

Evaluating Primary and Secondary Sources

An Online tutorial

Created by The National Library of Jamaica , special thanks to
Kerry-Ann Watson (MLIS, B.A., Dip. Ed.)
September 2013

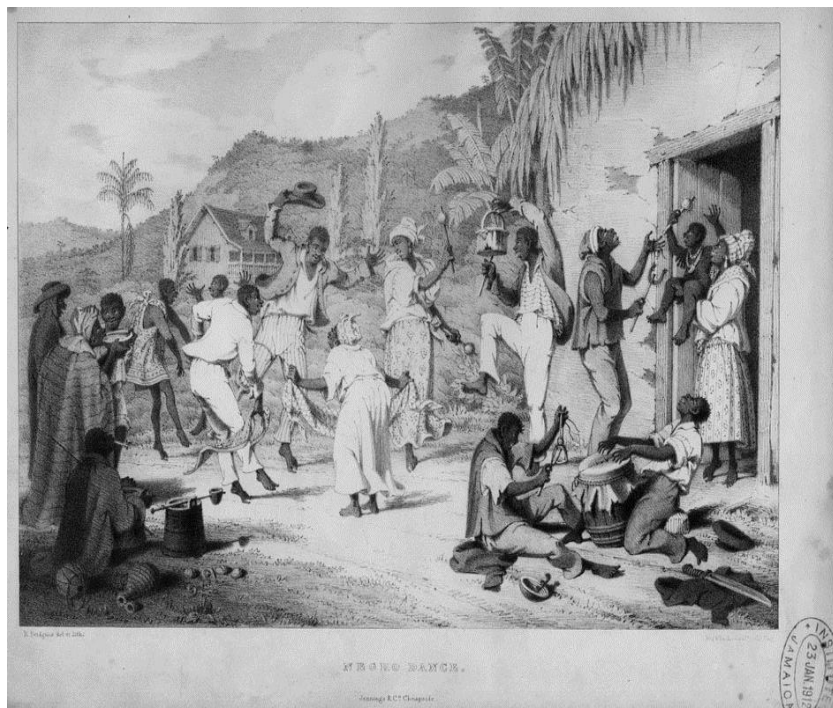
What are Primary Sources?

Primary sources are documents, artistic works and objects that were created during the time period being studied.

Examples of documentary primary sources are: diaries, letter, government records, newspaper articles, journals and maps

Examples of non-documentary primary sources are: paintings, sculptures, tools, utensils, buildings, oral sources (stories, songs, interviews).

Two samples of Primary Sources



Negro dance. From the National Library of Jamaica



“Advertisement from a West Indian newspaper from the end of the 18th century”. From the National Library of Jamaica

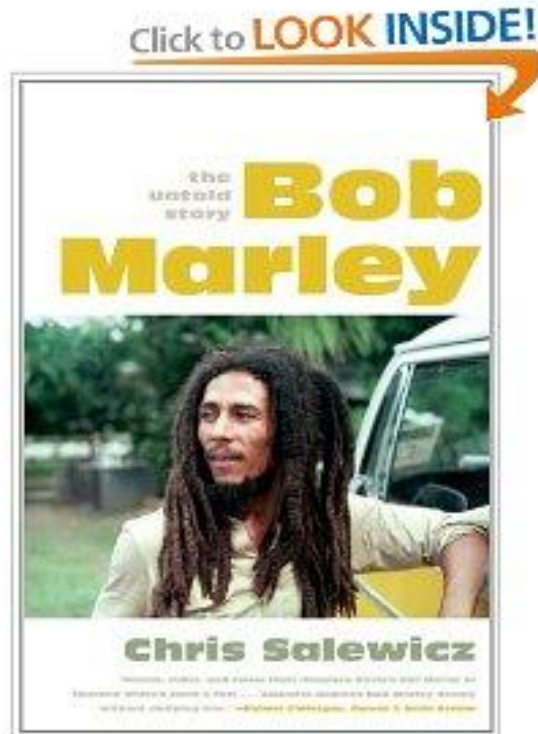
What are Secondary Sources?

Secondary sources “are analytical works that comment on and interpret other works such as primary sources”.

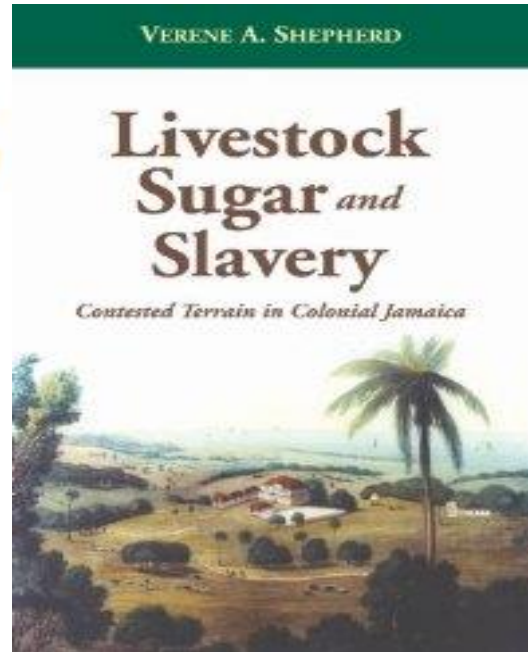
They are “second-hand, published accounts... because they are created after primary sources and they often use or talk about primary sources”.

