How to Use the Digital History Reader

Evidence

Evidence is the key component of each module in the Digital History Reader. The Reader was designed to provide students with hands-on experience interpreting the sorts of documents that historians use in seeking to understand the past. The documents selected and included in the Reader were chosen specifically because they equip students to evaluate and answer the central questions posed by each module.

Types of Evidence

Much of the evidence in each module will consist of written material, such as letters, diaries, or newspaper articles, and will be identified by the A symbol at right.

Other evidence will consist of images, such as paintings, photographs, or political cartoons, and will be identified by the eye symbol.

Evidence provided in audio format might include speeches, songs, or narrations. Those files are identified by the audio symbol.

Some of the evidence is video or other multimedia, such as Flash animations or QuickTime movies. They are identified by the filmstrip symbol.

Primary Sources

Whatever the format, each document represents what historians call a "primary" source, or one that dates from the period under study or that was produced later by someone who actually participated in or witnessed the events in question. Whether text or image, primary sources never speak for themselves. Historians must carefully analyze them in order to understand what they reveal about the past — in this case, about the Boston Massacre. Click below for examples of primary source material related to the Boston Massacre.

1. Deposition of William Wyat
March 7, 1770

2. Summary of Testimony by Matthew Murray
October 26, 1770

3. Paul Revere's Engraving of the Boston Massacre
March 1770

Establishing the Four Ws

The most basic task in reading any document, text or image, is to identify the four Ws:

Who produced it?
When was it made?
Why was it made?
What exactly does it say or show?

Who

Knowing *who* produced a particular document is critical to its interpretation. The author's age, gender, religion, race, and other factors inevitably color their views of the world. Moreover, each participant in or witness to an event experiences it differently and in turn remembers and describes it differently. Establishing *who* involves questioning whether the author participated directly in the event, and whether they had a stake or personal interest in its outcome. In the case of the Boston Massacre, for example, the historian must establish if the document originated with one of the protestors, a widow of a victim, a child playing in the street, a British soldier, a resident of Boston, a sailor on a visiting ship, or with someone else. Establishing *who* aids the historian in identifying and accounting for partiality or bias.

When

When a primary source was produced is equally important. Does the document date from the time of the events it describes or after? An author writing at the time of an event may capture more accurately the sentiment of the day; fifty years after the fact, memories may fade and errors or discrepancies creep in. On the other hand, the passage of time may enable the author to make sense of the

past more easily, distanced as they are from rumors and misconceptions often surrounding early reports of an event. In the case of the Boston Massacre, some witnesses recorded their stories just days after the event; others testified seven months later at the soldiers' trials. Still others recalled the evening of the Massacre forty or fifty years later, as a new generation of Americans scrambled to record the events of the Revolution before the last participants had died.

Why

Knowing *why* a document was produced is equally critical to judging its significance. Just a week after the Boston Massacre, the town meeting established a committee to document the citizens' "present miserable situation" and to "prevent any ill impressions from being made...against the town" (Boston, 1770). Later that year, soldiers involved in the Massacre were tried for murder in a criminal court, where both the defense and the prosecution called witnesses to testify. Knowing the provenance of a particular historical account - in this case, whether it was solicited by the town to defend Boston citizens or was perhaps given in testimony at the trial to uphold the actions of the British soldiers - remains of great importance to the historian investigating the motivations behind the Massacre.

What

Finally, historians should understand exactly *what* a document says or shows. In the case of a written document, the author may use words particular to a time period, region, nationality, social position, or dialect. Descriptions by witnesses at the Boston Massacre, for example, often included mentions of men in "surtouts." Anyone living in England or its colonies in 1770 knew that a "surtout" was an overcoat, but the word has vanished from modern English. More misleading to the historian are words whose meanings have changed over time. Three hundred years ago, "awful" meant awe-inspiring. In 1700, informing an architect that his work was awful would have been praise indeed. To understand the intentions of the author or speaker, historians may need to consult specialized dictionaries, such as the *Oxford English Dictionary* or dictionaries of legal or nautical terms, that chronicle shifts in meaning and identify words that may have passed out of the language entirely.

It can be equally difficult to determine what images portray. Many artists employ symbols immediately recognizable to the audience of their own day, yet which may prove less obvious to later observers. If an artist today depicted the U.S.

Capitol flanked by large golden arches, observers would most likely interpret the image as a commentary on the trivialization of American politics or the rise of convenience culture. Yet will McDonalds still exist a century from now? In addition, small details in images, as well as in written documents, can be important. Paul Revere, for example, in his famous engraving of the Boston Massacre, editorialized by naming the building behind the British soldiers "Butcher's Hall." As with any written document, historians must study images element by element to uncover all that they portray and say.

Comparing Primary Sources

Determining the four Ws of an individual document, however, marks just the first step of the research process. Historians must then compare different documents to determine whether the evidence in one confirms or contradicts that found in others. Compare, for example, the accounts of William Wyat and Matthew Murray. Wyat wrote or dictated his account as a deposition for inclusion in "A Short Narrative of the Horrid Massacre in Boston...," which Boston officials published soon after the Massacre in order to spread their version of events. Murray, on the other hand, served as a witness for the defense in *Rex v. Preston*, one of the criminal trials held later that year. The account included here actually stems from notes of his testimony taken down in court most likely by one of his lawyers. Wyat claimed that no one in the crowd threw anything at the soldiers and that Preston ordered his men "[to] fire, be the consequence what it will" (see Evidence No. 1). According to Murray, however, a stick or piece of ice hit one of the soldiers, "[up]on which he instantly fired" (see Evidence No. 2). And compare Revere's portrayal of the crowd, which appears brandishing no weapons, to the testimonies of Wyat and Murray, which both describe citizens armed with sticks or snowballs.

Historians may also find it appropriate or useful to compare the evidence to outside sources. The Boston Massacre occurred between 9:00 and 10:00 p.m. on the evening of March 5, 1770, long after darkness fell in a city with no streetlights. Could the witnesses really have seen much? Revere's engraving shows a large crescent moon, but was it really there? Fortunately, the website of the United States Naval Observatory includes a lunar calculator indicating that, on March 5, 1770, the moon was 60 percent full and high in the sky at the time of the shooting. Witnesses mentioned that many of the boys harassing the British soldiers that night were throwing snowballs at them. We might therefore conclude that snow on the ground reflected the moonlight and further brightened the streets.