know about that person or group of people. When and where did it appear? What happened to it after its first appearance? What can we learn about an author's motives, intentions, or point of view? Is the creator in a position to be a good reporter? Why or why not? How did the source survive? Why is it available in the twenty-first century?

Close Reading: Carefully read the source. For a written document, consider the kind of source, tone, and word choice. Pay attention to parts of speech — what kinds of nouns or adjectives are used? Does this remain consistent throughout the document or does it change? How formal or informal is the language? Is the account believable? Is it internally consistent or are there contradictions? For an image, look at each section separately and then look at the whole. Listen to a song or watch a video multiple times. What does the source say or look like or sound like? What might it mean? What does each section mean? How do the sections work together? What questions come up as you carefully analyze the source itself?

Contextualization: Consider the larger historical picture and situate the source within a framework of events and perspectives, paying close attention to *when* they happened and *where* they took place. When was the source created? What else was happening at this time that may have influenced the creator? Where was this source created? How might location have influenced its creation? How might an intended or unintended audience have shaped the source?

Corroboration: Whenever possible, check important details against each other. Evaluate multiple sources in relationship to one another, and look for similarities as well as contradictions. Look at key content and stylistic differences. Where do the sources agree with one another? Where do they disagree? What viewpoint does each source reflect? Which sources seem more reliable or trustworthy? Why?

As you can see, analyzing primary sources requires careful attention to details, language, and historical context. Reading a letter from the eighteenth century is very different from reading a nineteenth-century diary or a twenty-first-century cell phone text message. Analyzing early films requires different skills than in-

terpreting a map. Using new kinds of primary sources to understand the past can be challenging. The website *History Matters* [24] contains a number of guides to “making sense” of different kinds of evidence. In these guides, such as *Making Sense of Maps* or *Making Sense of Films*, and a series of interviews, such as *Analyzing Blues Songs* or *Analyzing Abolitionist Speeches*, scholars suggest questions to ask when working with various kinds of primary sources, from political cartoons to quantitative data.¹⁴

According to oral historian and scholar Linda Shopes, for example, asking questions such as “Who is talking?” and “Who is the interviewer?” is crucial when reading an oral history interview. The answers provide insight into the circumstances that created the interview as well as the recorded words. Interviewers shape the dynamic of an interview, asking certain questions and responding differently to various kinds of information. The individual being interviewed assesses the interviewer, deciding what he or she can say and what is best left unsaid. For example, a grandparent being interviewed by a grandchild for a family history project may suppress unpleasant memories to protect the child or preserve family myths.¹⁵

When studying American popular song, historian Ronald G. Walters and musicologist John Spitzer write that there are important issues to investigate in addition to asking who wrote and performed a song. What did the song mean when it was created? Did it mean different things to different audiences? What does it mean now? What can songs tell us about people and society? Musicians and their audiences are social actors. While they reflect the world around them, they also interpret and change it. For every anti-Vietnam War song such as the “I-Feel-Like-I’m-Fixin’-To-Die Rag” (1967), there were pro-war (or anti-anti-war) songs such as the “Ballad of the Green Berets” (1966). In cases such as these, songs are most valuable for telling us what concerned people, how they interpreted various issues, and how they expressed hopes, ideals, and emotions.¹⁶

An early nineteenth-century inventory of a house and a documentary photograph that came to symbolize the Great Depression in the 1930s demonstrate what can be learned by asking specific questions about resources. In an interview available on the website *History Matters*, historian and museum curator Barbara Clark Smith analyzes an inventory that lists the belongings, including slaves, of a man named Thomas Springer. After Springer’s death in 1804, the court in New Castle County, Delaware, appointed appraisers to assess and record the value of his belongings (Fig. 12). Smith shows how the document offers valuable information about the daily life, values, and household goods in this time period, offering insight into the life of someone who was not famous and left few historical artifacts. What did this man own? What can his possessions tell us

¹⁴*Making Sense of Evidence* guides (*Making Sense of Documents*) and interviews (*Scholars in Action*), <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/browse/makesense>.

¹⁵See Linda Shopes, *Making Sense of Oral History*, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral>.

¹⁶See Ronald G. Walters and John Spitzer, *Making Sense of American Popular Song*, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/songs>.

