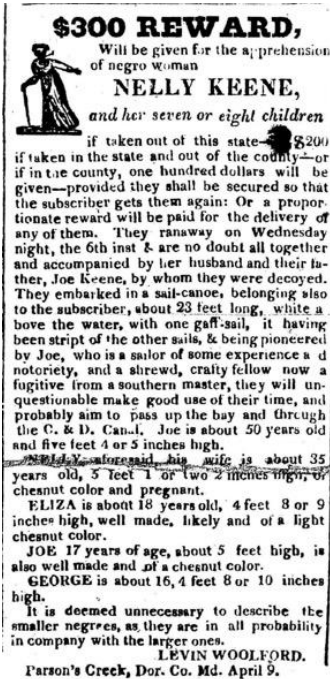


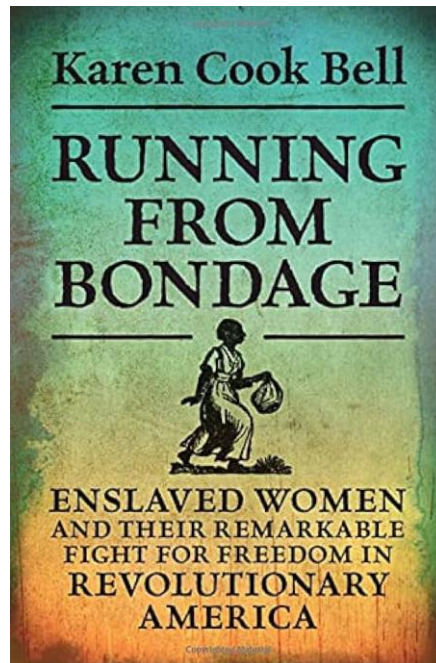
Understanding Primary and Secondary Sources

Primary sources are the foundation for historical research and writing. Through primary sources, researchers get as close to the past as possible. **Primary sources** are original documents or objects that provide a direct connection to the time period being studied. For example, diaries and letters often provide insight into the minds of individuals and can provide intimate details of events. Photographs, artwork, and artifacts help researchers visualize the past and gain a better understanding of how culture and living were experienced in the past. Newspapers and interviews created at the time of the event provide historians with some of the earliest accounts of historical events.

When interacting with primary sources, historians – like yourself – are naturally curious about the documents they interact with. They start with “why?": *Why was this document created in this particular year? What events led the author to create this source? How does this source connect with the other sources that I am seeing?* Thinking critically about the documents at hand is a great way to build the intellectual muscle needed to analyze primary sources.



\$300 REWARD,
Will be given for the apprehension
of negro woman
NELLY KEENE,
and her seven or eight children
if taken out of this state—\$200
if taken in the state and out of the county—or
if in the county, one hundred dollars will be
given—provided they shall be secured so that
the subscriber gets them again: Or a propor-
tionate reward will be paid for the delivery of
any of them. They ran away on Wednesday
night, the 6th inst. & are no doubt all together
and accompanied by her husband and their fa-
ther, Joe Keene, by whom they were decoyed.
They embarked in a sail-canoe, belonging also
to the subscriber, about 23 feet long, while a
bove the water, with one gaff-sail, it having
been stript of the other sails, & being piloted
by Joe, who is a sailor of some experience & of
notoriety, and a shrewd, crafty fellow now a
fugitive from a southern master, they will un-
questionable make good use of their time, and
probably aim to pass up the bay and through
the C. & D. Canal. Joe is about 50 years old
and five feet 4 or 5 inches high.
Nelly, aforesaid, his wife is about 35
years old, 5 feet 1 or two inches high, of
chestnut color and pregnant.
ELIZA is about 18 years old, 4 feet 8 or 9
inches high, well made, likely and of a light
chestnut color.
JOE 17 years of age, about 5 feet high, is
also well made and of a chestnut color.
GEORGE is about 16, 4 feet 8 or 10 inches
high.
It is deemed unnecessary to describe the
smaller negroes, as they are in all probability
in company with the larger ones.
LEVIN WOOLFORD.
Parson's Creek, Dor. Co. Md. April 9.



This fugitive slave advertisement (left) published on the Eastern Shore of Maryland in April 1831 is an example of a primary source. Historian Karen Cook Bell's book, Running from Bondage (right), is an example of a secondary source.

But be careful! Primary sources comprise just one type of evidence historians need in order to “do” history. The other type of evidence required of historians are secondary sources. Between the time a historical event occurred and the time in which we are living right now, innumerable historians have researched, contemplated, and written about particular historical events. **Secondary sources** usually provide an *interpretation* of past events and are created after the fact by someone who did not experience the event(s) firsthand or participate in them.

So, how do historians utilize primary and secondary sources in tandem? Historians use primary sources as factual grounding for their argument, or *interpretation*, of a historical period or event(s). They then look to existing scholarly works, like books and published articles in journals, to make sure their research is original and/or builds upon existing work. Consuming the scholarship that others have already written is a vital step in the historical research process. In reading what others have written, a researcher may opt to refute or support existing scholarly work on their topic of research.

If a historian in 2075 wanted to study classrooms from present day, what objects around us would serve as excellent primary sources in their research?

Examples of Primary Sources:
