
USING PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SOURCES

When conducting historical research, one will encounter and employ two types of sources – primary and secondary. Each has specific roles to play in creating a strong historical narrative.

DISTINGUISHING PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SOURCES

The terms “primary source” and “secondary source” are best understood by their meanings in relation to one another. In simplest terms, primary sources are pieces of information related by an individual during the time being researched. Examples include deeds, photographs, pieces of art, oral histories and journal entries. Secondary sources examine history during a later time. Examples include textbooks, documentary films and most narrative histories. The table below lists other differences:

Primary Sources

1. Direct account from a participant or eye-witness
2. Often reflects bias and attitudes of the participant and of the time period
3. Reflects attitudes of the time period

Secondary Sources

1. Indirect account by a non-participant
2. Often avoids bias and echoes attitudes of a later time period
3. May express attitudes and interpretations of a later time period

USE OF PRIMARY SOURCES

1. The library will have census record indexes. Find the index for the state and year you need.
2. The index will provide names, counties, states, page numbers and the location where the census was taken.
3. Write down the name, county and page number. Take this to the census records.
4. The census records are on microfilm. If you cannot locate the records, ask the librarian.
5. After locating the microfilm, you can take it a reader and you should be able to make copies.

USE OF SECONDARY SOURCES

The Texas State Library and Archives Commission offer the TexShare online database, which includes census records. To be able to use this, you must be a Texas resident and either register at the Texas State Library in Austin, or with a local library that has access to the database. The database that you will need to use is “HeritageQuest Online.”

1. Once accessing HeritageQuest Online, you will need to “search census records.”
2. In the fields provided, you can provide a surname, given name, census year and state. If you do not have all of this information, you will most likely receive a greater amount of results from your search.
3. After getting your results, select the surname of the person you are researching. The census record will load, which you read and print.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYZING SOURCES

Another way to look up census records is to use the Soundex system, which was instituted to organize the censuses of 1880, 1900, 1920 and part of 1910. This index is organized by the first letter of the last name and then by a three-digit code, with the idea that variations of surname spellings would still be filed in the correct area. However, it also means that several different surnames will be filed under the same code.

