

# Connecting with the Past

*Uncovering clues in primary source documents* — Lee Ann Potter

**A few years ago**, I found my great-great grandfather's homestead application among the billions of documents held in the National Archives. The pedagogical significance of the find was articulated perfectly by my husband—who happens to be an engineer, not a teacher or historian. His amazement at the tri-folded, eight-page, yellowing document from 1882 prompted him to say, "I can't believe it was actually his. I can't believe it is here. And I can't believe they are letting you touch it."

His observations hit on perhaps the three most important reasons for teaching students history through primary sources: they are a part of the past; they are with us today; and touching them allows us, quite literally, to touch and connect with the past. Primary sources also serve as excellent tools for teaching students the skills that will ensure their success in the information age. Primary sources

- encourage critical thinking
- make students question where information comes from
- drive students to determine validity and reliability of sources
- push students to consider bias, point of view, and audience, and
- enable students to realize the importance of referencing multiple resources.

Finally, as artifacts, primary sources have histories of their own, and often their significance transcends their content.

Primary sources are materials that were created by those who participated in or witnessed the events of the past. They can include letters, reports, photographs, drawings, sound recordings, motion pictures, artifacts, as well as other items. However, what may be a primary source to one topic may be a secondary source to another. For example, in most cases, a textbook is considered a secondary or even a tertiary source. Yet, if one is studying the impact of a specific political policy on education, textbooks contemporary to that policy become primary sources.

Primary sources can capture the attention of even the most reluctant learner. Occasionally, a well-chosen transcription of a document can do this, but in most cases, facsimiles or originals are much more effective. The letterhead, handwriting, special markings, size, color, texture, or other physical attributes contribute to a primary source's ability to engage students.

Once a tangible piece of history is in the hands of students, moving the students to understand historical events and processes

is the next step. Comprehending the content of the primary source is part of this understanding. But perhaps more important is that the primary source reminds students that the past was once the present. This realization helps students recognize that the events of history were not pre-determined and that their outcomes were once uncertain. It is at this point that students begin to understand not only historical events and processes, but also their significance.

A letter written by Secretary of War Henry Stimson to President Harry S. Truman in April 1945 is one example of a document capable of capturing student attention and encouraging critical thinking. In the letter, Stimson suggests that the two men meet to discuss a highly secret matter. The "highly secret matter" was the Manhattan Project, the program that led to the development of the atomic bomb, and although the letter itself does not mention the project by name, clues in the document will either lead students to this conclusion or will encourage further research. The clues include the following:

- 1) the date of the document—it was written on April 24, 1945, in the midst of World War II, less than two weeks following the death of President Franklin Roosevelt and Truman's swearing-in;
- 2) the players—Secretary of War Henry Stimson and President Harry S. Truman;
- 3) the special markings—"Secret" and "Declassified";
- 4) the content—"highly secret matter" and "bearing on our present foreign relations."

Captain Charles E. Yeager's notes on the ninth powered flight of the XS-1, dated October 14, 1947, are an example of a document that might make students consider the importance of the audience and realize the value in referring to multiple sources for information. The fourth item in the document reads in part, "it is estimated that 1.05 Mach was attained." In other words, he broke the sound barrier for the first time! But Yeager's emotions and the significance of the event seem to be missing from this document. As a result, students might be driven to find another account of the event—for example, the pilot's 1985 autobiography entitled *Yeager*. Comparing the two sources, both written by the same individual, one at the time the event occurred and one many years later, will easily lead students to considering the role both audience and passage of time play in how information is presented.

A White House memorandum dated August 13, 1974, is an

~~SECRET~~

WAR DEPARTMENT  
WASHINGTON

*B.F.  
War*

~~75~~  
*file*

April 24, 1945.

*saw  
4-25-45*

Dear Mr. President:

I think it is very important that I should have a talk with you as soon as possible on a highly secret matter.

I mentioned it to you shortly after you took office but have not urged it since on account of the pressue you have been under. It, however, has such a bearing on our present foreign relations and has such an important effect upon all my thinking in this field that I think you ought to know about it without much further delay.

*x386*

Faithfully yours,

*Henry H. Stimson*

Secretary of War. *x25*

The President,  
The White House.

*Mo H*

*Patton list  
tomorrow, Wed. 75,  
H.H.*

DECLASSIFIED

E. O. 11652, Sec. 3(E) and 3(D) or (F)

OSD letter, April 12, 1974

By NLT *[signature]*, NARS Date *1-2-76*

~~SECRET~~



example of a document that could be used to teach a significant concept beyond simply the information contained in the text of the document. This particular document appears to be a typical government memorandum that announces two personnel changes: one of which is Vice President Gerald R. Ford's promotion to president following Richard Nixon's resignation. It is the document's simplicity that makes it a powerful illustration of something that is almost intangible: the peaceful transfer of power in a democracy.

Finally, an 1863 map of Gettysburg is an example of a document that can help reinforce for students their understanding of the concept of provenance, or the history

**The Archival Experience**  
*If it is impossible to take students to an archival facility, try replicating one in your classroom: require students to leave all materials except for pencils in their lockers, distribute copies of documents in archival folders or boxes for students to analyze; and provide students with white gloves to wear while working with the documents.*

of ownership of a primary source. Just looking at the map may be interesting to students for it is a hand-drawn survey of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, created the same year that the Civil War battle occurred there. What the map itself does not reveal however, is that it is the one that accompanied General Robert E. Lee's report to Confederate President Jefferson Davis concerning the Battle of Gettysburg. This information may contribute to student interest in the document and encourage students to see documents as not merely sources for information, but as tangible links to the past, with histories of their own.

