

# Through Different Eyes: Primary Source Activity Instructor Guide

This activity aims to help students see what primary sources contribute to how historians interpret the past. The students can see firsthand how people lived and thought back to different periods, antebellum and postbellum, in the American South. Looking at primary sources gives the students a chance to place themselves in the shoes of people from the past and gives them a chance to appreciate what historians do. There are some difficulties dealing with primary sources, such as the language. While some words and phrases are not acceptable to discuss, it is essential to let the students know the struggles that historians go through when trying to interpret the past. The sources in this activity deal with enslavement in the United States, for this reason, please review each source to see if the themes and language is appropriate for the grade level.

This exercise can be conducted as a group activity or as an individual one. If you decide to make it a group activity, here is a timeline: Instructor reads directions and then moves into discussing primary and secondary sources; students can read the excerpts allowed if you prefer; then follow along the instructions in this packet. If time and resources allow, students can conduct the research during the activity, if not then the instructor can shift to explain and show the students how to conduct research. Bonus if you want to combine the two experts and compare the two points of views from women before and after the American Civil War.

The sources:

- Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838 – 1839 by Frances Anne Kemble. p.11.
- The Children of Pride: Selected letters of the family of the Rev. Dr. Charles Colcock Jones from the years 1860-1868; A New, Abridged Edition by Robert Manson Myers. p.1369.

## Source 1: Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation

“As for the exhortation with which Mr. --- closes his letter, that I will not "go down to my husband's plantation prejudiced against what I am to find there," I know not well how to

answer it. Assuredly I am going prejudiced against slavery, for I am an Englishwoman, in whom the absence of such a prejudice would be disgraceful. Nevertheless, I go prepared to find many mitigations in the practice to the general injustice and cruelty of the system -much kindness on the part of the masters, much content on that of the slaves; and I feel very sure that you may rely upon the carefulness of my observation, and the accuracy of my report, of every detail of the working of the thing that comes under my notice; and certainly, on the plantation to which I am going, it will be more likely that I should see some things extenuate, than set down aught in malice.”

Suggested talking points:

The first thing historians must do before examining the writing is to determine if the document is a primary or secondary source. What is the difference between a primary source and a secondary source?

- A primary source is a first-hand account of an event or time. It is from people who experienced and lived through the event. Primary sources include diaries, journals, newspapers, meeting minutes, speeches, and photographs.
- A secondary source is created by an individual who did not directly witness or experience an event discussed by the author. Examples of secondary sources include books and articles that analyze past events.

Once historians have determined the source type, the next step is to determine the person or people involved in the source. This is where research begins. If time and resources allow, students can conduct the research during the activity. If not, the instructor can shift to explain and show the students how to conduct research.

Where would they begin research?

The internet is at their fingertips. Do not be afraid to utilize what we have in front of us. One could start by researching the author’s name or events mentioned in the source to begin their research.

What sites should we trust in our research? How can we tell which is credible?

Libraries are great places to research, and they have many databases to use. While Wikipedia is sometimes a great place to start research since people can edit pages on it, it is

not a credible site. Sometimes, you can follow up on information you read on Wikipedia, leading you to more information, and institutions will have credible information. Amazingly, a simple Google search can lead one to find more sources and information on one subject. It is essential always to fact-check what you find!

If you were to research the author of this primary source, here is what you would find:

- Author: Frances (Fanny) Kemble was born in England in 1809. She was a stage actress in London. In the 1830s, she married Pierce Mease Butler, who owned plantations on the coast of Georgia in the United States. Butler also inherited hundreds of enslaved people.
- In 1838, Kemble came to the plantation on St. Simons Island, even though she strongly opposed slavery. This entry is from her journal, which she wrote during her visit to the various plantations. It explains her views on slavery and how she felt about the treatment of enslaved people in the Sea Islands of Georgia. Her abolitionist thoughts eventually divided her and her husband, and they divorced in 1848. She went on to publish her journals to promote these ideas.

After we learn more about the author, we can examine the source more deeply to understand its context and, if it has a purpose, what it is for. Are there indicators of how this person feels or why they are writing?

