SOURCES

Primary (1st Level)
Secondary (2nd Level)
Tertiary (3rd Level)

What are the types of Sources?

How Historians Work

Like you, historians are challenged by the complexity of the world, and many want to use their studies of the past to help solve the problems of the present or future. The questions that can come to mind are numberless, and serious historical investigators must choose wisely among them. They do not want to spend a lot of effort pursuing the kind of question to which history has no answer (for example, "What is the purpose of the Universe?" "Am I a lovable person?" "Who is the smartest person in the world?"). Nor do they want to struggle to achieve the solution to a problem that is not of real importance. (Historical investigation can probably tell you who wore the first pair of pants with a zipper in it, but that might not be worth knowing.) The

main difficulty facing historians is not eliminating unanswerable or unimportant questions but choosing among the important ones.

A historian's choice among important questions is determined by personal values, by the concerns of those who support the historian's work, by the nature of the time in which the historian lives, or by a combination of all of these. The ways in which these influences operate are very complex, and often historians themselves are unaware of them.

When the historian has chosen his or her subject, many questions still remain. For example, does historical evidence dealing with the subject exist, and if so, where can it be found? If someone wanted to study gypsy music from medieval Europe, and that music was never written down or mentioned in historical accounts of the period, then little or nothing can be found about this subject through historical research. Even if records exist on a particular subject, the historian may be unaware of them or unable to locate them. Perhaps the records are in an unfamiliar language or are in the possession of individuals or governments that deny access to them. Sometimes locating historical evidence can be a problem.

Having determined that records *do* exist and that they can be located and used, the historian faces another and more important problem: What is the credibility or reliability of the evidence? Is it genuine? How accurate are the records, and what biases were held by those who wrote them? If sources of information are in conflict, which is correct? Or is it possible that most of the sources are in error? Historians must pick and choose among the sources they uncover, and that is not always easy to do. The historian's own biases also cloud the picture, making impartial judgment extremely difficult.

Primary and Secondary Sources of Evidence

There are two basic forms of historical evidence: primary and secondary. Primary sources (see Figures 1.1 and 1.2) record the actual words of someone who participated in or witnessed the events described or of someone who got his or her information from participants. These can be newspaper accounts, diaries, notebooks, letters, minutes, interviews, and any works written by persons who claim firsthand knowledge of an event. Another primary source is official statements by established organizations or significant personages — royal decrees, church edicts, political party platforms, laws, and speeches. Primary sources also include any official records and statistics, such as those concerning births, marriages, deaths, taxes, deeds, and court trials. Recent history has been recorded by photographs, films, and audio- and videotapes. These recordings of events as they actually happened are also primary forms of evidence. Artifacts are another form