Examples of secondary sources include: textbooks, biographies, newspaper articles, movies, stories and musical recordings.

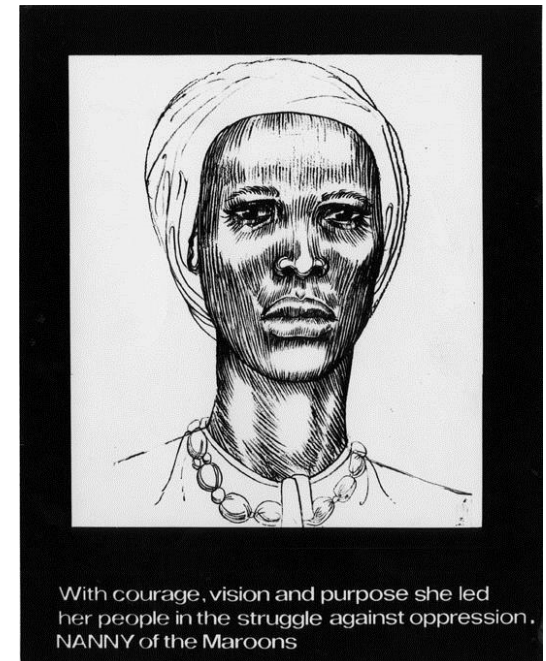
Sample Secondary Sources



Bob Marley, A biography



Historical text book



A depiction of Nanny of the Maroons. From the National Library of Jamaica

How do you know when it is a primary source?

- ▶ First pay attention to when the source was created. Can you determine if it was created within the time period under study?
- ▶ Did the creator witness the event or participate in the event when it happened?



How do you know when it is a primary source?

- ▶ Did you find this primary source at a reputable information unit such as a library, museum or on the website of a library, museum, educational institution, or government organization?

If the answer is yes to all the above questions then more than likely it is a primary source.



Evaluating Primary Sources

Reliability

- How trustworthy is the information found in the source? Primary sources are some times created by individuals with prejudices, and in order to find out if the picture painted is truthful, other primary sources should be used to corroborate the story.

Origin

- If you are unable to find information that tells you where it comes from then it is harder to determine if is an authentic primary source.

Which is the real Christopher Columbus?



www.shutterstock.com - 110860961

From *Shutterstock.com*



From *Biography.com*

Evaluating Primary Sources.

