American history. Introduction

How do historians know what they know? How is what historians know substantiated? What are the limits of historians’ work? These are all important questions to consider when studying any historical subject or era. We take these questions to task in this important assignment that helps lay the foundation for future historical study.

Summary

Adapted from materials originally from the Library of Congress’s American Memory Lesson, “This lesson introduces students to primary sources—what they are, their great variety, and how they can be analyzed. The lesson begins with an activity that helps students understand the historical record. Students then learn techniques for analyzing primary sources.” Finally, students apply these techniques to analyze primary sources about the so-called “Savage.”

Steps

Note: Compile all your responses to the Chapter 17 assignment into one Microsoft Word document that you will submit via the Blackboard Assignment feature. Read the following instructions and information carefully and complete all parts of this assignment.

1.    Read completely and carefully the information provided at the end of these steps under the grayed heading “Preliminary Reading for the Assignment.”

2.    Next complete in thought and writing the "Mindwalk Activity" provided below these instructions and the information you read in Step 1.

3.    Once you have read all the material under the “Preliminary Reading for the Assignment” heading and completed the “Mindwalk Activity,” you are ready to practice your skills with an actual primary source from America in the late 19th century.  You will practice by reading the primary source provided under the grayed heading “Primary Source for the Assignment.”

4.    After you have read the “Primary Source for the Assignment” on the so-called “Savage,” answer the seven “Questions to Answer on the Primary Source” at the end of this document.  Compose your answers based on your reading and interpretation of the primary source, including relevant excerpts from the document to support your responses.

Preliminary Reading for the Assignment

Primary and Secondary Sources

Historians use a wide variety of sources to answer questions about the past. In their research, history scholars use both primary sources and secondary sources. Primary sources are actual records that have survived from the past, such as letters, photographs, articles of clothing. Secondary sources are accounts of the past created by people writing about events sometime after they happened.

For example, your history textbook is a secondary source. Someone wrote most of your textbook long after historical events took place. Your textbook may also include some primary sources, such as direct quotes from people living in the past or excerpts from historical documents.

People living in the past left many clues about their lives. These clues include both primary and secondary sources in the form of books, personal papers, government documents, letters, oral accounts, diaries, maps, photographs, reports, novels and short stories, artifacts, coins, stamps, and many other things. Historians call all of these clues together the historical record.

The Historical Record

The historical record is huge. It contains literally billions of pieces of evidence about the past. Despite its huge size, the historical record gives us just a tiny glimpse of the past. Most of what happened in the past was never documented. Many sources of information about the past have been lost or destroyed. Some primary sources were accumulated simply by accident.

But some historical sources were created and saved by people interested in recording history. People kept journals, wrote diaries and autobiographies, recorded family trees, and saved business and personal letters and papers.

How can the historical record be both huge and limited? What kind of historical records do you leave behind in your daily life?

Analysis of Primary Sources

Historians analyze historical sources in different ways. First, historians think about where, when and why a document was created. They consider whether a source was created close in location and time to an actual historical event. Historians also think about the purpose of a source. Was it a personal diary intended to be kept private? Was the document prepared for the public?

Some primary sources may be judged more reliable than others, but every source is biased in some way. As a result, historians read sources skeptically and critically. They also cross-check sources against other evidence and sources. Historians follow a few basic rules to help them analyze primary sources. Read these rules below.

Time and Place Rule

To judge the quality of a primary source, historians use the time and place rule. This rule says the closer in time and place a source and its creator were to an event in the past, the better the source will be. Based on the time and place rule, better primary sources (starting with the most reliable) might include:

•    Direct traces of the event;

•    Accounts of the event, created at the time it occurred, by firsthand observers and participants;

•    Accounts of the event, created after the event occurred, by firsthand observers and participants;

•    Accounts of the event, created after the event occurred, by people who did not participate or witness the event, but who used interviews or evidence from the time of the event.

Bias Rule

The historians' second rule is the bias rule. It says that every source is biased in some way. Documents tell us only what the creator of the document thought happened, or perhaps only what the creator wants us to think happened. As a result, historians follow these bias rule guidelines when they review evidence from the past:

•    Every piece of evidence and every source must be read or viewed skeptically and critically.

