



THE HUNTINGTON'S PRIMER FOR

# *Working with* PRIMARY SOURCES

## Characteristics of Primary Sources

1

Primary Sources are actual pieces from the past. Anything qualifies—paper and non-paper sources. For example, books of Civil War memories, a peace treaty, the Declaration of Independence, children's books of the 1940s, newspapers and magazines, television episodes of "*Gidget*," a Maine homemaker's quilt from the 1790s, a painting, a house built in the French Quarter of New Orleans.

2

They are pieces of the lived experience of the past (as opposed to secondary sources which are the attempts of historians and others to synthesize the lived experiences of past people in order to make useful historical generalizations.)

3

They were always created for some other purpose than "History"—to sell magazines, to persuade a populace to revolt, to explore a scientific theory, as a personal expression of the artistic impulse.

4

A document is only a PRIMARY source for the time in which it is created. For instance, the 1939 movie, *Gone With the Wind*, is a primary source for, among other things, studying Hollywood movies of the 1930s or race relations in 1930s America. It is not a primary source for the Civil War and Reconstruction era (at best, the film is a dubious secondary source). Another example—*A Perfect Union: Dolly Madison and the Creation of the American Nation* is a secondary source for researching Washington women in the first decades of the 1800s. In 50 years, it could be a primary source for an examination of the work of women's historians in the late 20th century.





## Primary Source Check Sheet

Here is a handy CHECK SHEET for dealing with primary sources, with categories from the most basic to the most sophisticated:

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1.



### **Authenticity (Provenance)**

- Is it real? Is it what it purports to be?
  - Is it altered, edited, or complete?  
An original, a translation, a copy?  
Or an “as told to”?
- 

2.



### **Author / Creator**

- Who wrote it or otherwise created it?
- What do we know about the author or originator at the time of composition? Later in life? (Social location—sex, age, class, race, religion, significant facts)

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## Primary Source Check Sheet (cont.)

3.



### Document

- What's it about? (If it is an object, what is it?)
- What words do you need to look up?
- What do you not understand? (Also true for an object!)
- What information does it convey and is this particular document/author a competent source for that information?
- What is its genre?
- Is it similar to another document?
- What is its historical context?

4.



### Big Questions

- To whom was it written or created?  
(Both intended and unintended audiences)
- Why was it written or created? (Purpose)  
An underlying agenda? Bias? Any reason to lie?
- What's new and interesting? What's surprising?
- What is general about this document or thing  
(reflecting the author's or creator's culture)?
- What is particular about it (reflecting her or him)?
- How does the author or creator explain his or her culture?
- How does the author's or creator's culture explain her or him?
- What does it all mean? OR why should we care?