

# Exploring History Through Primary Sources: A Teachers' Institute

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**W**hy study history? In the Summer 1995 issue of the *Magazine of History*, Michael Edmondson gives three answers to this question, the foremost of which he recognizes as “the acquisition of higher level thinking skills.” Among these thinking skills, Edmondson includes “speculating, hypothesizing, reasoning, and theorizing.” To this list we would add others—research, documentation, corroboration, and conclusion—skills we want our students to acquire and use as adult decision makers. We do not necessarily want our students to become historians, but we do want them to think like historians.

We believe that one of the best ways to teach these skills is through the use of primary sources. In this article, we want to look how the Virginia Historical Society, through its Teachers' Institutes, “Exploring Virginia History Through Primary Sources,” has helped teachers encourage their students to think like historians.

The Virginia Historical Society was founded in Richmond Virginia in 1831. Our evolution over the past 165 years has, in many ways, mirrored the way the study of history has changed over that same period. We have gradually expanded our mission to become more inclusive, both in terms of the audience we serve and the materials we collect. Who is history about? Who is history for? These are the questions we have considered and reconsid-

ered over the course of our own institutional history.

Originally a small society composed of many of Virginia's antebellum elites, the VHS was established to collect and preserve the materials that documented the era of Virginia's Revolutionary greatness. In 1831, many believed that Virginia's greatness was in the past. Soil exhaustion and agricultural depression contributed to the exodus of more than 1,000,000 Virginians in the decades before the Civil War. This migration, combined with rapid development of the American West and the end of the Virginia Dynasty in the White House, led many prominent Virginians to fear that the Commonwealth was in decline. These Virginians felt the need to collect and preserve the material evidence of the state's “Golden Age” for future generations. Thus the Virginia Historical Society was established.

With its founding in 1831, the VHS began collecting the “stuff” of Virginia history. Today, that includes over 800 portraits, 7 million manuscripts, 135,000 books, and hundreds of thousands of newspapers, photographs, uniforms, maps, pieces of furniture, and many other items. For our first 100 years or so, collection and preservation remained our primary mission.

Early in this century, the trustees of the VHS decided to make our vast collec-

tions available to the public by opening and operating a research library. For the next half-century, the VHS served as one of the leading independent research libraries in the nation as researchers from around the world traveled to Richmond to use our collections. Yet, despite our renown among scholars, we remained largely unknown to the general public.

A major self-study inaugurated about 10 years ago revealed that, once again, it was time to expand our mission. In 1988, the Board of Trustees launched a \$12 million capital campaign, financing a building addition that more than doubled the size of the Society. The new building not only contained a new research library, but also five additional museum galleries for exhibits and a lecture hall for public programs—programs developed by a newly established education department.

From its founding in 1990, the education department's most important constituency has been Virginia's teachers and our most important resource has been our collections. With that audience in mind, we produced a series of collections-based teaching kits—"Teaching with Documents" and "Teaching with Photographs"—to be used in classrooms across the state. We provided exhibit-related curricular materials to teachers and in-service programs to school systems statewide. We also offered seminars and workshops for teachers at the historical society and around the state.

All these efforts culminated about two years ago when we received funding for a series of four Teacher Institutes that we called "Exploring Virginia History through Primary Sources." Underwritten by generous grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the M&M/Mars Education Fund, these Institutes brought 88 teachers to the historical society to study Virginia history from the antebellum period to the present. We chose the "recent" Virginia past because we wanted to place Virginia in the wider American context. The Institutes relied heavily on the unique collections of manuscripts, newspapers, maps, and museum objects at

the VHS.

These four institutes were held in July 1994, Fall 1994, Spring 1995, and July 1995. The Fall and Spring terms met one evening a week for three hours over 12 consecutive weeks. The summer programs, which were more intensive than the evening ones, met all day for three straight weeks in July. The summer institutes were also residential programs. The NEH underwrote lodging, travel, and meals for out-of-town participants. For all participants, we supplied books, articles, and materials, and we paid a stipend—\$300.00 for the Spring and Fall and \$750.00 for the sum-

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mer. Teachers who chose to write a paper received graduate credit in history from Virginia Commonwealth University.

Dr. James T. Moore, professor of history at Virginia Commonwealth University, was the lead faculty member for the two summer institutes. Dr. John T. Kneebone, assistant director of the division of publications and cultural affairs at the Library of Virginia and editor of the *Dictionary of Virginia Biography*, was the lead faculty member for the Spring and Fall Institutes. Each Institute was divided into twelve topical sessions, such as Reconstruction, the "Lost Cause," and the Woman's Suffrage Movement. Each of

the twelve sessions began with a lecture by the lead faculty or one of four visiting faculty. Afterward, the teachers discussed a series of assigned readings and a batch of primary sources—letters, diaries, broadsides, newspapers, pamphlets, and photographs. During the summer, the teachers wrote a daily reaction paper—a synthesis of the lecture and readings. They were also able to conduct research in our library.

