Finding and Using Primary Source Documents At ECSU's G.R. Little Library

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Introduction

This is a selective guide to finding primary source materials for beginning and undergraduate historical research at ECSU. The G.R. Little Library maintains rich collections of primary sources in print, microform, and electronic formats.

Additionally, there are hundreds of collections of primary source materials available on the Web, and more are added every day. Because there is no single comprehensive database of primary sources, you may need to explore different strategies for locating resources of interest.

What are primary sources?

Primary sources are often referred to as "first hand" accounts or "original" records. They are the evidence historians use to build interpretations of the past. Most primary sources are created at the time an historical event occurred. While others, such as autobiographies, are produced long after the events they

describe. Among the many types of materials that may be primary sources are letters, diaries, speeches, newspaper articles, autobiographies, oral histories, government and organizational records, statistical data, maps, photographs, motion pictures, sound recordings, advertisements and artifacts.

Strategies for Locating Primary Source Materials:

The sections that follow offer different approaches to locating primary source materials and are good starting points for research. You may want to explore several or all of these strategies. Don't hesitate to **Ask a Librarian** for assistance.

Search the ECSU Library Catalog for Primary Sources in Print and Microform

Often the fastest and easiest way to locate primary source documents is to search the library's catalog for published documents and collections.

Search by keyword
The following subheadings can be added to a keyword search to locate primary sources:

- sources
- diaries
- correspondence
- interviews
- personal narratives
- pamphlets

Examples:

Vietnam and sources
explorers and diaries
women and Great Britain and (sources or correspondence)

Nuclear arms control and Sources
world war 1939-1945 and personal narratives
Slavery United States and Diaries

Witchcraft Massachusetts Salem and -- Sources
Johnson, Lyndon B. (Lyndon Baines), 1908-1973 -- Diaries
Prohibition--United States and -Sources

. Ask a Librarian for assistance.

See   Suggested Resources for Beginning General Historical Research at
ECSU http://www.ecsu.edu/library/docs/historysubjectguide.pdf

for more on finding primary sources in print and microform.

Use electronic resources (databases) provided by the Library:
http://www.ecsu.edu/library/onlineresources.cfm

The G.R. Little Library subscribes to a growing number of electronic databases
that include primary source materials. Researchers have access to collections
of letters, diaries, oral histories, historical newspapers, government documents
and statistics, pamphlets, broadsides, photographs, and maps. Some important
examples are listed below.

Consult Directories and Databases of Primary Source Materials on the Web

The Web sites listed below are directories, gateways and databases that help
you locate digitized primary source documents and collections. They are
generally arranged by subject, time period, or geographically. Some are
keyword searchable. Some include secondary as well as primary sources.

AMDOCS

http://www.vlib.us/amdocs/

This page links to important documents for the study of American history from
1400 to the present. From the University of Kansas.

American Women's History: Digital Collections of Primary Sources

http://frank.mtsu.edu/~kmiddlet/history/women/wh-digcoll.html
A subject directory of digitized collections of primary source materials for the

study of American women's history. From Middle Tennessee State University Library.

Digital Collections Online

http://digitalcollections.uconn.edu/

This is a database that links to digital collections of primary source documents. Search by keyword or browse by subject. From the University of Connecticut Libraries.

Digitized Primary American History Sources
http://www.lib.uiowa.edu/spec-coll/resources/researchresources.html
This directory includes general and topical sources, works of presidents, photographs, illustrations, cartoons and sources for the U.S. at war. From the University of Northern Iowa Library.

Digitized World History Sources

http://www.library.uni.edu/library-instruction/course-web-pages/digitized-world-history-sources
Directory of world history sources arranged geographically. From the University of Northern Iowa Library.

History Matters http://historymatters.gmu.edu/search.php
This database is a gateway to Web resources for teachers of U.S. history. Choose "WWW.History" to browse sites by topic and time period. Choose "Many Pasts" to browse a collection of over 900 primary documents. Or choose Full Search to search by keyword and limit by type of primary source and other criteria. The materials in "Many Pasts" emphasize the experiences of "ordinary Americans". From the American Social History Project / Center for Media and Learning and the Center for History and New Media.

History On-Line http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Resources/Type/primary.html
This database links to hundreds of history Web sites, many of which contain primary sources. Browse, or search by keyword and limit by time period. From the Institute of Historical Research.

Library and Archival Exhibitions on the Web
http://www.sil.si.edu/SILPublications/Online-Exhibitions/
This database contains links to over 3000 online exhibitions, many of which

contain images. Browse by title or search. From the Smithsonian Institution Libraries.

Use a Search Engine Like Google

Search engines are very useful for locating specific primary source documents. If you use **Google**, put the names of specific documents in quotation marks.

Example:

"war powers resolution"

For broader searches, add terms like "documents", "primary sources", or "papers" to your search string.

Examples:

world war II primary sources
roosevelt papers

Explore Important Collections of Digitized Primary Sources on the Web

The Web sites listed below are examples of important collections of digitized primary sources available on the Web. Use the strategies outlined above to find other collections on the topic in which you are interested. This list is highly selective and focuses primarily on U.S. History.

American Journeys
"American Journeys contains more than 18,000 pages of eyewitness accounts of North American exploration, from the sagas of Vikings in Canada in AD1000 to the diaries of mountain men in the Rockies 800 years later." Search or browse by expedition, settlement, geographic region, state or province. From the Wisconsin Historical Society.