•    No piece of evidence should be taken at face value. The creator's point of view must be considered.

•    Each piece of evidence and source must be cross-checked and compared with related sources and pieces of evidence.

Types of Primary Sources

When analyzing primary sources, historians consider the type of primary source under study. Different primary sources were created for different reasons. Knowing the different types of primary sources will help you evaluate the reliability of primary sources. Read about the different types of primary sources below.

Published Documents

Some primary sources are published documents. They were created for large audiences and were distributed widely. Published documents include books, magazines, newspapers, government documents, non-government reports, literature of all kinds, advertisements, maps, pamphlets, posters, laws, and court decisions.

When reviewing published documents, remember that just because something was published does not make it truthful, accurate, or reliable. Every document has a creator, and every creator has a point of view, blind spots, and biases. Also remember that even biased and opinionated sources can tell us important things about the past.

Unpublished Documents

Many types of unpublished documents have been saved, and can be used as primary sources. These include personal letters, diaries, journals, wills, deeds, family Bibles containing family histories, school report cards, and many other sources. Unpublished business records such as correspondence, financial ledgers, information about customers, board meeting minutes, and research and development files also give clues about the past.

Unpublished documents often come from community organizations, churches, service clubs, political parties, and labor unions in the form of membership lists, meeting minutes, speeches, financial and other records. Government at all levels creates a variety of unpublished records. These include police and court records, census records, tax and voter lists, departmental reports, and classified documents.

Unlike published documents, unpublished records may be difficult to find because few copies exist. For example, personal letters may be found only in the possession of the person to whom the letters were sent. Letters of famous or remarkable people may be collected and eventually published. Keep in mind that letter writers did not intend (and perhaps could not imagine) that their letters would be read by more than one person. Because unpublished documents were seldom meant to be read by the public, they provide interesting clues about the past.

Oral Traditions/Oral Histories

Oral traditions and oral histories provide another way to learn about the past from people with firsthand knowledge of historical events. Recently, spoken words that make up oral histories have gained importance as primary sources. Historians and others find out about the lives of ordinary people through spoken stories and tales. Oral histories provide important historical evidence about people, especially minority groups, who were excluded from mainstream publications or did not leave behind written primary sources.

Oral histories are as old as human beings. Before the invention of writing, information passed from generation to generation through the spoken word. Many people around the world continue to use oral traditions to pass along knowledge and wisdom. Interviews and recordings of community elders and witnesses to historical events provide exciting stories, anecdotes, and other information about the past.

Visual Documents and Artifacts

Visual documents include photographs, films, paintings, and other types of artwork. Because visual documents capture moments in time, they can provide evidence of changes over time. Visual documents include evidence about a culture at specific moments in history: its customs, preferences, styles, special occasions, work, and play.

Like other primary source documents, a visual document has a creator with a point of view -- such as a painter, sculptor, or film maker. Even photographs were created by photographers using film and cameras to create desired effects.

Think about the creator's point of view when you review visual documents. What was the creator's purpose? Why this pose? Why that perspective? Why that framing? Why this distance? Why this subject? What was included? What was excluded? Using visual documents as primary sources requires careful analysis of the content and the point of view of the creator.

Mindwalk Activity

1.    Think about ("mind walk" through) all the activities you were involved in during the past 24 hours. List as many of these activities as you can remember.

2.    For each activity on your list, write down what evidence, if any, your activities might have left behind.

3.    Review your entire list, and what you wrote about evidence your activities left behind. Then answer these questions:

a.    Which of your daily activities were most likely to leave trace evidence behind?

b.    What, if any, of that evidence might be preserved for the future? Why?

c.    What might be left out of an historical record of your activities? Why?

d.    What would a future historian be able to tell about your life and your society based on evidence of your daily activities that might be preserved for the future? What might the materials tell archaeologists about your family, community, region, and/or nation?

4.    Now think about a more public event currently happening (a court case, election, public controversy, law being debated), and answer these questions:

a.    What kinds of evidence might this event leave behind?

b.    Who records information about this event?

c.    For what purpose are different records of this event made?

