TEACHING WITH PRIMARY SOURCES—MTSU
NEWSLETTER: JANUARY 2014

WELCOME!

Teaching with Primary Sources—Middle Tennessee State University, administered by the Center for Historic Preservation, engages learners of all ages in using primary sources to explore major issues and questions in many different disciplines.

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NEWS

• Mark your calendars for this summer’s Civil War Institute! From June 17-19, we will be exploring the theme “A Soldier’s Life.” The institute will spend two class days in Murfreesboro and the other day will be spent visiting middle Tennessee Civil War sites. More information will be available in next month’s newsletter.

• Are you on Twitter? If so, be sure to follow the @TeachingLC feed. The Library’s Education Outreach staff is working to use this social-media platform to give you quick ideas for new primary sources to use in your classroom with critical-thinking questions. Each week they also deconstruct a new source in five parts. To read more about this new resource, visit the Teaching with the Library of Congress blog.

“AWESOME” SOURCE OF THE MONTH:

Children having snowball fight, Chillicothe, Ohio [Feb. 1940]

What is your favorite winter weather outdoor activity?

THEME: MYTHBUSTERS

You may be familiar with the popular television series Mythbusters, which sets out to scientifically test and confirm or “bust” scenarios based on Internet claims, movie stunts, or common sayings. This issue of the TPS-MTSU newsletter attempts to “bust” some myths about history that seem to get passed down in textbooks and/or popular culture. The inquiry process followed by TPS for approaching primary sources in history/social studies, English/language arts, and related subjects is similar to the scientific method, from testing out a hypothesis to making conclusions based on careful observation and then verifying those conclusions. Asking questions about well-known stories can keep us from taking them for granted and help us discover the truth behind the stories.

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Lesson Idea—First in Flight?

Ohio, whose state license plates read “Birthplace of Aviation,” and North Carolina, whose read “First in Flight,” have always debated whether their respective states can claim the “first in flight” recognition through the Wright Brothers’ 1903 flight. But, recently Connecticut passed a state law recognizing Gustave Whitehead’s alleged 1901 flight as first. This has caused quite a bit of press in the past year.

Divide your class into two groups: Team Whitehead and Team Wright Brothers. Have your students analyze the Whitehead and Wright brothers interviews and accounts to consider the following questions: How were the two machines similar? How were they different? What were the flying conditions, and who served as witnesses to the events?

What key factors lead you to believe the plausibility of one over the other? How does the existence or lack of photographic evidence affect each team’s argument? Reunite the class to discuss the 2003 Scientific American article and the present day debate surrounding the “first in flight” distinction.

Discuss the evolving nature of technological innovation and its role in the development of modern aeronautics. How did the commercial viability of the inventors’ product and their ability to make improvements to that invention influence the debate today?

This lesson idea can be adapted to meet state curriculum standards for Science, grades 6-8 (Embedded Inquiry, and Embedded Technology and Engineering), High School Physics as well as High School U. S. History (Era 6 and Era 7).

Lesson Idea—Rosa Parks & the Bus Boycott

The story goes that Rosa Parks, a seamstress on her way home from work on Dec. 1, 1955, refused to give up her seat to a white person. This is indeed true. Her steadfastness in the face of Jim Crow laws was followed by a year-long bus boycott by the African American community of Montgomery, Alabama, which ended successfully with a repeal of the law mandating segregated public spaces. This is also true. However, the implications that Parks just decided to keep her seat because she was tired, and that her action spontaneously sparked the bus boycott, are misleading. While Parks’s action has understandably made her an American hero, focusing just on one individual neglects to emphasize the important roles that other community organizers played to plan and carry out such a massive and effective boycott. It was not a spontaneous event after all.

Start by asking your students to tell the story about Rosa Parks as they’ve always heard it, recording key points on a white board as they go. Next, show students the photograph (above) of Rosa Parks getting fingerprinted, and ask them what they think this image is depicting. If students believe that this is a photograph of her Dec. 1 arrest, tell them that this photograph is actually from 1956. Was Parks arrested a second time? How else did she defy the law? Who else was arrested because of actions against segregation on public buses? Then, have students read the article on the Montgomery Bus Boycott from the Encyclopedia of Alabama. How does this new information change the story about Parks and the boycott? Students can also examine the role of Jo Ann Robinson, whose fliers advertised the initial boycott, through a lesson from Reading Like a Historian or by reading the flier’s words here (8th paragraph). Have students ponder the question, “What/who does it take to organize such a boycott?”

This lesson can be adapted to meet curriculum standards for high school U.S. History (Modern United States 1945-1979) and English/Language Arts Common Core Standards (Reading: Informational Text and History/Social Studies).
Lesson Idea– Did Pocahontas Save John Smith?

