



Primary Sources for Elementary Students Life in Early America

When I think about what's important in a set of primary sources about colonial America for elementary-age students, I ask myself what these sources can provide that students can't just as easily get from a textbook, a secondary source, or me as the teacher. For me, primary sources from this period are critical to helping students develop a visual understanding of the geography of early America and the people who lived there.

Certainly, as Dr. Kathleen DuVal mentions in our episode of *One Question With...*, there are many opportunities to explore material culture and trade through artifacts. In my experience, though, digitized artifacts from this period are often easier to find than some of the sources highlighted below. When searching for artifacts, I frequently turn to collections from historic sites and museums such as George Washington's Mount Vernon, the Massachusetts Historical Society, and the Smithsonian Institution.

Below, I've included two maps that I believe are essential for understanding the geography of early America, along with several sources that represent the major groups of people living in colonial America. For each source, I've provided historical context, guiding questions, as well as narrative examples of how I have used—or might use—the source with my own students.

Source & Citation	Brief Description	Guiding Questions	How I Would Use it with Students
<p>The towne of Pomeioock, 1585</p> <p>White, J. (ca. 1585). <i>The towne of Pomeioock</i> [Watercolor]. British Museum. https://encyclopedia.virginia.org/154hpr-5d492058cf8d5c8/</p>	<p>Created by English artist John White in 1585, this watercolor depicts the Indigenous town of Pomeiooc in present-day North Carolina. The image provides a detailed look at homes, tools, and daily life, and helps historians better understand Indigenous communities in the Chesapeake region before sustained English settlement.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What kinds of buildings do you see? • What are the people in the image doing? • What details help you learn about daily life in this community? • What tools, animals, or objects can you identify? • How is this community similar to or different from communities today? • What questions do you have about the people who lived here? • What can this picture teach us about life in North America before Jamestown was founded? 	<p>I like to use this watercolor by John White to do some guided inquiry work with students. Below are a few of my questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What can we learn from this image that might not be recorded in written documents? • Who created this image, and how might that influence what is shown? • What details did John White choose to include? What might be missing? • How does this image challenge common assumptions about Indigenous communities before European settlement? • Why is it important to study Indigenous communities as organized societies rather than simply as groups encountered by Europeans?
<p>John Smith's Map of Virginia, 1612</p> <p>Encyclopedia Virginia. (n.d.). <i>Captain John Smith's map of Virginia, 1612</i> [Map]. Virginia Humanities. https://encyclopedia.virginia.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/744hpr_24d5af2b9837969-scaled.jpg</p>	<p>A 17th-century map created by John Smith showing Virginia's geography, Indigenous communities, waterways, and English settlements. The map reflects both exploration and English colonial ambitions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What places, rivers, or landmarks can you find? • What symbols or labels did John Smith include on the map? • What names do you see for American Indian communities? • Describe how the Powhatan people and Powhatan himself are pictured. • Who do you think would have used this map, and why? • What can this map teach us about life in early America? 	<p>John Smith's map of colonial Virginia is just so cool, and there are countless ways to explore it with students.</p> <p>One strategy I've used is dividing the map into sections and assigning each section to a group for a "See, Think, Wonder" activity.</p> <p>If I have a larger class, I might also assign one group to research the history of the map and another to research John Smith. Students can use the map to examine how Europeans viewed Virginia, identify Powhatan communities, and discuss how maps communicate power, resources, and perspective. It's also a great source for introducing sourcing and perspective with younger learners.</p>

