

How to Find Primary Sources in History

What is a primary source?

Primary sources may include several sorts of documents:

1. official records of events such as government documents, laws and treaties, statistics (birth, death, taxes), court records, royal decrees, official correspondence (e.g. diplomatic) , property deeds, photographs (in some instances), drawings, film (e.g. newsreels), maps,etc.
2. the actual words of participants in and/or witnesses to events (whether recorded at the time of the events or afterwards); these may include letters, diaries, memoires,notebooks, newspaper accounts, interviews, oral history, etc.
3. artifacts such as buildings, tools, machinery, clothing and uniforms, furniture, weapons, badges and insignia, etc.

Secondary sources are historical works that use primary sources and other secondary sources to tell about events in the past. Historians, professional or amateur, write histories using these sources; they are not eye-witnesses (usually) to the events that they narrate and explain.

A full discussion of primary sources can be found in Jules R. Benjamin, *A Student's Guide to History*, 9th ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004) in the Watson Reference Collection at D16.3 B4 2004.

You may also want to consult these important websites.

Library Research: Finding Primary Sources at:

<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/PrimarySources.html>

Primary Sources at:

<http://www.library.yale.edu/instruction/primsource.html>

Using Primary Sources on the Web at:

<http://lib.washington.edu/subject/History/RUSA/>

How to find primary sources in the KU Online Catalog

Search in the online catalog using **Subject Headings**. Search for countries, cities, corporate bodies, groups of persons (e.g. nurses or Latinos), topical headings or historical periods. Then use the sub-heading **History-Sources**.

- E.g. Women - Great Britain – History - Sources
- France-History - 18th Century - Sources
- Anglo-Saxons – History – Sources

Other useful sub-headings are:

Correspondence

E.g. James, Henry – Correspondence

Diaries

E.g. Haig, Douglas – Diaries

Personal Narratives

E.g. World War, 1914-1918 – Personal Narratives, American

Sometimes other sub-headings may be helpful. E.,g

Archival Resources

Charters

Court Records

Public Records

Search the online catalog using the **Keyword Boolean** search. Caution: this kind of search may give you more items than you want. E.g. **France and history and sources** will give you nearly 1500 titles, and **Women and diaries** will give you nearly 350.

Selected KU Library Bibliographic Databases

19th Century Masterfile

Indexes 19th century newspapers, periodicals, books, and government documents; some full-text. Contains Poole's Index to Periodical Literature.

Public Documents Masterfile

A comprehensive electronic guide to federal, state, local and international public documents, spanning over 200 years of publication, in a single searchable database.

Readers' Guide Retrospective

Provides indexing to the most popular general-interest periodicals published in the United States and reflects the history of 20th century America.

Selected KU Library Full-Text Databases with Primary Sources

19th Century U.S. Newspapers

19th Century U.S. Newspapers provides access to approximately 1.7 million pages of primary source newspaper content from the 19th century, featuring full-text content and images from numerous newspapers from a range of urban and rural regions throughout the U.S. The collection encompasses the entire 19th century, with an emphasis on such topics as the American Civil War, African-American culture and history, Western migration and Antebellum-era life among other subjects.

American Civil War-Letters and Diaries

Presents a collection of American Civil War (1861-1865) letters, diaries, memoirs and biographies written between 1855 and 1875, including material that is previously unpublished. Covers the military, social, economic, and political aspects of the war.

Documenting the American South

A collection of sources on Southern history, literature and culture from the colonial period through the first decades of the twentieth century. Includes the following projects: First-person narratives of the American South; Library of Southern literature; North American slave narratives; The Southern homefront, 1861-1865; The church in the Southern Black community; The North Carolina experience, beginnings to 1940; and: North Carolinians and the Great War.

Early Encounters in North America: Peoples, Cultures, and the Environment

The Early Encounters database documents the relationships among peoples in North America from 1534 to 1850. It makes available a collection of published and unpublished accounts, including narratives, diaries, journals, and letters that document the first impressions of North America by Europeans and of Europeans by native people. The collection includes primary materials, images, environmental studies and maps that researchers and students would otherwise struggle to obtain. Indexing makes it possible to compare original descriptions of an area with the observations by individuals who followed.

Early English Books Online

Digital library of book published in England before 1700 and/or books published anywhere in the world before 1700 written in the English language. Contains all works listed in: Pollard & Redgrave's Short-title catalogue, Wing's Short title catalogue and Thomason tracts.

Harper's Weekly

HarpWeek provides electronic access to Harper's Weekly, the illustrated 19th century "national newspaper," an important resource for examining 19th century America on a cumulative week-to-week basis. Through this database one can discover news stories, illustrations, cartoons, editorials, biographies, literature, and advertisements that shaped and reflected public opinion of the times. The Civil War Era and Reconstruction I segments available here cover the period 1857 - 1877, and begins with the inaugural issue, Jan. 3, 1857. Prior to the Civil War the journal provides coverage of such events as the economic panic of 1857, John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry, the attempt to lay the first transatlantic cable, and the presidential election of 1860. With the onset of the Civil War, the journal devotes its efforts to covering the conflict with detailed reporting, vivid illustrations, and influential commentary. Readers can follow news and views from the battlefield; intense policy debates concerning emancipation, the draft, financing the war, civil liberties, the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, the end of the war, and the early years of reconstruction. (At the "Web Access Agreement" screen, click "I Accept").