4 pr. Hams, 3 collars, 3 blin d and 16, 10 pins, 1 pair of shoes, 1 pair of boots, 1 pair of shoes, 2 holes and chains	2, 50
bury bank, sheep skins &c	" 3 1/2
1 old white horse \$10, 1 old soul a° \$10	20, 00
1 old black mare \$6, 1 deer or nearly blind \$20	26, 00
1 gray man and 2 cotts	120, 00
1 chair and Hames \$60, 1 Dutch fan and widdle \$16	76, 00
1 Rich clover Hay \$20, 1 stalk a° \$25	55, 00
1 stalk clover a° \$29, 1 clover and Timothy \$24	43, 00
1 a° coarse mash a° \$3, 1 small a° clover a° \$8	16, 00
5 a° stubble a° \$20, 1/2 quantity oat straw \$10	30, 00
1 quantity clover Hay in the Barn	32, 00
1 quantity wheat straw a°	60, 00
9 1/4 Bushels wheat @ \$1, 50 pr. 13 1/2 bushels @ 1, 00	147, 37 1/2
3 1/2 bushels Ditto oats @ 1, 40 pr. a°	156, 25
Rye in the ground, say 10 but sowing	20, 00
2 1/2 Bushels Corn @ 47 Cts	117, 50
3 1/2 bushels Ditto Potatoes @ 25 Cts	20, 62 1/2
9 Bushels of corn @ \$2, 50 pr. Bushel is	22, 50
9 Bushels of apples @ 50 Cts pr. Bushel	4, 50
1 plough \$3, and red cow \$16	19, 00
one negro man, named Ace, 9 years to serve, valued at	180, 00
one old negro man, a slave 66 years old, named Will	00, 00
20 Gallons whiskey @ 50 Cts	10, 00
1 Chair whip	2, 00
1 quantity empty Barrel	4, 00
Amounting to sixteen hundred and ten Dollars 17 1/2	1610, 17 1/2

Joseph Ball
John Hall Judge

Fig. 12 An inventory of the belongings of Thomas Springer after his death in 1804. The value of Springer's possessions informs research into the economic and cultural conditions of his time. Of particular interest are "one negro man, named Ace[?]: 9 years to serve, valued at 180.00" and "one old negro man, a slave 66 years old, named Will . . . 00.00." What can we learn from this information? (Courtesy of Delaware Public Archives.)

about his life? What can we learn about the lives of others in his household, such as his wife and two African American men?¹⁷

This inventory begins with the clothing of the deceased, including coats, shirts, trousers, and boots. The dollar amount assigned to various items provides a sense of what they might have cost. Clothing was valuable, worth \$30 in 1804. This was more valuable than the "feather Bed, Bedding and Bedstead"

¹⁷See Barbara Clark Smith, *Analyzing an 1804 Inventory*, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/sia/inventory.htm>.

valued at \$26. The inventory also reveals some family behavior and patterns. The teacups and tea table suggest participation in the ceremony of tea. “Two spinning wheels” hints at the work done by women in the Springer household.

Perhaps more surprising is that people are listed among the artifacts, including two “negro” men. This reveals several important things about the period and the status of slaves. In some respects, this was common practice—these men are listed as possessions alongside clocks and trousers. But it is also interesting to note that only one is listed as a slave. In Delaware in 1804, slavery was ending, primarily because it was not as profitable in the North as it was in the South. The “negro man named Ace” had “nine years to serve.” This suggests that Ace may have negotiated his freedom for a certain number of years of service, an indenture to the Springers, which some African Americans did after the American Revolution. At the end of the set period, Ace would have received his freedom and possibly a small amount of money. “Will,” however, is described as a slave and no monetary value is placed on him, probably because of his age.

With strategies for analyzing the inventory, we can learn about daily life, economics, social relationships, and work from this one document. The inventory can be even more valuable when compared with similar lists from Springer’s town or county and with those from neighboring areas. Examining inventories over a period of ten years would reveal what different people owned, which items were typical, and which things were extraordinary. With a large enough pool of inventories, you could start to count the items involved and utilize quantitative analysis to study trends.

Reading an inventory may seem relatively straightforward, but there are often vast amounts of information hiding beneath the surface. It can also appear easy to look at a photograph and mistakenly think of it as a reproduction of reality, a historical mirror. Historian James Curtis discusses how visual evidence requires different tools of analysis in his guide, *Making Sense of Documentary Photography*. Scholars ask who wrote a letter or autobiography and why, but it is equally important to ask who took a photograph. Why was it taken? Who sponsored it? What was the photographer’s goal or intent in taking the image? How was the photograph taken and how was it presented to the public? There are important stories hidden within images that can teach us many things about the past.¹⁸

Documentary photography emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century and was initially considered journalism rather than art. Documentary photographers were seen as event recorders and they often encouraged this misconception, presenting themselves as fact gatherers and denying political or social motives. It is impossible, though, even with a goal of recording events, to avoid shaping a picture. Photographers make many decisions as they create an image regarding subject, angle, framing, what to include, and equally important, what to exclude. Printing, selecting, editing, and presentation shape the final

¹⁸See James Curtis, *Making Sense of Documentary Photography*, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/Photos>.



