



Analyzing Historical Photographs at Ashland, The Henry Clay Estate

Learning from historic house museums and authentic historical sites is unique because educators use artifacts as a tool to teach students about the past. Ashland uses some photographs to interpret the history of the Clay family and the men, women, and children who were enslaved at Ashland in both onsite tours and online at henryclay.org. The advent of photography falls in the interpretive period of Ashland. While uses of photography have changed over time, even at its inception, we can learn about the past through the image captured: the person taking the photo, the people in the photo, and even those who do not appear in the photo. The following strategy for deconstructing photographs allows students to understand the past, encouraging mindfulness in its interpretation. Encourage students to utilize this strategy throughout their online research and where applicable onsite at Ashland. We encourage you to keep this strategy in mind as you translate your experiences into the classroom.

Describe

Describing a photograph using as much essential, factual information as is available: Who is the photographer? Who is in the photo? When and where was the photograph taken? Why was the photograph taken? Look at the subject matter and describe it as clearly as you can.

Analyze

Analyze the photograph by looking at how the photograph was composed. Look closely at other seemingly at other seemingly less significant details. What information can they give you? What is going on in the background? Do you see any writing in the photo (signs, or posters)? Are there recognizable buildings or landmarks? Think about overall mood or feeling.

Interpret

Interpret the photograph using what you have discovered through description and analysis in order to draw conclusions. While we cannot say *exactly* what is happening in the photograph, we can ask what is the intent of the photographer? What or who is in the picture and what is left out? How do these decisions affect the meaning? Can you determine the socio-economic status of the people in the photograph?

Research

At this point, you might need to do some research to discover the historical context of the photograph. Was it staged or spontaneous? What was happening in the world at the time? Think about the time period when the photograph was taken. Why was this photograph preserved? Does the meaning of the photograph change when we look at it now, compared to when it was created? *Think critically; do not simply accept the image as a singular representation of the event.*



Evaluate

The final stage of your decoding is evaluation. What do you think about the work? Is the photograph useful to you in terms of your historical research? What does it add to your knowledge of the subject? Base this on the earlier information you have gained.



Analyzing Ashland's Primary Source Documents

When examining primary sources, it is important to read multiple accounts and perspectives in order to gain an understanding of the variety of experiences when they are available. After examining one source, ask where else you could look to learn about this topic or event. Then compare multiple sources. Where do the sources agree? Disagree? If they tell different stories, why might that be? Those who lived at Ashland included the Clay family and the men, women, and children they enslaved. The primary source documents that almost exclusively created by the Clay family. Because there exist almost no primary source documents created by enslaved people at Ashland, it is important to consider whose perspective is missing.

In addition to the Henry Clay Papers which include letters and documents, Ashland utilizes speeches published in abolitionist newspapers, campaign song lyrics, court documents, and more to interpret the history of Ashland and its residents.

Strategies for Examining Diaries/Letters

1. What type of document is this?
2. Who created it? How is he/she significant in regard to the history being studied?
3. To whom is it addressed?
4. What is the date?
5. What significant events were taking place at this time?
6. What is the tone of the diary/letter?
7. Why was this document written?
8. What evidence in the document helped you to know why it was written?
9. What new information about the subject or period did you learn from this letter/diary?
10. Do you consider this new knowledge as being valuable in helping you to better understand the time period? If so, how? If not, why not?
11. Is there anything you do not understand in the document? If so, what?
12. Whose perspective is missing?

Strategies for Examining Court Documents

1. What type of document is this?
2. What is the date of issue, if any, of the document?
3. What information in the document places it in a particular time period?
4. Who created the document? What is the evidence for that?
5. Who was the audience for the document? What is the evidence for that?
6. What factual information is in the document?
7. What are the key points in the document?
8. What is the purpose of the document?
9. What inferences, generalizations, and conclusions might be drawn from the document?
10. What else do you need to know about the document in order to determine its purpose and/or significance?

Strategies for Examining Political Cartoons



1. Define the following techniques: symbolism, ridicule, caricature, metaphor, satire, pun
2. List the people or objects.
3. Identify the symbols and metaphors.
4. What might the symbols and metaphors mean?
5. Describe the action taking place in the cartoon.
6. Describe, in your own words, the message of the cartoon.
7. From whose viewpoint is the cartoon drawn? What evidence do you see of the cartoonist's viewpoint?
8. What traits make you feel sympathetic or unsympathetic to the cartoon's point of view?



This worksheet has been adapted from resources in the collection of Ashland, The Henry Clay Estate, Library and Archives Canada, the National Archives and Records Administration.

Analyzing Ashland's Artifacts

When examining artifacts, consider what you might learn from them that you could not learn anywhere else. These items tell a particular story of individuals, but not without interpretation and explanation. Therefore, they require more attention and scaffolding for students to understand their “story” than might photos or documents.

Keep in mind that, with any primary source, artifacts must be given proper historical context. What other documents or historical evidence could you use to help you understand the event or time in which this artifact is used?

Strategies for Analyzing Artifacts:

1. Describe the artifact.
2. Describe the uses of the artifact:
 - a. What might it have been used for?
 - b. Who might have used it?
 - c. Was the person who used this artifact rich or poor?
 - i. How can you tell?
 - d. Where might it have been used?
 - e. When might it have been used?
3. Why was the artifact made?
4. What does the artifact tell us?
 - a. What does it tell us about technology of the time in which it was made and used?
 - b. What does it tell us about the life and times of the people who made it and used it?



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