American Memory
"American Memory is a gateway to rich primary source materials relating to the

history and culture of the United States. The site offers more than 7 million digital items from more than 100 historical collections." Search or browse by topic, time period, geography, or format. From the Library of Congress.

American Presidency Project
Nearly 40,000 documents related to the study of the American Presidency including the Public Papers of the President, State of the Union and inaugural addresses, presidential debates, national party platforms, and more. From UC Santa Barbara.

American Rhetoric - Online Speech Bank
"A Growing database of full text, audio and video (streaming) versions of public speeches, sermons, legal proceedings, lectures, debates, interviews, other recorded media events."

Archival Research Catalog
The Archival Research Catalog (ARC) of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) can be used to search a subset of NARA documents that are available online. The tips page offers searching advice by subject area. Select the yellow button to open ARC and click the checkbox to limit to "Descriptions of Archival Materials linked to digital copies."

Avalon Project at Yale Law School
"The Avalon Project will mount digital documents relevant to the fields of Law, History, Economics, Politics, Diplomacy and Government." Search, browse by time period, or collection.

Core Documents of U.S. Democracy
"The basic Federal Government documents that define our democratic society." This includes "cornerstone" documents like the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, and from recent years: Congressional bills, the Congressional Record, public and private laws, the U.S. Code, Supreme Court decisions, Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents, the Federal Register, Code of Federal Regulations, the Statistical Abstract of the United States, and much more. From GPO Access.

Digital Schomburg
A selection of images and texts from the Shomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. Collections include African American Women Writers of the 19th Century and Images of African Americans from the 19th Century.

Documenting the American South

"Documenting the American South" (DocSouth) is a digital publishing initiative that provides Internet access to texts, images, and audio files related to Southern history, literature, and culture from the colonial period through the first decades of the 20th century. Currently DocSouth includes seven thematic collections of books, diaries, posters, artifacts, letters, oral history interviews, and songs. " From the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library.

FDR Library Digital Archives

Includes over 13,000 pages from the "President's Secretary's File", over 1000 images, and Roosevelt's Fireside Chats. From the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library.

Historical Census Browser

"The data presented here describe the population and economy of U.S. states and counties from 1790 to 1960. The available data differ somewhat from decade to decade, according to what was collected in the census and the items chosen for transcription to electronic form. For the early decades, most of the enumerated items are included. For later decades, only a portion of characteristics have been transcribed." From the University of Virginia Library.

Historical Publications of the United States Commission on Civil Rights

"Since its inception in 1957 the United States Commission on Civil Rights has been at the forefront of efforts by the Federal government and state governments to examine and resolve issues related to race, ethnicity, religion and, more recently, sexual orientation." Historical documents arranged by title, date, subject, and SUDOC number. From the Thurgood Marshall Law Library.

History Channel - Speech Archive

Listen to hundreds of 20th Century speeches. Categories include politics and government, war and diplomacy, science and technology, arts and entertainment. Requires RealPlayer (free download).

Making of America - Cornell University Library

"The Making of America project is a collaborative effort by the libraries of Cornell University and the University of Michigan to present digital copies of primary source materials published in the United States from before the American Civil War to the 1920s. Journals and other periodicals are the principal publications available, as well as some book titles. The fields of

education, American history, religion, sociology, psychology, religion, and science and technology are especially well represented."

Making of America - University of Michigan Library
See entry for Making of America - Cornell University Library, above. The two Web sites hold different collections.

Maps: University of Texas (Austin) Perry-Castañeda Library Online Map Collection

The PCL Map Collection includes more than 250,000 maps, and 20% of the collection is currently online.

Women Working, 1800-1930
"Provides access to digitized historical, manuscript, and image resources selected from Harvard University's library and museum collections. The collection features: 7,500 pages of manuscripts, 3,500 books and pamphlets, and 1,200 photographs."

World War II Poster Collection
A comprehensive collection of over 300 posters issued by U.S. Federal agencies from the onset of war through 1945. Search by word or phrase and browse by date, title or topic. From Northwestern University Library

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Things to Consider When Using Primary Sources on the Web
How reliable are the primary sources you find on the Web? Who maintains the site? Are documents transcribed or scanned? This guide includes important information on evaluating and citing primary sources located on the Web. From the American Library Association.

Before relying on the information provided by a website, examine and understand the purpose of the website. While the purpose might not affect the accuracy of the primary source material it contains, it might indicate that the material has been altered or manipulated in some way to change or influence its meaning.

Sometimes sites use primary source material to persuade the reader to a particular point of view, distorting the contents in obvious or subtle ways. Also, sites can use primary source material haphazardly, without appropriately

choosing, inspecting, or citing the work.

In general, look for websites with a non-biased, balanced approach to presenting sources. Websites produced by educational or governmental institution often are more reliable than personal websites, but government sites may be subject to propaganda.

Can't Find What You Are Looking For?

E-mail Reference questions to our e-mail reference service, at
djmbrown@mail.ecsu.edu

Or to Archives Jean Bischoff :at jbbischoff@mail.ecsu.edu

Suggestions on Library Service? Please e-mail our Director of Library Services at jmidgette@mail.ecsu.edu