Tips for Evaluating Historical Documents

When studying and interpreting historical documents, one should follow a general plan of approach. Sometimes, we are fortunate enough to have contextual information to support our understanding of a document, but at other times, we must try to make inferences about the past from scant written records. Here are some general areas for consideration and some possible questions to pose:

Source Information
- How do you know that this is truly an historical document?
- Did it come from a reliable source?
- How did the source happen to come by the document? (What is the document’s provenance?)
- If it is truly an historic document, how do you know that its information is accurate or true?
- What is the historical context in which the document was created?

Author/Speaker Information
- Who are the writers?
- What was their function?
- What authority did they have to speak or write what they did?
- Do they seem reliable?

Reader/Audience Information
- Who was supposed to read this document?
- What was its intended effect?
- What was the reader supposed to think or do as a result of reading it?

Format Information
- What type of document is this? A personal letter? A government decree?
- Is the information likely to be more reliable or less reliable because of its format?

Topic Information
- What is the document saying?
- What is its tone?
- What problems of language do you have to overcome to understand the document?

See also the related document “Tips for Historical Interpretation of Visual Material” on the Society’s Web site (http://www.nhhistory.org/edu/support/nhsourcesindex.htm). The document is also available on the Society’s CD-ROM.

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