Fig. 13 *Rebel Sharpshooter in Devil's Den*, photograph. (Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, reproduction number LC-B8171-7942 DLC.)

product and all of these decisions are influenced by the photographer's goals, as well as mechanical limitations.

During the Civil War, as Curtis writes, bulky equipment and long exposure times meant that photographers could not capture combatants in action. Instead, they took pictures of battlefield remains, sometimes rearranging scenes for dramatic effect. After the bloody battle of Gettysburg in 1863, photographer Alexander Gardner had a dead soldier moved across a field and placed in a rocky corner. The resulting photograph, *Rebel Sharpshooter in Devil's Den*, remains a powerful image of the Civil War despite knowledge of the photographer's intervention (Fig. 13).¹⁹

Manipulation of subjects remains an important tool for documentary photographers. This becomes apparent when looking at companion photographs. Documentary photographers often take a series of pictures to ensure backup images. The process also provides the opportunity to later select an image that best relates their sense of the scene or reflects the meaning they want to present. Photographers working for the Farm Security Administration (FSA) during the Great Depression were required to submit all of their negatives from an assignment, creating an amazing record of companion photographs that detail the steps involved in obtaining a desired image. A collection of these photographs is

¹⁹American Memory Project, Library of Congress, *Rebel Sharpshooter in Devil's Den* (or *The Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter, Gettysburg*), <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/cwphtml/cwphome.html> (accessed October 15, 2003).

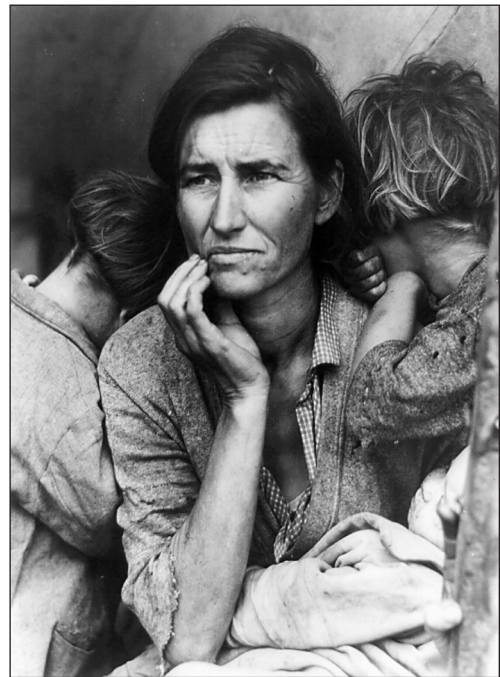
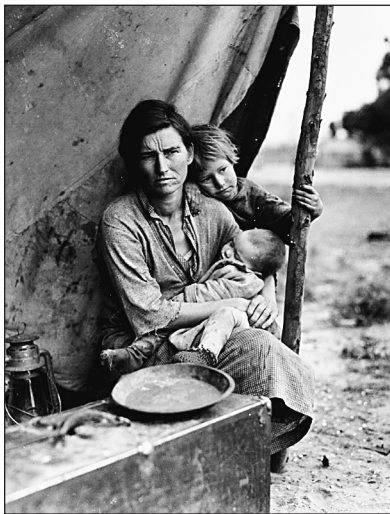
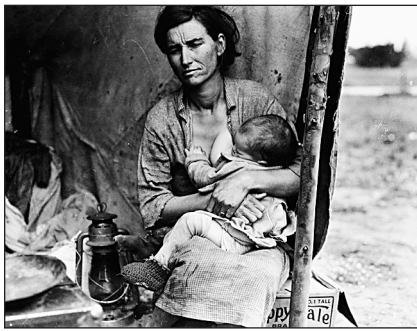
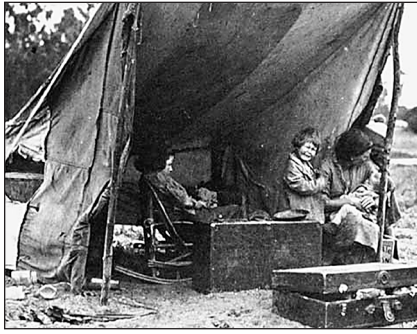