If you polled your students, how many of them would agree with the following statement: Pocahontas rescued John Smith from certain death at the hands of her father Powhatan? This is a popular historical myth that was further perpetuated by the 1995 Disney cartoon Pocahontas. Where did this myth originate from?

Begin by allowing your students to view this scene from the Disney film. How does this align with their understanding of the events that took place between John Smith and Pocahontas? What differences do they note? Keep a list of your students’ thoughts and observations in the front of the class.

Next have students read John Smith’s account of his encounter with Powhatan from the 1608 A True Relation... (pp. 33-38). You can access a version of his account (document A) created for students by clicking here for a packet of materials. How does this account differ from your students’ earlier reflections? What surprises them about Smith’s account? John Smith wrote about his first encounter with Powhatan again in 1624 in General History of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles (pp. 101-102). For middle school, have them read document B in the packet. How does this compare with Smith’s account in A True Relation? What might explain the differences in his two accounts? Have students review the timeline included on page four of the packet.

You can conclude your lesson by discussing how historians deal with conflicting primary sources. Ask your students what they would do next to uncover the truth. For more on thinking like a historian, be sure to review this edition of the TPS Journal.

This lesson can be adapted to meet curriculum standards in 4th and 8th grade social studies and 4th-12th grade English/Language Arts Common Core Standards (Reading Informational Text).

Featured Feature– Mythbusting TPS-MTSU Lesson Plans

In addition to the lesson ideas in this newsletter, TPS-MTSU has several mythbusting lesson plans already in our archives.

- In Debunking Civil War Photographs: The Case of the Moved Body, 9th-12th graders fulfill standards in Visual Art History and History by analyzing the staging of Civil War battlefield photographs. Students answer questions about how the photographic technology of the time influenced the composition of images, the motives of photographers, and the effects of these images and their accompanying text on the public’s view of the war.

- The familiar story of Columbus “discovering” the New World is now an old-fashioned one, but how was this myth finally “busted”? A Matter of Perspective: Columbus in the New World helps 7th graders sort facts from fiction and learn to detect bias by comparing their textbook accounts of Columbus with excerpts from his journals and a famous painting of his arrival from 1893.

- The Myth of the Vanishing Race, for 8th-12th graders, focuses on the creation of a cultural myth, in this case, the early 20th-century belief that Native Americans were nearly extinct as a people. Students look at a number of photographs and discuss how the photographers helped create and perpetuate the myth of the vanishing race.

- The image of the Migrant Mother is ubiquitous in discussions of American history. But who was she, really? Investigating an Icon of the Great Depression: The Migrant Mother guides both 5th and 9-12th graders through the recollections of the subject, Florence Thompson; Thompson’s descendants; and Dorothea Lange, the photographer. How do the stories attached to the photograph compare with the real lives of Florence Thompson and her children? What are some of the issues created when a documentary photograph becomes an icon?
Myth of the Vanishing Race

The vanishing race—Navaho [1904]

Early in the 1900s, photographer Edward S. Curtis believed that Native Americans were a “vanishing race” and that this photograph of Navaho people illustrated that conclusion. Describe the setting and what is happening in this photograph. How do the setting and action support Curtis’s description? Does it help that the image is rather indistinct? This lesson plan explores the myth of the vanishing race.

Columbus Discovered America

Concerning Discovered Islands: Letter of Christopher Columbus, to Whom Our Age is Greatly Indebted, Concerning Islands Recently Discovered in the Indian Ocean [1493, detail, p. 5]

Columbus Day is a federal holiday in the United States, but Columbus himself never set foot in this country (and certainly didn’t name it “America”). In 1492, he landed in what is now the Bahamas and Hispaniola, and he always believed that he actually “discovered” a new part of Asia. Read more about it at the Exploring the Early Americas exhibition.

Gunfight at the O.K. Corral

Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Tombstone, Cochise County, Arizona. [1886]

The gunfight at the O.K. Corral is arguably one of the most iconic tales of the Wild West. What is the real story behind this gunfight and its most famous participant Wyatt Earp? Check out this fascinating Webcast by Ann Kirschner in which she discusses Josephine Earp and her life with Wyatt.

Grand Duchess Anastasia

RUSSIAN ROYAL FAMILY... [1914]

For decades, rumors spread that Grand Duchess Anastasia (3rd from right) had survived the 1918 execution of her family. Several people came forward claiming to be surviving family members. A woman called Anna Anderson, who died in 1984, was the most famous “Anastasia.” However, in 2009, science finally confirmed that all the Romanovs died and were buried in 1918. Why did the myth of a surviving Romanov, particularly Anastasia, persist so long?