

Using Original Documents: An Introduction

A Letter from John Stark

Background

The study and writing of history requires the use of original or primary sources as well as secondary sources, such as textbooks written by those who were not present when actual events occurred. *Primary sources* are eyewitness or first-person accounts. Their accuracy or reliability can be tested using critical thinking skills. Students, like historians, can incorporate the use of original or primary sources into their classroom study of the past.

Written documents are the *records of history*. They include such things as maps, letters, diaries, newspaper articles, manuscripts, and cartoons. They give us insight into what people thought about their own lives and their reactions to events going on around them.

Historians are paying more attention to the records of history that deal with everyday life because these records tell us more about how most people lived at a particular time. Although government documents are traditionally considered “important,” we do not know or understand the impact or significance of these documents until we examine additional primary sources from the same time period.

The use of primary or original documents requires answering several critical questions:

- What type of original document is it?
- Who is the author?
- What is the author’s point-of-view?
- Why was the document created?
- How accurate is the document? What evidence is needed to prove that it is a reliable or accurate source of information?

We are not always able to answer these questions about every primary source. We need evidence to provide reliability. And sometimes all the evidence we need is not available either because it does not exist or because we haven’t found it yet. Many questions about the past, such as who started the Boston Massacre? are not answerable! Therefore historians often say that this is *probably* what happened. When new information or explanations are found, we *revise* our writing of history. Historians are constantly *interpreting* (explaining the meaning of facts in light of what we know at the time) and *revising* (changing their interpretation as new information becomes available) history. *The writing of history is never finished.*

Objectives

1. To introduce students to primary sources and how they can inform us about the past.
2. To develop critical thinking skills for evaluating the reliability of original sources.
3. To become aware of resources available at research libraries like the New Hampshire Historical Society's Tuck Library. One of our guided museum programs, Document Detectives, can provide your students further introduction to the Tuck Library and to working with primary source material.

Activities

- Questions for Discussion
 - What are primary documents? (first-person, or eyewitness accounts, written at the time of the event)
 - What primary documents do you and your family have for recording the events of your lives? (photographs, video, e-mail, letters, diaries, newspaper clippings)
 - Where do we find primary documents about events of the past such as the American Revolution? (historic sites, libraries, archives, personal or family collections)
- After reading John Stark's letter, have students answer these questions:
 - How is writing in the 1700s different from writing today? Why might Stark have chosen to capitalize certain words?
 - What is the purpose of General Stark's letter?
 - What "message" is he sending to the Revolutionary leaders in Vermont?
 - If you were a member of the Vermont Revolutionaries, how would you feel after reading this letter? What action would you take?
 - How accurate is General Stark's description of the situation? Is he being unnecessarily pessimistic? How can we test his perception of the situation? (We know that generals often complain about not having enough men and equipment and often use these complaints as excuses for not fighting. This happened quite often in the Union Army during the Civil War as well as in 20th-century battles in Southeast Asia.)
 - Are there any unfamiliar names mentioned in this letter? Where could you look to find information about these people?
 - What was the outcome of General Stark's march? Where can we find more information about the significance of what happened at Bennington?

- Are there any particular problems using a primary source quoted in a secondary source? (Did the author of the secondary source accurately quote the primary source?)
- Encourage students to share original sources that record the life of their family, school, or group of friends and to ask the same questions about these documents as those asked about documents from earlier times.

Teacher Resources

Material Culture Studies in America. Nashville, TN: The Association for State and Local History, 1984.

Metcalf, Fay D. and Matthew T. Downey. *Using Local History in the Classroom*. Nashville, TN: The Association for State and Local History, 1982.

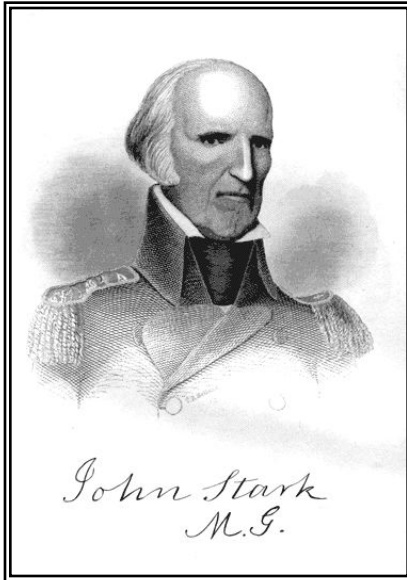
Schlereth, Thomas J. *Artifacts and the American Past*. Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, 1996.

Incorporate reading and analyzing historical documents into the curriculum throughout the school year. *New Hampshire History Curriculum Book I (K-6)* and *Book II (7-12)* contain lists of sources for teachers and students.

Source Information

- General Stark's letter to the Vermont Committee is cited in Howard Parker Moore's *A Life of General John Stark of New Hampshire* (New York, 1949), pp. 271–272.
- T.R. Holland's engraving of General Stark is the frontispiece in Caleb Stark's *Memoir and Official Correspondence of John Stark with Notices of Several Other Officers of the Revolution; Also a Biography of Capt. Phineas Stevens and Col. Robert Rogers with an Account of His Services in America During the Seven Years War* (Concord: G. Parker Lyon, 1860).

General Stark's Letter



Charlestown, No. 4, July 30th, 1777

I received yours of the 22nd inst. with the inclosed informing me of the situation of the enemy and of our frontiers; but previous to your letter I had received an Express from Col. Warner informing me of their situation and I forwarded 250 men to their relief on the 28th; I sent another detachment of this day and as fast as they come in I will send them. I expect to march myself tomorrow or next day; we are detained a good deal for want of Bullet molds as there is but one pair in Town and the few Balls you sent goes but a little way in supplying the whole.

I am afraid we shall meet with difficulty in procuring Kettles or utensils to cook our Victuals as the Troops has not brought any. If such articles can be procured I believe it would be of the utmost importance to the safety and welfare of the Troops. I am informed this day by a man from Otter Creek that the Enemy is left Castletown and is gone to Skeensborough with an intent to march to Bennington but I rather think they do it by way of a faint to call the attention of General Schuyler from fort Edward or to Fatigue our Troops. There is four pieces of small cannon at this place that looks good but wants to be cleared out and put on Carriages; if you should think proper I will order it done as there is people here that says they can do it; as there is but very little Rum in the Store here if some could be forwarded to us it would oblige us very much as there is noe of that article in them parts where we are agoing. I inclose you a Copy of a Letter I this moment received from Col. Williams and as you informed me when I saw you last that you had not received any account from any gentleman in the army since the desertion of Ticonderoga I likewise inclose you a copy of a letter I recd from Mr. Coggan and by the best information is as near the truth as any you may receive. I have showed it to Col. Bellows and a number of other officers that was present and they say they could all sign it.

I am, Sirs, your Honours most

Obedt humble servt

John Stark

I would take it kind if the Brigade Majors' Commission could be forwarded to me, as being present with me; his name is Stephen Peabody; likewise adjt. Edward Evans of Col. Stickney's Regt.