



## Assets and Liabilities of Primary Sources

### The assets of using primary sources:

- Primary source materials promise authentic resources that enliven history for students and teachers.
- With primary source materials, students work with the fragmentary and detailed pieces of evidence that historians themselves use as building blocks in retelling the past.
- Historical archives invite teachers and students to confront new kinds of materials, new perspectives on historical events, and a new need for historical context.
- Primary sources, approached critically, can help students build an authentic and complete portrait of the past unlike textbook material that tends to be softened for students through editing.

### Possible liabilities of using primary sources:

- Practical considerations are the most common challenges for instructors using online primary source archives. These include access to good quality sources of information, up-to-date operating equipment and the time to make use of online materials.
- Primary source collections often include photographs, films, audio recordings, pamphlets, and political cartoons. Teachers and students need a wide array of skills to successfully interpret the different media.
- The faithful depiction of the language, thinking, and behavior of historical actors, when out of step with contemporary values or when patently offensive to many, is another challenge for teachers. Remember that historical sources may include racist language, or graphics in its raw unedited form with little if any contextual explanation or interpretation.
- The multiple perspectives presented by primary source archives make history, and history teaching, more complicated. They may also touch emotional nerves in students that can result in the history classroom becoming a more volatile place.
- Online primary sources are both vast and fragmentary and finding resources for specific curriculum topics can be difficult (i.e. the website may provide only part or sections of the original document without the entire context).
- Because most documents relate to specific events such as an impending political decision, a wounded soldier's recovery, or the opening of a world's fair, students need assistance with the historical context in order to make sense of the documents.