Fig. 14 Dorothea Lange's photo series; *Migrant Mother*, bottom right. (Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, 1936.)

available at the Library of Congress website *America from the Great Depression to World War II: Photographs from the FSA-OWI, 1935–1945* [187].²⁰

One of the most enduring images of the Depression, known as *Migrant Mother*, depicts a woman and her children in a California migrant labor camp (Fig. 14). This is the last in a series of six photographs that FSA photographer Dorothea Lange took on a rainy afternoon in March 1936. The composition of this image, however, was not accidental. Lange crafted the photograph carefully, changing perspective and camera angles, excluding details and people, and rear-ranging poses.

These images demonstrate Lange's control of the scene and the action of her subjects. In her initial frame, Lange showed thirty-four-year-old Florence Thompson and four of her children. In the second frame, the oldest of the four is outside the tent. Thompson had seven children, but Lange knew this would not elicit sympathy from her middle-class audience and concentrated on the youngest ones. The trunk and empty pie tin in the foreground of the fifth photograph attest to the family's itinerancy and struggle for survival, but they do not appear in the final frame. For the sixth photograph, Lange posed the two young girls with their heads resting on their mother's shoulders. She turned their faces away from the camera and brought Thompson's right hand to her face, a strategy for framing the face and drawing attention to the subject's feelings. This final picture was as Lange had envisioned and quickly became a symbol for the suffering occasioned by the Great Depression coupled with the strength of human dignity. The companion images, though, show that this was not a simple document or a reflection of reality. The image and its message were shaped by Lange, her purpose, her sponsor, and her audience.²¹

Learning various strategies to analyze historical evidence creates new opportunities and introduces new questions. When you think carefully about the kinds of materials you are using and what they tell you that other resources cannot, your research question will become more refined and you may be led to unexpected conclusions. Start by asking general questions, move to specific questions relevant for that source, and then explore how the primary source fits into a larger context.

Search Tips and Further Resources

Using Search Engines Effectively

Browsing is very helpful when you are starting a project and do not have a specific resource or topic in mind. A well-designed website allows you to wander around large thematic or chronological sections, to see connections and groupings. When you do know what you want, however, a keyword search is sometimes

²⁰American Memory Project, Library of Congress, *America from the Great Depression to World War II: Photographs from the FSA-OWI, 1935–1945*, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/fsowhome.html>.

²¹For more on the *Migrant Mother* photograph, see *What Can Companion Images Tell Us* at <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/photos/question4.html>.

the best path. *Google*, the most commonly used search engine, can be a powerful tool, especially once you understand how it works and how to use it wisely.

The first wave of search engines, such as *AltaVista*, *HotBot*, and *Excite*, were not very successful at discriminating between high-quality and low-quality websites. A poorly written website that mentioned the Holocaust fifty times might be mechanically ranked more “relevant” than an authoritative website from the *U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum* [206] that mentioned the word only a dozen times on its homepage. In the late 1990s, *Google* revolutionized the way search engines work, presenting a smarter search engine.

Google looks at the presence of keywords in the title and URL rather than searching meta tags, the hidden tags written by a website author to describe the contents of a webpage. The more significant development, however, builds on a unique element of the Web itself—the ability to link to other websites. *Google* founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin found a way to use the popularity of certain websites to promote their rankings. A website on the Holocaust with twenty links to it from other websites was probably better than a site with one or two links to it. If in turn some of those other websites were “authoritative” (*i.e.*, they also had lots of links to them), so much the better for the first website’s ranking. In short, *Google* found a way to measure reputation on the Web through a recursive analysis of the interconnectedness of the medium itself.²²

Here are some useful tips for using a search engine:

Use Quotation Marks Using quotation marks makes your search more specific by identifying multiple search terms as a specific phrase. If you enter the words *U.S. history* without quotes, *Google* returns more than 130 million results. If you put the search term in quotes (“U.S. history”) you narrow it to six million. Entering the specific topic, time period, or region you are interested in exploring, such as “U.S. history” “scopes trial,” will narrow it still further.

Use Advanced Search The easiest way to expedite your search and quickly move from millions of returns to hundreds or even dozens, is to use the *Advanced Search* feature. You can click on “Advanced Search” from *Google*’s main search page or go directly to http://www.google.com/advanced_search. This allows you to narrow your search to specific languages, include or exclude words or phrases, restrict domain names, or define the location of occurrences (*e.g.*, the phrase occurs anywhere on the page, only in the title, or only in the text of a webpage).