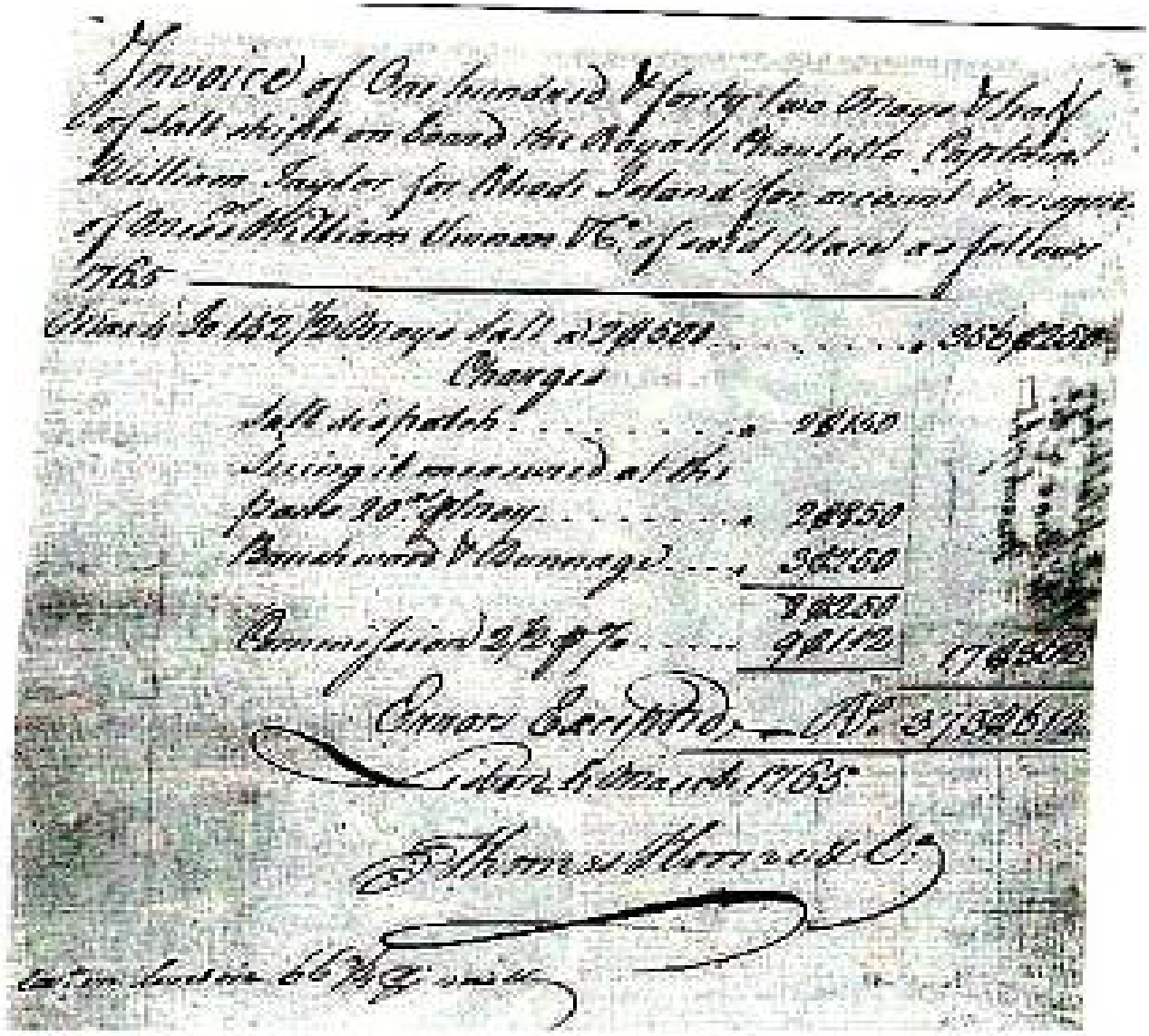

FIGURE 1.1 Example of Primary Evidence (1765)
Primary documents are often handwritten rather than printed and reflect the vocabulary and writing style of the day. Here is an invoice describing a shipment of salt carried from Lisbon, Portugal, to Providence, Rhode Island, in March 1765 "on Board the Royall Charlotta Captain William Taylor for Rhode Island for account & risque of Mr. William Vernon. . . ." The value of the cargo is written in Portuguese escudos. The document was handwritten and signed by Thomas Horne just after the salt was loaded onboard the ship. It brings us as close as we can come to the actual scene on the docks at Lisbon over two hundred years ago.

of primary evidence. These are things made by people in the past: houses, public buildings, tools, clothing, and much more.

Secondary sources (see Figure 1.3) record the findings of someone who did not observe the event but who investigated primary evidence. Most history books and articles fall into this category, although some

are actually *tertiary* (third level) evidence because they rely not on primary evidence but are themselves drawn from secondary sources. When your own history research paper is finished, it will be secondary or tertiary evidence to anyone who may use it in the future.

Douglass's personal story, like American history itself, is both inspiring and terrible. Few writers have better combined experience with the music of words to make us see the deepest contradictions of American history, the tragedy and necessity of conflict between slavery and freedom in a republic. Douglass exposes the bitterness and absurdity of racism at the same time that he imagines the fullest possibilities of the natural rights tradition, the idea that people are born with equal rights in the eyes of God and that these rights can be protected under human law. Few have written more effectively about the endurance of the human spirit under oppression. And in American letters, we have no better illustration of liberation through the power of language than in Douglass's *Narrative*. With his pen, Douglass was very much a self-conscious artist, and with his voice and his activism, he was a self-conscious prophet.

