

HOW DO I KNOW IF A PIECE OF HISTORICAL EVIDENCE IS RELIABLE?

History involves the interpretation of evidence. When primary and secondary sources are analyzed they become “evidence” which plays an important role in historical inquiry.

1

Primary sources are accounts, traces, relics, or records created by people who lived during the time under study (e.g., speeches, diaries, newspaper articles, monuments, songs, recipes, toys, photographs).

2

Secondary sources are created after the time period under study by someone who did not experience firsthand or participate in the events discussed (e.g., textbooks, books, blog posts, documentaries).

Things aren't always straightforward! Sometimes the same source can be both a primary or secondary source, depending on the questions we ask about the source.

ASK:

- Did I find the piece of evidence in a repository of sources? (e.g., museum, archive, library, historical society, community knowledge keeper)
- Is the primary source authentic (i.e., not fake)?
- Is the author of the secondary source trustworthy (i.e., an expert)?
- Have experts found the primary or secondary source to be reliable (i.e., they used it as historical evidence in their own work)?