Enter Multiple Terms If you are interested in the role played by American troops in the Boxer Rebellion, “boxer rebellion American troops” will help you avoid websites on the boxer Muhammad Ali. The first website returned by the *Google* search engine in this search is the *Wikipedia* page on the Boxer Rebellion. The second website is from the National Archives and offers an article

²²Daniel J. Cohen and Roy Rosenzweig, “Building an Audience: Mass Marketing, Online and Off,” *Digital History: A Guide to Gathering, Preserving, and Presenting the Past on the Web*, University of Pennsylvania Press, <http://chnm.gmu.edu/digitalhistory/audience/2.php> (accessed July 16, 2007).

(secondary source) on the involvement of American troops in the rebellion. The third choice is from the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), and includes the transcript of an interview with noted American diplomatic historian Walter LaFeber. The fourth is from *About.com*, which simply republishes the content from *Wikipedia*. It is not until you get to the ninth choice in the *Google* search that you finally have access to primary sources, in this case drawn from a U.S. Navy collection.

Tell Google Where to Find It If you know that you saw a handwritten Jewish calendar from 1844 on the website *Jews in America: Our Story* [31], but do not remember exactly where on the website you found it, you can type your keyword and the URL “calendar 1844 site: www.jewsinamerica.org” into a *Google* search. This will take you to a searchable image gallery list where you can quickly find the calendar. If you remember that the title of a website you visited included the words “historic,” “building,” and “survey” you can type “intitle:historic building survey” to quickly find *Built in America: Historic American Buildings Survey and Historic American Engineering Record* [10].

Other such operators include

<i>intext:</i>	<i>inurl:</i>
<i>allintext:</i>	<i>author:</i>
<i>allintitle:</i>	<i>location:</i>

Use the +, -, |, and ~ Signs It is also possible to limit the results of a *Google* search by using special characters. If you are interested in listening directly to the words of Samuel Gompers, you might search for “Samuel Gompers” + “audio.” The first hit is the American Memory Project website *American Leaders Speak: Recordings from World War I and the 1920 Election* [143]. The minus sign (-) means *not* and the solid vertical line (|) substitutes for *or*. If you are searching for information on the John Scopes trial, you might try “John Scopes | monkey + trial” because the case was also called the “Monkey” trial. Or, if you wanted search results that *excluded Wikipedia*, you would use “John Scopes | monkey - wikipedia” to access more carefully selected search results. If you are not sure about different names for the same thing, try using the synonym search. Using the tilde (~) symbol in your search returns the term you are looking for *and* any synonyms of that term.

Translate a Text Although a rough translator at best, *Google* can give you the “gist” of an article or website in a number of languages, including Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Russian, Portuguese, and Spanish. See http://www.google.com/language_tools for this feature. Beware, however, that free, online translations are mechanically generated and are often imperfect.

Other Searches You can find a current street or satellite map by typing an address into *Google* or using *Google Maps* at <http://maps.google.com>. You can also find out what a word means by asking *Google*. For example, enter “define:portmanteau” to find the two possible meanings of *portmanteau*. You can also convert

measurements or make a calculation with *Google*. Type “9000/4” and *Google* will return the answer “2250.” Type “35 degrees Celsius in Fahrenheit” and you will receive “95 degrees Fahrenheit.”

Other Search Engines When searching for information on current events, you may want to search directly on media websites such as the *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>, or the *British Broadcasting Corporation*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk>. Both offer broad coverage of current events, although access to archived articles is not free. You can also try other search engines such as *Metacrawler*, <http://www.metacrawler.com>, and *Vivísimo*, <http://www.vivisimo.com>. Keep a library of “favorites” or “bookmarks” with search engines or websites that you use frequently for research.

A Word About Plagiarism

Printed materials have long provided ready content for plagiarism, but the Internet, and the mixture of skill and naiveté with which many approach it, creates new opportunities and new dangers. Online texts, images, sounds, and videos are easy to copy, paste, and manipulate. While this may make note taking easier, it also makes plagiarism—intentional or unintentional—as easy as clicking on “copy” and “paste.” Many students are not aware of the full meaning of plagiarism and its repercussions. School and college policies vary, but students who are caught plagiarizing can encounter a range of consequences, from failing a course to expulsion. Plagiarism does not have to be deliberate to be wrong—unintentional plagiarism is generally subject to the same penalties.²³

Plagiarism is presenting the words, work, or opinions of someone else as one’s own without proper acknowledgment. This includes borrowing the sequence of ideas, the arrangement of material, or the pattern of thought from someone else without proper acknowledgment. If a history paper gives the impression that the writer of the paper is the author of the words, ideas, or conclusions when they are the product of another person’s work, the writer of that paper is guilty of plagiarism. This is equally true for published and unpublished materials (such as a paper written by another student) as well as for any material found on the Internet.

