

From Attics to Graveyards: How to Locate Primary Documents for Your Classroom

Tom Gray and Susan Owens

FINDING APPROPRIATE AND MOTIVATING DOCUMENTS CAN BE A LABOR OF LOVE OR A STROKE OF LUCK. There's no sure-fire way of locating these sources, but we have a number of suggestions on how to start.

First, you have to define your goals because the quantity of sources is vast. Are you searching for records of a specific time period, event, or topic? Or do you want to search records in general to discover what may be available and can be used in your curriculum?

If you are just looking for new material to enliven your lessons and help students think more critically about primary sources, a great place to start is your own attic (or grandmá's). It's amazing what can be found in our own family collections that can be used to personalize history. Add the families of your students and you will have access to an incredible amount of material—immigration papers, old photographs, letters, postcards, diaries, and report cards, just to name a few. One method of getting primary sources from your students is to announce at Open House or Back-to-School Night that you are looking for family documents. These will not only add variety, but will also give students a special interest and feeling of ownership in the lessons. Using materials gathered from parents and incorporating students' families into history lessons can also improve relationships with parents and community members.

A trip to the office or home of the local community historian is a must. Historians may be able to suggest items of

interest to students of varying grade levels. The historian may be willing to come to class or to have students come visit in small numbers to do research of their own. Many local historians and historical collections store valuable slide shows and displays.

One of the best ways to find documents on a particular person or event is through an Internet search. In recent years, there has been an explosion in the number of documents and lessons available on the net. Two excellent sites are the National Archives Digital Classroom (www.archives.gov/digital_classroom) and the Library of Congress American Memory Collection (memory.loc.gov/ammem/amhome.html), which include millions of maps and photographs. The National Park Service website, Teaching With Historic Places, offers a community activity with every lesson plan as well as suggestions for other lessons (www.cr.nps.gov/nr/twhp.htm).

For research on a more local topic, the state or local historical society may have useful records online. Most have websites available to describe their holdings. If they do not have the actual record online, they may have an index of available documents online.

School records are invaluable to introduce students to primary documents. Many teachers use documents such as old textbook lessons, library holdings, report cards, yearbooks, material lists and old photographs to compare schools of the past to today. Many of these materials can be obtained from district archives or school library collections. Some of these

records may have already been turned over to local historical societies for preservation. There might be privacy issues with copying report cards located in the district office, so the best way to find old report cards is for the teacher to bring in his or her own or to ask parents for theirs. Many local schools and community libraries also house a treasure trove of documents (e.g., scores of newspaper clippings that have been left unused) stored in file cabinets. Local church records can also be a source of community information.

Educators who are trying to locate particular types of records such as census records, may want to check their county clerk's office; federal census schedules are available on microfilm from the National Archives. Recently, the census schedules have been copied onto CD-ROMs and are now available through online services. They can be purchased through organizations such as Ancestry.com (www.ancestry.com) and Genealogy.com (www.genealogy.com). While this might be cost prohibitive, USGenWeb (usgenweb.org) has quite a bit of information available for free, including some parts of the census, cemetery listings, and affiliated state and county websites. The Genealogical Society of Utah and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS or the Mormons) local research branches are also an excellent source of family information (familysearch.org). Immigration information can be found through the census or through online sources such as (www.EllisIslandrecords.org) and the

Where to find Primary Documents

JUST LOOKING

- municipal/county historian
- local records repositories
- museums and historical societies
- university library/special collections
- local library- history room
- flea market/local bookshops
- attic searches
- cemeteries
- internet

LOOKING FOR SPECIFIC RECORDS

Personal Papers (diaries, letters, etc.)

