

LEARNING MODULE #3
RIDEAU CANAL PRIMARY SOURCES

Learning Objective

To Learn:

1. Why primary sources are valuable
2. How to define a primary source
3. How use determines a primary source
4. How to distinguish between primary and secondary sources

Introduction

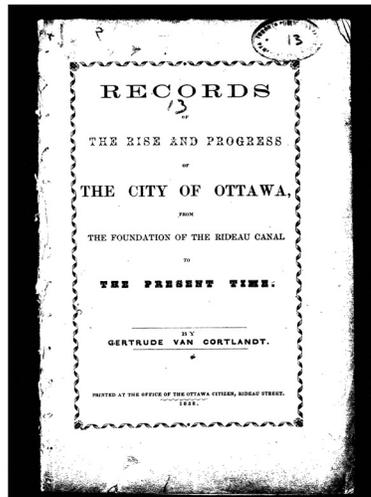
Primary sources are not only accounts or artefacts generated by an eyewitness or participant in past events, but they can also be artefacts, documents, recordings, or other sources of information created in the period you are studying. Secondary sources are often documents that cite, comment on, or build upon a primary document. But how do you tell if something is a primary or secondary source, since it can be difficult to tell them apart? To determine this you can ask questions about the object or material you are using:

- Does the object or item give you evidence to the past, an event, or an activity?
- Is it a direct source—that is, an eyewitness account, original document, from the office of origin, or a first-hand document, created at the time of the event or shortly thereafter?

Determining whether an object, document, record, or publication is a primary or secondary source can be complicated, as it sometimes depends on the way that one uses the resource in research.

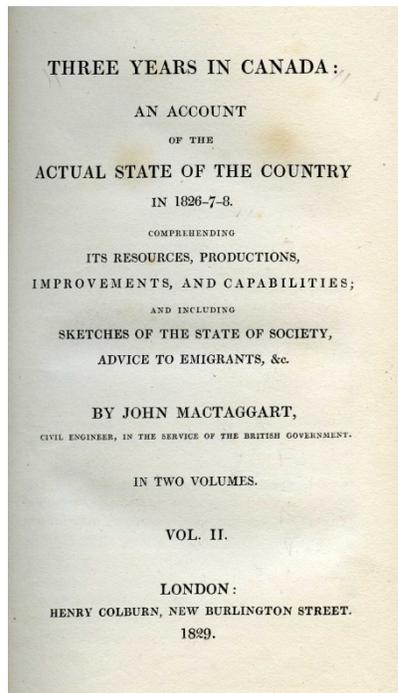
Learning Module

1. The decision as to whether a record is a primary source is often determined by its use. If you were studying the construction of the Rideau Canal and the effect it had on the growth of Ottawa/Bytown as an urban centre in the early to mid-1800s, would this publication be considered a primary or secondary source?



This document is:

- Van Cortlandt, Gertrude. (1858). Records of the rise and progress of the city of Ottawa from the foundation of the Rideau Canal to the present time. The Ottawa Citizen. Retrieved from <http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/ItemRecord/63231?id=413df51ba1bef7b9>
 - This is a published book—and if you were reading it as a piece of literature, as it was intended in its time, it is considered a secondary source. However, it is also an eyewitness account by Gertrude Van Cortlandt. She detailed the building of the Rideau Canal and the resulting effect on infrastructure, society, and progress in Ottawa/Bytown. This would be a useful primary source for anyone researching the social aspects of early Bytown, the construction effects and influence of the Rideau Canal, life in early Canada, the role of women in early Canada, and many other subjects. It would be this use of the material and interpretation that would make this a primary source.
 - Resources such as Van Cortlandt will tell you what people thought in the past and provide insight into past events.
- 2. It is always a good idea to compare one primary source to other primary sources from the same time period. Just like any eyewitness, the individual may be biased or express a particular point of view. Adding another perspective is always good practice for research, and leads to a better understanding of the past. Look at the following document. Is it a primary source?



This document is:

- MacTaggart, John. (1829). Three years in Canada: an account of the actual state of the country in 1826-7-8, comprehending its resources, productions, improvements, and capabilities, and including sketches of the state of society, advice to emigrants, &c., London: H. Colburn. Retrieved from: <http://www.canadiana.org/view/36878/0003>.
- Does MacTaggart provide a first-hand account of life in Bytown during the construction of the Rideau Canal?
- Who was he and how may this bias his viewpoint? Who was Van Cortlandt and how may this bias her perspective?
 - MacTaggart was a civil engineer from Scotland. He would likely have his own culturally conditioned perspective about other ethnicities, based on his background. His ideology would be based on his training as an engineer and those he encountered as an immigrant. He also provides an account that is male-gendered and from an earlier timeframe than Van Cortlandt.
 - Van Cortlandt was the wife of a prominent physician, and could be expected to view life from a position of relative wealth and privilege. You can expect her female-gendered perspective to differ from MacTaggart's in the experiences it conveys, the topics it addresses, and the language it uses. Her account was also written later than that by MacTaggart, providing less information about the immigrant experience in early Bytown, while offering a greater sense of a more developed Ottawa.