Studying other people’s ideas through primary and secondary sources is central to conducting historical research. Historians use quotations from primary sources to illustrate their arguments and include quotations from other scholars to place their discussion in a larger context. Both of these uses are acceptable, and indeed desirable, aspects of writing a history paper. The key is to always credit the source of direct quotations, paraphrased information, or ideas, and to use your skills to create your own original ideas and historical analysis.

²³Johns Hopkins University History Department guidelines; Diana Hacker, *The Bedford Handbook for Writers*, 4th ed. (New York: St. Martin’s, 1994), 477–79; *Bedford/St. Martin’s Workshop on Plagiarism*, bedfordstmartins.com/plagiarism/flyer.

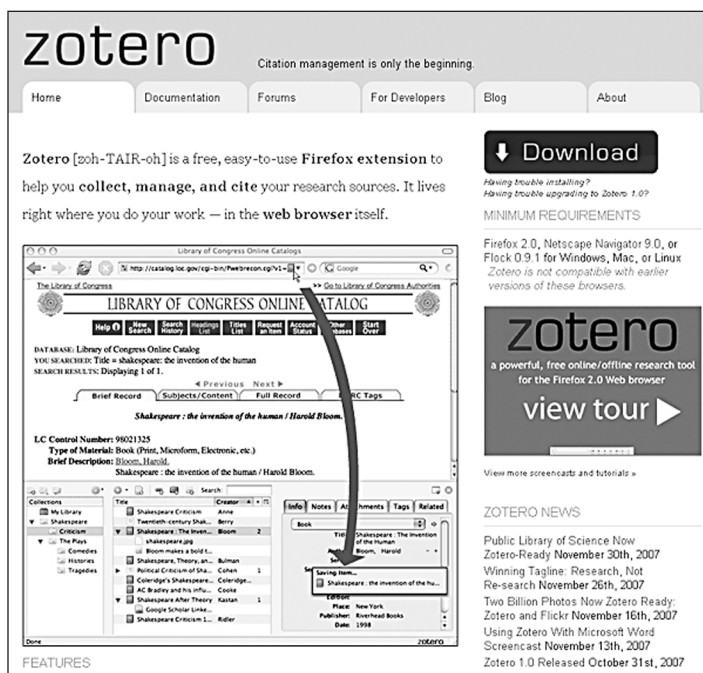


Fig. 15 Screenshot from *Zotero*. (Center for History and New Media, George Mason University.)

There are new tools to help you in this process. *Zotero*, <http://www.zotero.org/>, a free extension for the popular open-source web browser *Firefox*, allows you to build, organize, and annotate your own collections while conducting research online (Fig. 15). With the click of a mouse, it collects and saves all available reference information about a website, book, article, or other primary source from major research websites and databases, such as *JSTOR*, *ProQuest*, and *Google Books*, as well as most library catalogs. Once saved into *Zotero*, you can add notes, drag and drop texts and images into multiple collections (folders), search your collections, export citations, and create “reports” or documents summarizing your research. You can also highlight and add notes to stored documents from the Web. Tools such as *Zotero* help you organize your research and reduce the risk of ending up with unidentified sources or notes, a key factor in avoiding plagiarism.²⁴

Here are some steps that you can take to avoid plagiarism.

- 1) Start by taking notes carefully, especially when moving from a website to a word processing document or when typing notes from a book. If you copy and paste, always put the entire text in quotes and include the full citation. If you paraphrase, make sure that you understand the original text and

²⁴For more information, see Daniel J. Cohen, “Zotero: Social and Semantic Computing for Historical Scholarship,” *Perspectives* (May 2007), <http://www.historians.org/Perspectives/issues/2007/0705/0705tec2.cfm> (accessed June 29, 2007).

then put it aside. Write the idea in your own words and be sure to cite the author as the source of the idea, even when it is not a direct quote.