- archives: public records repositories
- historical societies and museums
- family attics
- libraries

Business Records (executive, financial and employee records)

- advertisements in old magazines
- old catalogs (like the 1902 Sears Catalog-reissue)
- local historical society
- corporate archive
- local business people
- libraries (public and university)

Newspapers

- libraries (microfilm/microfiche)
- historical societies and museums
- newspaper offices (archives)

Old Maps

- libraries
- county and local government clerks
- museums and historical societies
- used bookstores
- zoning offices

Picture Sources (photographs, postcards)

- garage sales, auctions
- historical societies and museums
- family albums

Broadsides (posters)

- archives collections
- libraries
- historical societies
- museum collections
- antique dealers

Local Government Records (court, minutes of meetings, deeds, school district, wills, military, license, permits, etc.)

- city, county, village, town clerks
- local government archives
- local school records
- surrogate court (wills and inventories)
- historical societies

Census Records (Federal: 1790-1930)

- National Archives facilities
- Genealogical Society of Utah – familysearch.org
- check major public and university libraries.
- local clerk's offices

Death Records, Wills and Inventories

- local clerk's office
- surrogate court
- historical societies and museums
- family records

Cemetery Records and Visits

(Using a site as an educational tool)

- historical societies
- newspaper files—deaths, obits
- community maps
- church records
- cemetery records, burial plot information, cemetery plot maps
- fraternal and military organization records

Organizational Records

(political parties, labor unions, social clubs, etc.)

- historical societies
- organizations themselves

Church Records

- diocesan archives
- local churches, synagogues, and mosques

Military Records

- pension records (National Archives)
- museums and historical societies
- VFW/American Legion
- cemetery stones

Calling ahead for an appointment is a good idea.

List developed by Tom Gray and Susan Owens.

National Archives, which holds records of passenger ship manifests and makes them available on microfilm. Information on ordering or renting microfilm from the National Archives is available online at www.archives.gov/publications/microfilm_catalogs/how_to_rent_microfilm.html.

Old maps can be obtained from town officials, libraries, historical societies and local museums. The map collection available through the Library of Congress (memory.loc.gov/ammem/amhome.html) offers students a “bird’s eye view” of their communities some 150 years ago. Comparing these old maps to modern ones provides interesting insight into the changes that occurred over time in a community.

Cemeteries and other historical gravesites offer a unique view of the past and can be used with many other records. The Association of Gravestone Studies (www.gravestonestudies.org), and Colonial Williamsburg’s online lesson, *History Comes Alive in the Graveyard* (history.org/history/teaching/graveyard2.cfm), both offer the novice information on where and how to begin searches and lesson preparations.

Many documents can be located within published sources. The award-winning book from the New York State Archives, *Consider the Source—Using Historical Records in the Classroom* (www.archives.nysed.gov/a/nysaservices/ns_edu_consider.shtml) provides lesson plans (written by the authors of this article) on how to locate and use

local records for instruction. Although these lessons feature local New York State records, the finding aids and activities are applicable nationwide.

Summer vacation is always a great time to begin your document hunt because of the extra time available for teachers to go to repositories or search through attics. Grants or coursework may also be an option, where educators can get credit or a stipend for their efforts. Check local, state, or the National Archives for availability of such programs. Before you travel to any site, find out ahead of time about photocopying and/or digital photography or scanning policies. You may have to bring a lot of quarters. Some institutions are strict about what visitors can bring into a research facility, so call in advance or check online. Teachers should find out in advance the hours and when help is available.

Finding great documents can be time consuming, but also very rewarding, as students learn and enjoy history. Teachers should each build their own document libraries, remembering to indicate on the back of the original where each document was located in case the teacher needs to cite the source or return to get more. When copying documents for classroom use always copy from the original, as it provides the best copies. So, start hunting. You never know what you may discover! Have fun and remember to share what you find. What you give out will return to you in new materials and ideas from others. 📖

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This is a page from a penmanship book of James Matthews dated October 16, 1811. In addition to practicing good handwriting, students were also memorizing moral ideas. The record was found by Susan Owens in the collection of the Town Historian of East Greenbush, NY, some twenty years ago.

