



Analyzing Historical Photographs at Ashland, The Henry Clay Estate

Learning from historic house museums and authentic historical sites is unique because educators can use artifacts as tools to teach students about the past. The advent of photography falls within the interpretive period of Ashland, and for both onsite tours and online Ashland uses photographs to interpret the history of the Clay family and the men, women, and children who were enslaved on the estate. While the uses of photography have changed over time, students can learn about the past through the captured image: the person who took 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 and encourages mindfulness in their interpretation. Encourage students to utilize this strategy throughout their online research and where applicable onsite at Ashland. Keep this strategy in mind as you translate your experiences into the classroom.

Describe

Describe 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 less significant details. What information can the details 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 the overall mood or feeling of the photograph.

Interpret

Interpret the photograph to draw conclusions using what you have discovered through description and analysis. 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 those decisions affect the meaning? Can you determine the socio-economic status of the people in the photograph?

Research

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 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 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, when they are available, to gain an understanding of the variety of experiences. 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 were almost exclusively created by the Clay family. Very few primary source documents exist that were created by the people who were enslaved at Ashland. When examining primary sources, it is important to consider whose perspectives are 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 are they significant 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 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 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 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?



Analyzing Ashland's Artifacts

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

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