- 2) When you quote directly from a source to a computer document (including all citation information), change the color of the quote with your word processor to make it stand out from the rest of the text. This will serve as a visual reminder that something is a quote and requires proper citation.
- 3) Update your list of sources, primary and secondary, as you take notes. Use the guidelines for citing electronic resources listed below.
- 4) Keep a copy of each source you use, including photocopies of print articles and key passages from books. Print copies of online sources or email them to yourself and store them together in one folder.
- 5) Save drafts of your work as you research and write papers. When you begin to make revisions, create a new copy and save the original. This creates a record of your work and the development of your thoughts.
- 6) Finally, learn more about plagiarism, paraphrasing, and college regulations by visiting a writing center or library. Visit the websites listed below for additional definitions, suggestions, and resources.

Additional Online Resources on Research, Plagiarism, and Documenting Sources:

Research and Documentation Online, Diana Hacker

<http://dianahacker.com/resdoc>

Writer's Handbook, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Writing Center

<http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook>

Documenting Sources, George Mason University Writing Center

<http://writingcenter.gmu.edu/resources/plagiarism.html>

Citing Online Sources

Citing sources is key to conducting historical research. It also provides an important record of your research process. Keeping a “running” bibliography of print and online sources, whether you are using a program such as *Zotero* or in a word processing document, helps you assess what sources you are using, the balance of primary and secondary materials, and whether or not you need to seek out new kinds of sources to gain a well-rounded perspective on an issue.

Footnotes for a history assignment may vary slightly from those required in other courses. Here are some guidelines to follow for citing various kinds of electronic sources if you do not receive specific instructions in class. The following guidelines are based on *The Chicago Manual of Style*, fifteenth edition, and are specific for footnotes or endnotes. For bibliography or reference list styles, visit *The Chicago Manual of Style Online* “Citation Quick Guide,” http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html.²⁵

²⁵University of Chicago Press, “Chicago-Style Citation Quick Guide,” *The Chicago Manual of Style Online*, 15th ed. (2006), http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html (accessed June 28, 2007).

Website List the author or organization that is responsible for the website, followed by the title of the subsection in quotation marks (if relevant) and the website title in italics, each separated by a comma. Next, list the URL and the date of access in parentheses.

University of Connecticut Libraries, *Colonial Connecticut Records, 1636–1776*, <http://www.colonialct.uconn.edu/> (accessed December 8, 2007).

U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, “Kennedy Administration,” *Foreign Relations of the United States*, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/kennedyjf/> (accessed December 15, 2007).

Source from an Online Database List the author of the source (if available) followed by the name of the source in quotation marks, name of the database in italics, URL, and date accessed.

John Quincy Adams, “Liberty Incomplete,” 1843, *Samuel J. May Anti-Slavery Collection*, <http://dlxs.library.cornell.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?c=mayantislavery;idno=07838115;view=image;seq=1> (accessed November 30, 2007).

Book Published Electronically List the author(s) of the book, followed by the title, publisher, URL, and date accessed.

Daniel J. Cohen and Roy Rosenzweig, *Digital History: A Guide to Gathering, Preserving, and Presenting the Past on the Web*, University of Pennsylvania Press, <http://chnm.gmu.edu/digitalhistory/book.php> (accessed June 28, 2007).

Journal Article Published Electronically List the author(s) of the article, article title in quotation marks, journal title and publication information, publisher, URL, and date accessed.

Andrea Friedman, “The Strange Career of Annie Lee Moss: Rethinking Race, Gender, and McCarthyism,” *The Journal of American History* (September 2007), <http://mutex.gmu.edu:2069/journals/jah/94.2/friedman.html> (accessed December 16, 2007).

Weblog (Blog) Entry or Comment List the author of the entry or comment, followed by identifying information on the entry or comment, name of the blog, date posted, URL, and date accessed.

Mills Kelly, entry on “What’s It All About?” *Edwired*, entry posted on June 6, 2007, <http://edwired.org/?p=183> (accessed June 28, 2007).

Jonathan Dresner, “Teacher Logic,” comment on “History At Play,” Rob MacDougall, *CLIOPATRIA: A Group Blog*, comment posted on June 27, 2007, <http://hnn.us/blogs/entries/40294.html> (accessed June 29, 2007).

Email Message List the author of the email, identify it as an email message, include the subject header when possible, and add the date on which it was sent. If the email is personal, note that but do not include the author’s email address. Ask permission from the author before citing a personal email message.

Lynn Temple, “Re: Question about the Bedford flag,” email message, March 26, 2007.


Listserv Message The format is similar to an email message, but you should include the email address of the listserv.







Liz Ten Dyke, “South Asians in 19th century USA,” listserv message, January 17, 2003, h-world@h-net.msu.edu.

