

Introduction to History part 2

Boring names, facts, dates - this is history for a lot of people. But historians think about history differently. They see themselves as detectives, often unsure about what happened, what it means, and rarely able to agree amongst themselves. This process of trying to figure out things you don't already know is as different from mindless memorization as you can get.

Students often ask: How do historians know what happened in the past? How do they know what Frederick Douglass said about slavery, what Abigail Adams thought about American independence, or what happened at Sutter's mill? As scholars and teachers, we know that primary sources are the building blocks, the "stuff" of history.

Official government documents, political speeches, wills, newspapers, diaries, and letters are just a few of the **sources** we can draw upon to **reconstruct** an historical era or an individual life. We can also turn to paintings, political cartoons, and in later decades, photographs and film footage. Borrowing techniques from other disciplines such as **archaeology** and **anthropology**, historians can reconstruct the material world of seventeenth-century Jamestown colonists and the family structures of eighteenth-century enslaved men and women of the Chesapeake. Using the technology of the twentieth century, we can computerize hundreds, even thousands, of tax records or probate court documents and discover patterns that reveal economic differences among residents of a nineteenth-century city or the steady growth of a consumer culture in the early Republic.

In addition, the tools people leave behind are clues to the lives of women and men who did not have the time or the skill to record their thoughts and experiences in letters. Slave ship **logs** provide **documentation** of journeys taken, while the **oral histories** passed from one generation to another preserve life stories as valid as those preserved in diaries. Modern-day **census** data, tax returns, business audits, architectural drawings, department store catalogues, clothing, jewelry -- even your students' report cards and term papers -- these will all be primary sources for future historians hoping to understand our **society** and **culture**.

Sources: Historical Thinking Matters. 6 April 2012 <<http://historicalthinkingmatters.org/why/>>; Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History. 6 April 2012 <http://www.gilderlehrman.org/historynow/12_2004/issue.php>.