5.    Based on this activity, write one sentence that describes how the historical record can be huge and limited at the same time.

Primary Source for the Assignment

“A great general has said that the only good Indian is a dead one, and that high sanction of his destruction has been an enormous factor in promoting Indian massacres. In a sense, I agree with the sentiment, but only in this: that all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man....

The Indians under our care remained savage, because forced back upon themselves and away from association with English-speaking and civilized people [as a result of segregation on isolated reservations], and because of our savage example and treatment of them. . . .  We have never made any attempt to civilize them with the idea of taking them into the nation, and all of our policies have been against citizenizing and absorbing them.  Although some of the policies now prominent are advertised to carry them into citizenship and consequent association and competition with other masses of the nation, they are not, in reality, calculated to do this....

We make our greatest mistake in feeding our civilization to the Indians instead of feeding the Indians to our civilization. America has different customs and civilizations from Germany. What would be the result of an attempt to plant American customs and civilization among the Germans in Germany, demanding that they shall become thoroughly American before we admit them to the country? Now, what we have all along attempted to do for and with the Indians is just exactly that, and nothing else. We invite the Germans to come into our country and communities, and share our customs, our civilization, to be of it; and the result is immediate success. Why not try it on the Indians? Why not invite them into experiences in our communities? Why always invite and compel them to remain a people unto themselves?

It is a great mistake to think that the Indian is born an inevitable savage. He is born a blank, like all the rest of us. Left in the surroundings of savagery, he grows to possess a savage language, superstition, and life. We, left in the surroundings of civilization, grow to possess a civilized language, life, and purpose. Transfer the infant white to the savage surroundings, he will grow to possess a savage language, superstition, and habit. Transfer the savage-born infant to the surroundings of civilization, and he will grow to possess a civilized language and habit. These results have been established over and over again beyond all question; and it is also well established that those advanced in life, even to maturity, of either class, lose already acquired qualities belonging to the side of their birth, and gradually take on those of the side to which they have been transferred.

As we have taken into our national family seven millions of Negroes, and as we receive foreigners at the rate of more than five hundred thousand a year, and assimilate them, it would seem that the time may have arrived when we can very properly make at least the attempt to assimilate our two hundred and fifty thousand Indians, using this proven potent line, and see if that will not end this vexed question and remove them from public attention, where they occupy so much more space than they are entitled to either by numbers or worth.

The school…is an attempt on the part of the government to do this. The school…has always planted treason to the tribe and loyalty to the nation at large. It has preached against colonizing Indians, and in favor of individualizing them. It has demanded for them the same multiplicity of chances which all others in the country enjoy…. [The school] fills young Indians with the spirit of loyalty to the stars and stripes, and then moves them out into our communities to show by their conduct and ability that the Indian is no different from the white or the colored, that he has the inalienable right to liberty and opportunity that the white and the negro have. It does not dictate to him what line of life he should fill, so it is an honest one. It says to him that, if he gets his living by the sweat of his brow, and demonstrates to the nation that he is a man, he does more good for his race than hundreds of his fellows who cling to their tribal communistic surroundings….

When we cease to teach the Indian that he is less than a man; when we recognize fully that he is capable in all respects as we are, and that he only needs the opportunities and privileges which we possess to enable him to assert his humanity and manhood; when we act consistently towards him in accordance with that recognition; when we cease to fetter him to conditions which keep him in bondage, surrounded by retrogressive influences; when we allow him the freedom of association and the developing influences of social contact – then the Indian will quickly demonstrate that he can be truly civilized, and he himself will solve the question of what to do with the Indian.”

Questions to Answer on the Primary Source

1.    What is the document author’s gender? Why do you draw this conclusion?

2.    What is the document author’s race/nationality/ethnicity? Why do you draw this conclusion?

3.    What are the document author’s beliefs? Why do you draw these conclusions?

4.    What are the document author’s aspirations or goals? Why do you draw these conclusions?

5.    What are the document author’s prejudices? Why do you draw these conclusions?

6.    What else of historical value and relevance can you extract from your reading of the primary source? Explain.

7.    Who is the actual author of the document? (Make an educated and specific guess here. I’ll share the answer with you along with the feedback and grade on the assignment.)