Using This Guide

Online resources for learning about U.S. history have opened an exciting world of primary materials and analysis to college students everywhere. To take full advantage of these opportunities, learn to find reliable websites, beginning with those listed in this guide. Then start to think about strategies for critically analyzing the range of online sources you can access, asking questions specific to the kinds of sources you are using.

The collection of 250 websites included in this book is not definitive; rather, it is intended as a useful guide to finding valuable online resources for exploring the American past. The authors of this book reviewed more than 5,000 websites to select this list with the goal of illustrating the strengths of the Internet for learning about the past and the incredible range of resources and perspectives available, from images of the Atlantic slave trade [57] through *Washington Post* news stories leading to Richard Nixon’s resignation in *Watergate Revisited* [250]. Many excellent websites were not included, but those we have chosen represent some of the best materials available for use in a U.S. history course.

Most of the websites presented here are available at no cost. Increasingly, however, publishers are creating significant historical databases and charging subscription fees. If colleges and universities subscribe to these databases, the materials become available for student use. Fees range widely and can be quite high, but some of these websites offer large quantities of materials otherwise unavailable, such as historical newspapers and periodicals. *ProQuest Information and Learning* [46] allows access to the *New York Times* (1851–2001), the *Washington Post* (1877–1988), the *Wall Street Journal* (1889–1986), and the *Christian Science Monitor* (1908–1991) as well as a host of other resources. *Accessible Archives* [83] provides close to 200,000 articles from nineteenth-century newspapers, magazines, and books, including *Godey’s Lady’s Book* (1830–1880), one of the most popular nineteenth-century publications, and the *Pennsylvania Gazette* (1728–1800). *HarpWeek* [125] offers some resources at no cost as well as subscription-based access to full-text images and transcriptions from *Harper’s Weekly* (1857–1912). Given the size and scope of these resources, some subscription websites are included in this guide. Their status is clearly identified in the description and the symbol for subscription websites  is included. Ask your librarian if your school subscribes to these resources, and how you can access them. If you do not currently have access, read the information available on the website. Some offer trial subscriptions or low cost access for individual students.

Additional symbols note the kinds of resources available on each website.  signifies that there are significant textual primary sources, such as books, documents, letters, or diaries.  includes photographs, paintings, or drawings.  means that audio files, usually music, speeches, or oral history interviews, are available.  means that the website offers film or video clips, ranging from early film footage to contemporary commercials and interviews.  indicates quantitative resources, such as census or price data.  identifies the presence of cartographic resources.

The first section of this list, “General Websites for U.S. History Research,” introduces resources that span broad periods of time. Some of these provide a broad range of resources, such as the National Archives and Record Administration database, *Archival Research Catalog (ARC)* [7] or *Hypertext on American History from the Colonial Period until Modern Times* [26], created by a history professor in the Netherlands. Others deal with a specific topic or kind of resource across centuries, such as *Women and Social Movements in the United States, 1600–2000* [55] created by history professors Thomas Dublin and Kathryn Kish Sklar or *American Time Capsule: Three Centuries of Broadsides and Printed Ephemera* [6] from the Library of Congress’s American Memory Project collection.

The subsequent sections focus on broad time periods covered in U.S. history survey courses.

Three Worlds Meet and Colonization, Beginnings to 1763

Revolution and the New Nation, 1754–1820s

Expansion and Reform, 1801–1861

Civil War and Reconstruction, 1850–1877

Development of the Industrial United States, 1870–1900

Emergence of Modern America, 1890–1930

Great Depression and World War II, 1929–1945

Postwar United States, 1945 to the Early 1970s








Contemporary United States, 1968 to Present

Finally, the index is a valuable starting point if you are looking for resources on a general topic (e.g., “African Americans,” “International Relations,” or “Women”), specific events or individuals (e.g., “Mark Twain” or “World War I”), or for a particular kind of primary source (e.g., “Advertising,” “Music,” or “Speeches”). The glossary provides definitions of common Internet terms.

The Internet can help you track down answers to historical questions or explore unique primary sources to challenge traditional explanations in American history. Use it wisely and it can be a valuable tool for learning about the past.

—Kelly Schrum

Key to the Icons

-  This website contains written primary sources, such as literary works, official documents, letters, or diaries.
-  This website contains images, such as photographs, paintings, drawings, and artifacts.
-  This website contains audio files, such as music, speeches, or oral history interviews.
-  This website contains film or video clips.
-  This website contains quantitative resources, such as census or price data.
-  This website contains maps and other cartographic resources.
-  This website charges a fee.