Historical New York Times 1851-

Provides access to full page and article images with searchable full-text back to the first issue in 1851.

Making of America

Digital library of primary sources in American social history primarily from the antebellum period through reconstruction. The collection is particularly strong in the subject areas of education, psychology, American history, sociology, religion, and science and technology.

North American Immigrant Letters, Diaries and Oral Histories

North American Immigrant Letters, Diaries, and Oral Histories provides a personal view of what it meant to immigrate to America and Canada. Included are approximately 100,000 pages of primary sources (many previously unpublished), such as letters, diaries, pamphlets, autobiographies, political cartoons, and oral histories. Materials included cover a period from approximately 1840 to the present, with most of the focus on the period from 1890 to 1920. People from many countries are represented, including more recent waves of immigrants from Latin America and Asia. Several thousand pages of Ellis Island oral history interviews are indexed and searchable as well.

Territorial Kansas Online

Contains hundreds of personal letters, diaries, photos, and maps from the collections of the Kansas State Historical Society and the Kansas Collection of the Spencer Research Library at the University of Kansas. Includes a tutorial for Territorial Kansas history, with lesson plans.

Selected Print Resources in the Library Reference Department

Documents of American History. Eds. Henry Steele Commager and Milton Cantor. 10th ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ.: Prentice Hall, 1988. E173 .D59 1988

English Historical Documents. 12 v. New York: Oxford University Press, 1950 - . DA26 .E55

Major Peace Treaties of Modern History, 1648-1967. Ed. Fred L. Israel. 5 v. New York: Chelsea House, 1967-1980. JX121 .I8

Bibliographic Resources: Some Examples

American Autobiography, 1945-1980: a Bibliography. Ed. Mary Louise Briscoe. Madison, WI.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982. Z5305 .U5 A47 1982.

American Diaries: an Annotated Bibliography of American Diaries written prior to the year 1861. Ed. William Matthews. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1945. Z1247 .M3

A Bibliography of American Autobiographies. Eds. Louis Kaplan et. al. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1961. Z1224 .K3

Personal Writings by Women to 1900: a Bibliography of American and British Writers. Eds. Gwenn Davis and Beverly A. Joyce. London: Mansell, 1989. Z1229 .W8 D38 1989

The Published Diaries and Letters of American Women: an Annotated Bibliography. Ed. Joyce D. Goodfriend. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1987. Z5305 .U5 G66 1987

Primary Sources in KU Library Departments

Government Information Resources

The KU Libraries has information resources from a number of government and quasi-government organizations. These include:

- U.S. Federal Government. Member, Federal Depository Library Program since 1869, and Regional Library in FDLP since 1976
- U.N. Depository Program
- European Union Depository Program
- Official Publications of the United Kingdom
- State of Kansas Government Information
- World Bank
- International Monetary Fund (IMF)
- Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)

Materials from these and other organizations may be available in print, microfiche or microfilm, computerized media such as CD-ROM or DVD, and via the Internet. Most materials are in the Anschutz Library (State of Kansas materials are in the Kansas Collection, Spencer Research Library). Internet based resources are generally available from any computer with a live Internet connection, including computers in KU Libraries. (Please note: some government documents resources may require a KU affiliation to order to access them from a non-KU computer.)

Kansas Collection

The Kansas Collection is the regional history division of the University of Kansas Libraries. The Collection provides researchers with primary source materials that document the history of Kansas, the region, and the people who have lived here. In order to support teaching and research at the University, and elsewhere, staff of the Collection acquire, preserve, and make available such resources as manuscripts, historical photographs, maps, architectural drawings and blueprints, books, newspapers and other serial publications (e.g., periodicals), film and videotapes that document the "Kansas Experience." The Kansas Collection is also a depository for publications of the state of Kansas and for Douglas County records.

The University Archives

The University Archives is the repository for the records documenting the history of the University of Kansas. Included are the official papers of the chancellors, records of student and faculty activities, and selected publications and papers of alumni and faculty.

The Archives includes substantial photographic holdings documenting university people, places, and events; blueprints and architectural drawings for university buildings; videotapes and films of university events and activities; books published about the university, faculty and students; university publications such as student newspapers, university timetables, and yearbooks.

Special Collections

The Department of Special Collections contains a wide range of rare books and manuscripts. Its primary charge is the collection and preservation of original sources for use by students of the humanities, of the history of science, and of the history of the book.

The Department presently holds about 250,000 volumes printed since the mid-15th century and about 500,000 manuscripts dating from Antiquity to the present.