The purpose of the institutes was twofold. We wanted to encourage teachers to be scholars—to read, research, and discuss history with historians and their colleagues in a professional setting. That setting was both formal and informal as we gathered for meals and snacks and built in many opportunities to share ideas. Our second goal was to give teachers access to resources that would help them, in some way, teach their students to think like historians.

All teachers were required to develop a teaching unit based on the lectures, discussions, and their own research. This unit could focus on any one or more of the twelve topics, but had to use primary sources in a way specific to the needs of their students. Thus the units we received were all very different, reflecting the teachers' interests, their individual research, and the requirements of their respective curricula. Individual units examine letters written by slaves, compare textbooks published in Boston and Richmond around the turn-of-the-century, and trace how the land use around a current school house has changed over two centuries.

In working with primary sources, teachers quickly realized they were doing the work of historians. They also realized that what they saw in the sources often depended largely on who they were and what experiences they brought to the table. They became aware that all history reflects the author's perspective, which itself is the product of a unique set of advantages and limitations. They realized that history is forever changing because they and their students are forever changing. All history is subject to revision as we learn more and examine things in new

## Plan Ahead

### Future OAH Annual Meetings

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1997

San Francisco

April 17-20  
San Francisco  
Hilton

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1998

Indianapolis

April 2-5  
Indiana Convention  
Center

•  
1999

Toronto, Ontario

April 22-25  
Sheraton Centre

•  
2000

St. Louis, Missouri

March 30-April 2  
Adam's Mark

ways. Thus all history is still a rough draft. This is the lesson we wanted them to take back to the classroom.

Did we meet our goals? Was something good happening in the classroom because of the Institute? Had the teachers developed as scholars? To assess the answers to these questions, a reunion was held on 15 March 1995 for the forty-four alumni of two Institutes, one held in July 1994 and the other in December 1994. Focus questions were sent to the alumni beforehand. Once at the reunion, participants were divided into small groups, and they selected a secretary who wrote down everyone's responses. The groups reconvened, and as the secretary read off her report, the comments were recorded on a large sheet of paper for all to see, add to, and correct. Their comments have been distilled and the following is a compilation of what was said:

#### Focus Question # 1

*How would you assess the value of the Teachers' Institute in enhancing the classroom experience of your students?*

1. The introduction of primary sources, especially diaries and letters, provided a "hands-on" history experience for the students which helped them retain information over time.

2. The students' *enthusiasm* for history increased and it was infectious.

3. The students came to see that several different primary sources can be used to learn about a topic, so, television news may not offer the complete story.

4. There was evidence of improved critical thinking skills; the students ask questions prefaced by, "What if \_\_\_\_; Why \_\_\_\_; Do you think that \_\_\_\_?"

5. Students came to see that they themselves possess a collection of primary sources, such as their birth certificates and family photos. In addition, they became aware that primary sources exist in the world around them, so that the political cartoons of today are the primary sources of tomorrow.

6. The students developed confidence as researchers.

#### Focus Question #2

*How did the Teachers' Institute experi-*

*enced benefit you, both personally and professionally?*

1. The teachers reported feeling more competent, comfortable, and confident.

2. The Institute gave the teachers an intellectual jump start, stimulating them to expand their thinking about historical events, and to develop an appreciation for Virginia history.

3. The teachers became aware of the numerous types of primary sources available and how they were adaptable to several course topics and grade-levels.

4. The teachers felt empowered by the intellectual content of the Institute. The result was their increased credibility among both their fellow teachers and students. They now felt more capable of providing guidance to students doing research. They also had the desire *and* the ability to incorporate primary sources into their lesson plans and began looking for ways to use them in their classes.

5. They had a sense they were inspiring their fellow teachers as they shared materials and teaching techniques with them.

6. The teachers felt encouraged to increase their own scholarship and to pursue post-graduate work.

As a final inquiry, the alumni were asked to assess the greatest strength of the Institutes. The unanimous responses declared that the greatest strengths were 1) the scholarly nature of the lectures, 2) their being treated as scholars, and 3) their being made to feel that they were a part of a high-level group of individuals.

These strengths have translated into action. Two alumni have since enrolled in graduate school, one at the Ph.D. level; she said she had forgotten how much fun it was to learn. Another alumni was one of only sixteen participants chosen nation-wide for a five-week NEH program; she said the Institute gave her confidence in her own scholarship.

What do these reunion comments indicate? The teachers found it hard to separate positives in the classroom from positives in themselves, perhaps indicating that self-confidence, nurtured through scholarship and professionalism, is what translates into motivated and enthusiastic education. □