When mentioning her husband's plantations, she uses phrases like "prejudiced against slavery" and "general injustice and cruelty of the system," which indicate that we can assume she is against slavery. She expresses that she is prepared to witness the system's cruelty so that she can share her thoughts on it in hopes of sharing it with others. While this is her journal, her hopes to one day see the abolishment of slavery led her to publish her journals to show the public what she experienced on plantations.

Kemble's journal showcases ideas and thoughts different from the mainstream ideas typically associated with this period. This is a primary source written by a woman about anti-slavery, which makes this document a different point of view from the time. Primary sources help historians better understand the past and help us see the world through other people's eyes. If you have a journal or a diary, historians could one day reference your writing as a primary source.

## **Source 2: The Children of Pride**

Mrs. Mary Jones to Mrs. Mary S Mallard

Montevideo, Tuesday, January 8th, 1867

“My dearest Daughter,

I sometimes feel I must sink under the various perplexities of this situation, and know that if God should withdraw the hope and confidence which I trust He permits me to entertain His infinite wisdom and special guidance, that I should be truly desolate and miserable. I have struggled hard to hear up under the severe losses, the sad reverse, and I may almost say pecuniary ruin of our temporal prospects. I have tried to live here that I might protect and sacrifice this our home from any feeling of loneliness or isolation, or from motives to ease and deliverance from care. I have labored to preserve it as my only home, and what might in God’s providence be a home to my dear children. And now I am not willing, if I can prevent it, to have it sacrificed. But I feel that God is hedging up my way here; and I have come to the determination that if a purchaser can be found, we must part with our beloved, our long-cherished home. I do not see how I can keep it up, dependent as I am upon a manager for the oversight and upon the false and faithless freedmen as laborers. If there was hope of improvement in the future, I could endure any temporary trials; but I am convinced the condition of things will grow worse and worse. There is nothing to make it better- at least with the present generation; and by what means the Negro is to be elevated to an intelligent and reliable laborer I cannot see. The whole constitution of the race is adverse to responsibility, to truth, to industry. He can neglect duty and violate contracts without the least compunction of conscience or loss of honor; and he can sink to the lowest depths of want and misery without any sense of shame or feeling of privation which would afflict a sensitive Caucasian.”

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If you were to research the author of this primary source, here is what you would find:

- Author: Mary Jones, matriarch of the Jones family from Liberty County, Georgia. His mother, Mary Jones, will handle her husband's estate after he dies and moves to live with her daughter in New Orleans. From 1852 to 1869, The Jones family wrote over three thousand letters to each other. The family's patriarch, Charles Colcock Jones, Sr., was a Presbyterian minister. Just before the Civil War, he believed his calling was to help educate and convert the enslaved people in Liberty County.
- In 1866, Mary and Charles Jr. issued a standard sharecropping contract to the newly freed African Americans who previously worked on their plantations. Sharecropping was generally unsuccessful in Liberty County because most white landowners left after the Civil War, and both sides would need to be present to have the dynamic work. The land that the Jones family rented to freedmen for sharecropping would have a low yield, and like many other sharecropping farms, it could have been more helpful for both sides.

After we learn more about the author, we can examine the source more deeply to understand its context and, if it has a purpose, what it is for. Are there indicators of how this person feels or why they are writing?

The reader can assume she is religious because she references God and his wisdom throughout her letter. She mentions her societal struggles and life after the American Civil War. She writes, “ I have labored to preserve it as my only home, and what might in God’s providence be a home to my dear children. And now I am not willing, if I can prevent it, to have it sacrificed. ” Her talk of losing the house and land due to the change of freeing enslaved people leads the reader to assume that the family home is a plantation.

Overall, her tone is negative when discussing freedmen, calling them “false and faithless as laborers.” She is upset with the freeing of her enslaved workers and blames the “present generation.” Freedmen, according to Mary Jones, “can neglect duty and violate contracts without the least compunction of conscience or loss of honor; and he can sink to the lowest depths of want and misery without any sense of shame or feeling of privation which would afflict a sensitive Caucasian.” This sentence supports her complaints about freemen, but she does not seem sympathetic towards their hardships and new found freedoms. Her talk of “hope of improvement in the future” and how she could “endure any temporary trials” lets the reader know that she views the results of the Civil War dealing with enslavement as temporary, and she wishes for a way to improve this ending.

One could say that Mary Jones is the boomer Karen of her generation. She complains about “this generation” as the problem with society.