Perhaps the very best way to get students to appreciate the power of primary sources is by directing them to conduct original research in an archival institution, in a library, or in an historical society's special

COPY  
PILOTS NOTES

**SECRET**  
**DECLASSIFIED**

Date: 14 October 1947

Pilot: Capt. Charles E. Yeager

Time: 14 Minutes

9th Powered Flight

1. After normal pilot entry and the subsequent climb, the XS 1 was dropped from the B 29 at 20,000' and at 250 MPH IAS. This was slower than desired.
2. Immediately after drop, all four cylinders were turned on in rapid sequence, their operation stabilizing at the chamber and line pressures reported in the last flight. The ensuing climb was made at .85-.88 Mach<sub>1</sub>, and, as usual, it was necessary to change the stabilizer setting to 2 degrees nose down from its pre drop setting of 1 degree nose down. Two cylinders were turned off between 35,000' and 40,000' but speed had increased to .92 Mach<sub>1</sub> as the airplane was leveled off at 42,000'. Incidentally, during the slight push over at this altitude, the lox line pressure dropped perhaps 40 psi and the resultant rich mixture caused the chamber pressures to decrease slightly. The effect was only momentary, occurring at .6 G's and all pressures returned to normal at 1 G.
3. In anticipation of the decrease in elevator effectiveness at speeds above .93 Mach<sub>1</sub>, longitudinal control by means of the stabilizer was tried during the climb at .83, .88, and .92 Mach<sub>1</sub>. The stabilizer was moved in increments of 1/4 - 1/3 degree and proved to be very effective; also, no change in effectiveness was noticed at the different speeds.
4. At 42,000' in approximately level flight, a third cylinder was turned on. Acceleration was rapid and speed increased to .98 Mach<sub>1</sub>. The needle of the machmeter fluctuated at this reading momentarily, then passed off the scale. Assuming that the off scale reading remained linear, it is estimated that 1.05 Mach<sub>1</sub> was attained at this time. Approximately 30% of fuel and lox remained when this speed was reached and the motor was turned off.
5. While the usual light buffet and instability characteristics were encountered in the .88-90 Mach<sub>1</sub> range, and elevator effectiveness was very greatly decreased at .94 Mach<sub>1</sub>, stability about all three axes was good as speed increased and elevator effectiveness was regained above .97 Mach<sub>1</sub>. As speed decreased after turning off the motor, the various phenomena occurred in reverse sequence at the usual speeds, and in addition, a slight longitudinal porpoising was noticed from 198-96 Mach<sub>1</sub> which controllable by the elevators alone. Incidentally, the stabilizer setting was not changed from its 2 degrees nose down position after trial at .92 Mach<sub>1</sub>.
6. After jettisoning the remaining fuel and lox a 1 G stall was performed at 45,000'. The flight was concluded by the subsequent glide and a normal landing on the lake bed.

/s/

Copied 11/14/50  
File 1 copy XS 1 pilot's notes  
1 copy Computers

CHARLES E. YEAGER  
Capt., Air Corps.

**SECRET**  
**DECLASSIFIED**  
**DECLASSIFIED**

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

August 13, 1974

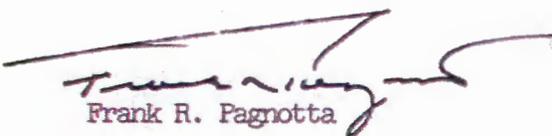
MEMORANDUM FOR: Miss Jane Dannerhauer  
Staff Assistant, Security  
Mr. Louis B. Sims, Special Agent in Charge  
Technical Security Division

SUBJECT: Weekly Report

The following changes in personnel were made in the Office of the Vice President during the period Tuesday, August 6, to close of business Monday, August 12, 1974:

CHANGE:

|                    |  |
|--------------------|--|
| Gerald R. Ford     | Vice President to President<br>effective 12:05 p.m.<br>Thursday, August 9, 1974    |
| Robert T. Hartmann | Chief of Staff to Counsellor to the President<br>effective Thursday, 9 August 1974 |

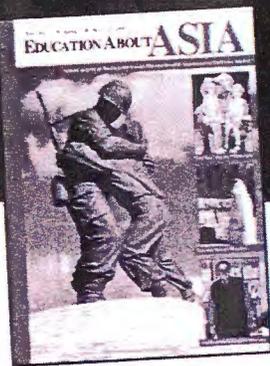
  
Frank R. Pagnotta

cc: Mr. Jerry Bechtle

collections, where students will be exposed to a “clean” reading room. In many facilities they will be required to wear white gloves (to prevent oils from their hands from getting on the documents), be prohibited from using pens to take notes (so that stray marks do not appear on the documents), and view materials stored in acid-free folders and boxes. Students will gain an additional lesson in the importance of provenance when they are forced to follow the requirement to keep materials in the order in which they are found. Through such an experience, students will learn first-hand that primary sources are valuable artifacts from the past. They are with us today. And touching them allows us, quite literally, to touch the past and to connect with it. 📖

*Note: The documents featured in this article come from the holdings of the National Archives and Records Administration. The Stimson letter is at the Harry S. Truman Library in Independence, Mo. The Yeager notes come from Record Group 255: Records of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, and is at NARA's Pacific Region in Laguna Niguel, Calif. The White House memorandum is from the Gerald Ford Library in Ann Arbor, Mich. And the Gettysburg map comes from Record Group 109, the War Department Collection of Confederate Records, and is at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. You may reproduce the documents shown here in any quantity.*

**LEE ANN POTTER** is the head of education and volunteer programs at the National Archives and Records Administration in Washington, D.C.



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