

Guidelines for Locating Primary Documents
for the Colonial, Revolutionary, and Early Republic Periods
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In many history classes, you will be expected to analyze documents generated by the people who lived during the period you are studying. These documents can be of many genres: newspapers, books, official records, private letters and diaries, and material objects like furniture, posters, or buildings. Locating primary documents that you can use to investigate an historical problem is a learned skill. Some have been collected and printed for the use of researchers, others are single copies archived in historical societies and museums, and still others are reproduced on the world wide web. Here are some suggestions for where to find primary documents generated by people who lived in North America before 1800.

I. Printed collections of primary documents owned by C.W. Post's Schwarz Library

There are many edited collections of primary documents that offer reliable transcriptions of primary documents. When searching for suitable documents, you might find them collected by topic (as "primary documents women"), by place ("primary documents New York"), by author ("primary documents George Washington"), or by period ("primary documents American Revolution.") Below are some examples available in Post's library. You can find more like these by doing a search in the library's catalogue.

1. *The Annals of America*: a multi-volume, encyclopedia-like collection, arranged chronologically.
2. E.B. O'Callaghan, comp., *The Documentary History of the State of New York*: a 13-volume set, with some volumes organized by the place where he found the documents. The documents start with the Dutch and extend to the early 19th century.
3. John J. Patrick and Gerald P. Long, eds., *Constitutional Debates on Freedom of Religion: A Documentary History*. Note that in a collection like this, the editors will have selected the documents they think are most relevant.

II. Reproductions of primary documents on microform and owned by the C.W. Post Library.

In the old days before the development of the internet, some historical archives, like the American Antiquarian Society, photographed literally thousands of their documents and made them available to scholars on microfilm.

1. Charles Evans, comp., *Early American Imprints*. This is a collection of 42,000 documents—almost every book, almanac, broadside, and pamphlet printed in the colonies/states between 1639-1800. C. W. Post's catalogue

will give you the call number for a multi-volume index, which is arranged by year (and then within each year alphabetically by author.) Pick the volume with the years you are interested in, and then look at the subject index in the back for likely titles. Each title has a number (its “Evans Number”). Once you have the Evans Number, you can go downstairs to the Periodicals Room and ask for the document by its number. They’ll hand you the correct microfilm and you can read it using a microfilm reader.

III. Reproductions of primary documents available on the web

The web has tons of primary documents, but you need to be aware that websites are not all of equal quality. Some take great care to post primary documents carefully, uncut and free from transcription errors. Others, with fewer resources and/or skills, post botched versions. Still others, usually mounted by people with idiosyncratic agendas, post documents with unacknowledged editing or ones that are frankly false. On the Helpful Notes page of my website I have a link to a site that gives you pointers for distinguishing reliable from unreliable websites. Meanwhile, here are some reliable examples:

1. “Gateway” websites

Some websites offer multiple links to other websites on a single topic, that is, they serve as a “gateway” to that topic on the web. The websites below have links to primary documents, but you need to be aware that they link to other sorts of material as well, such as timelines, essays, information. These latter are secondary sources, not primary documents themselves. You need to recognize the difference and be able to distinguish between the two sorts of links.

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/madsbook12.html>

<http://www.research.umbc.edu/~bouton/Revolution.links.htm>

2. “Archive” websites

Other websites offer a straightforward array of the primary documents themselves. It is as if you were walking into an actual archive and asking the librarian to fetch you the actual original document. The Library of Congress, our national public library, offers a particularly extensive array of the documents in its collection on its American Memory website:

<http://memory.loc.gov>

As well as searching the entire collection, the LOC has bundled some items into specialty groups, some of which might be of interest:

American Revolutionary Maps and Charts

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/dmdhtml/armhhtml/armhome.html>

Documents from the Continental Congress & Constitutional Convention

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/bdsds/bdsdhome.html>