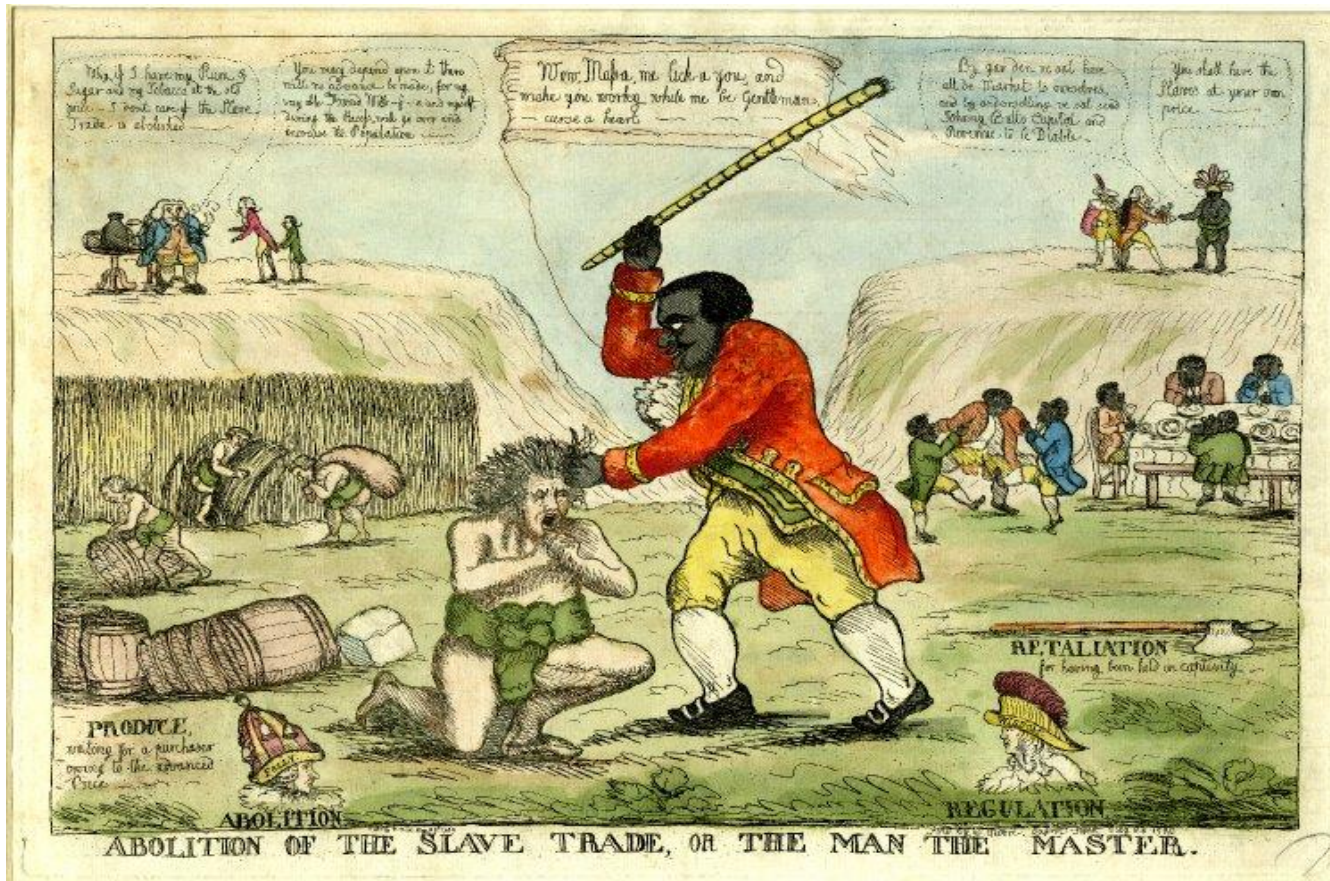
Validity

- Is this source really important to the research being undertaken, does it add meaningful information? When determining validity pay attention to who is the creator of the source, and the quality and relevancy of the information obtained.

Accuracy

- Are there any errors in the primary source? Human beings are imperfect creatures and we make mistakes. Therefore as said in a previous point, use other primary sources to corroborate the facts.

Is anything wrong with this picture?



“Satire on abolitionism”, a prediction about what will happen if slavery is abolished. Taken from the *British Museum* website.

Although many primary sources contain inaccurate and biased information; they are still useful as they can provide insight into the thinking of that time period. However, the flaws should NOT be overlooked in your interpretation of the source.

Did find you anything wrong with the cartoon from the previous slide? What do you think are the reasons for creating this cartoon?

Checklist– Evaluating Primary Sources

- ▶ Reliability
- ▶ Origin
- ▶ Validity
- ▶ Accuracy



“Cutting the sugar cane”. From the National Library of Jamaica.

Evaluating Secondary Sources

Suitability

- Read the introduction, go through the table of contents and the index, to determine if the source has sufficient and relevant information. Also, the information in the work should meet the required academic standard, for example do not use a primary school textbook for your CSEC History SBA.

Objectivity

- Prejudices and biased opinions will never be excluded from secondary sources. It is important to detect these biases, and an introduction or preface will usually give an idea of the point of view of the writer. Therefore use other secondary sources to get a balanced view

Evaluating Secondary Sources

Accuracy and Credibility

- Two ways to determine if a secondary source is accurate and credible is to use other secondary sources to corroborate the information and to check the list of references used by the author. The reference list can tell you the type of sources used and how they can be verified, so If a secondary source does not have references do **not** use it.

Currency

- Although in history the older the work the more valuable the information it contains, it is important that secondary sources contain information that reflect the most recent discoveries in the field. Therefore pay attention to the date of publication, and use the newer edition.

Authority

- Who is the author, is he or she an expert in the field and is well-known? Is the publisher a reputable company that only publishes works of high academic quality?

Checklist – Evaluating Secondary Sources

Is the information

- Suitable
- Objective
- Current
- Accurate
- Credible



and does it have Authority?

Evaluating Online resources

- ▶ “Much of what purports to be serious information [on the Web] is simply junk...”
–William Miller
(Former President of the Association of College and Research Libraries)
- ▶ Anyone who has access to a computer and the Internet can put information on the Web, therefore online resources must carefully evaluated before being accepted.



WIKIPEDIA

The Free Encyclopedia

Tips for checking the reliability of online resources

Is it produced by a reputable website? Look at website's address and see if it includes ".gov" or ".edu".

Information from websites of government organizations and educational institutions tend to be more reliable.

Does the webpage have an author? If the author's name is given, there must be verification that he or she has the expertise or qualifications in the subject.

The webpage should also give a list of sources used by the author. This would be helpful in verifying the information.

Remember! Both primary and secondary
sources are useful

Use Wisely!