Readers of the *Narrative* quickly came to realize that language, written and oratorical, had been a fascination and a weapon for Douglass during his years as a slave. When he first spoke before a meeting of New Bedford blacks against African colonization in March 1839, and when he delivered his first public speeches before a gathering of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society on Nantucket Island in August 1841, he was not merely appearing as the spontaneous abolitionist miracle he was often portrayed — and portrayed himself — to be. No doubt the first effort at "speaking to white people" at the Nantucket meeting was a "severe cross," as he describes the experience in the *Narrative*.[4] But Douglass was no stranger to oratory, or to the moral arguments, sentimentalism, and evangelical zeal that characterized the antislavery movement during that era. By 1841 he had been reading abolitionist speeches, editorials, and poetry in William Lloyd Garrison's newspaper, *The Liberator*, for at least two years. And as the *Narrative* tells us in a variety of ways, Douglass had been a practicing abolitionist of a kind — out of self-interest and for his fellow bondsmen — even while he was a slave. He had read the Bible extensively, and he had discovered and modeled his ideas and style on a remarkable 1797 book, *The Columbian Orator*, by Caleb Bingham, a selection from which is reproduced in this volume.

From the earliest period of his public career, Douglass knew that whether in the slave South or in the free North to which he had liberated himself, literacy was power. The nineteenth-century Western world owed much of its values and mores to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment's faith in human reason and its assertion of individual rights. To be judged truly human and a citizen with social and political recognition, therefore, a person had to achieve literacy. For better or worse, civilization itself was equated with cultures that could write their history. Hence, writes Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Douglass became an American "Representative Man because he was Rhetorical Man, black master of the verbal arts. Douglass is our clearest example of the will to power as the will to write. The act of writing for the slave constituted the act of creating a public, historical self."[5]

FIGURE 1.5 Example of Secondary Evidence
This example of secondary evidence comes from a book about Frederick Douglass, the escaped slave who became a leader of the movement to end slavery in the United States. It is an essay, published along with Douglass's autobiography (a *primary* source), that explains the significance of the autobiography and sets it in its historical context.

The problem of determining the reliability of evidence is a serious one. Secondary and even primary sources can be fraudulent, inaccurate, or biased. Eyewitness accounts may be purposely distorted in order to avert blame or to bestow praise on a particular individual or group. Without intending to misinform, even on-the-scene judgments can be incorrect. Sometimes, the closer you are to an event, the more emotionally involved you are, and this distorts your understanding of it. We can all recall events in which we completely misunderstood the feelings, actions, and even words of another person. Historians have to weigh evidence carefully to see if those who have participated in an event understood it well enough to accurately describe it, and whether later authors understood the meaning of the primary sources they used. Official statements present another problem — that of propaganda or concealment. A government, group, or institution may make statements that it wishes others to believe but that are not true. What a group says may not be what it does. This is especially true in politics.

To check the reliability of evidence, historians use the tests of consistency and corroboration. Does the evidence contradict itself and does it agree with evidence from other sources? Historical research always involves checking one source against another. For example, Figure 1.4 on pages 11–12 presents two primary documents which both report the fighting at Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts, in 1775 — battles that began the Revolutionary War. As you read them, consider what additional sources would help you decide which report is more accurate. The two accounts agree on some facts but disagree on the responsibility for the fighting. Eyewitness accounts from other English soldiers and from American colonials who were there will help in determining which description is more accurate. It might turn out, for example, that parts of *each* account are correct and other parts are distorted in some way. Sometimes there is no one true source for the history of an event. Still, the more primary sources you read, the closer you will come to knowing the event in all its details and meanings.

The bias of a source also presents difficulties. People's attitudes toward the world influence the way they interpret events. For example, you and your parents may have different attitudes toward music, sex, religion, or politics. These differences can cause you to disagree with them about the value of a rock concert, a Sunday sermon, or the president. Historians have their own attitudes toward the subjects they are investigating, and these cause them to draw different conclusions about the character and importance of religious, political, intellectual, and other movements. Later historians must take these biases into account when weighing the reliability of evidence.

Primary sources are the best source of information. Here are some examples.

Some Primary Sources:

I. Contemporary Records: while something is going on.

   A. Instruction or Command

   B. Stenographic, Photographic, or Phonographic

   C. Some business or legal papers

   D. Personal Notebooks and Private Memoranda

   E. Video or Audio Recordings

II. Confidential Reports: after the fact, to create impression, less intimate, not as close to the event.

   A. Military and Diplomatic Dispatches

   B. Journal and Diaries

   C. Personal Letters

III. Public Reports

   A. Newspapers and TV News

   B. Memoirs and Autobiographies

   C. Official and Authorized Histories

IV. Written Questionnaires

V. Government Documents and Compilations

VI. Expressions of Opinion: Editorials, Speeches, Letter-to-the-editor, Cartoons, Political Cartoons

VII. Fiction Books, Songs, and Poetry (contemporary)

VIII. Folk Lore, Myths, Legends, Stories (contemporary)