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<p><u>Pocahontas, 1616</u></p> <p>van de Passe, S. (1616). <i>Pocahontas</i> [Engraving]. Virginia Historical Society. https://encyclopedia.virginia.org/18hpr-f92351f53c8c28b/</p>	<p>This 1616 engraving is the only known portrait of Pocahontas created during her lifetime. Produced by Simon van de Passe while she was visiting England, the image identifies her by both her Indigenous name, Matoaka, and her Christian name, Rebecca. Historians believe the portrait helped promote Virginia to English audiences.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How would you describe Pocahontas's clothing? ● What details make her seem important or powerful? ● Do you think this portrait was made for Pocahontas, her community, or another audience? ● What clues tell you that this image was created a long time ago? ● What questions do you have about Pocahontas after looking at this portrait? ● What can we learn about a person from a portrait? And what can't we learn? 	<p>While there are lots of ways to use this striking portrait of Pocahontas in English garb (another great addition to our gallery walk of colonial America), I love sharing the image with students without any context and seeing how long it takes them to figure out who it depicts.</p> <p>Once someone guesses correctly, I ask the class to work backwards and identify the clues, observations, and inferences that led them to that conclusion. As students share their thinking, I record the process on the board and turn it into an anchor chart for historical inference-making.</p> <p>Throughout the year, we return to that chart as a model for how historians—and students—make educated interpretations about historical artifacts, even when context is limited.</p>
<p><u>"Family Group", 1631-1633.</u></p> <p>Duyster, W. C. (ca. 1631-1633). <i>Family group</i> [Oil painting]. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Netherlands.</p>	<p>Painted by Dutch artist Willem Cornelisz Duyster, this artwork depicts a family gathered in a domestic setting, providing a glimpse into family life, clothing, household objects, and social relationships during the seventeenth century, helping students visualize aspects of daily life in the Atlantic World.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Who do you see in this painting? ● What details do you notice about the family's clothing? ● What objects do you see in the room? ● What do you think the family is doing? ● What clues tell you this painting was created a long time ago? ● How is this family similar to families today? ● How is this family different from families today? 	<p>This portrait is always a hit with students because, honestly, they're usually a little horrified by it. Without fail, the first thing they point out is how "creepy" the children look. I lean into that reaction and ask why the children feel unsettling to modern viewers. That conversation often leads students to notice how children in wealthy colonial families were frequently portrayed as "little adults" through their clothing, posture, and expressions.</p> <p>Students also quickly notice the enslaved person in the background. I often use this image as part of a gallery walk because it allows us to discuss how wealth, childhood, social hierarchy, and the ways enslaved people were represented in elite portraits, showing that portraits are carefully constructed historical sources.</p>

Source & Citation	Brief Description	Guiding Questions	How I Would Use it with Students
<p>🌟 Source Selection, Guiding Questions, and Classroom Application by Patrick Hussey, lilyPD Education Intern!</p> <p>Manuscript poem in the “Eliot Indian Bible,” ca 1663</p> <p>Anonymous. (ca. 1663). Manuscript poem in the “Eliot Indian Bible” [Manuscript]. Massachusetts Historical Society. https://www.masshist.org/database/1689</p>	<p>A brief five sentence (incomplete) poem that appears on the back of a copy of John Eliot’s Indian Bible. The message remained unclear until Vance Randolph and May Kennedy McCord (1948). Through research they found a later version of the poem, which you can access through their article although the meaning behind the poem largely remains still unknown.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is a “Bible”? And why might bibles have been important texts for European colonists? • Who was John Eliot? • Why would someone translate the Bible into an indigenous language? • Why write a poem in the bible? Could you think of a reason why a person might do that? 	<p>If I were using this source with elementary students, I would begin by helping them understand that people in early America came from many different cultural and religious backgrounds. Rather than focusing on religious beliefs, I would encourage students to think about how ideas, languages, and traditions were shared—and sometimes changed—when different groups of people interacted.</p> <p>I would begin by asking students to examine the poem and consider what questions it raises. Because historians do not know exactly who wrote it or why, students can engage in the same kind of inquiry historians use when interpreting incomplete evidence. After discussing the John Eliot Bible and the communities that used it, students could explore how language, religion, and cultural exchange shaped everyday life in early America.</p> <p>Rather than focusing on finding a single "correct" interpretation, I would encourage students to think about what this source reveals about communication, literacy, and the interactions between Indigenous peoples and English colonists. Reading the poem aloud and comparing it with a modern transcription would help students consider how people recorded ideas, shared knowledge, and expressed themselves in the seventeenth century. The source reminds us that early America was a diverse and interconnected place where individuals from different backgrounds influenced one another in ways that historians are still working to understand today.</p>

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<p>Ninigret, Sachem of the Niantics, ca 1700</p> <p>Unknown artist. (ca. 1700). <i>Native American sachem</i> [Oil on canvas]. Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI.</p>	<p>This portrait, painted around 1700, has long been believed to depict Ninigret, the seventeenth-century sachem of the Niantic people. However, because the painting was created after Ninigret's death, historians cannot confirm with certainty that he is the individual shown.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What details do you see about the person's clothing, hairstyle, or expression? ● What clues suggest this person might have been an important leader? ● What words would you use to describe the person in the portrait? ● Why do you think someone created this painting? ● What can this portrait tell us about Indigenous people in colonial America? 	<p>While this image would work really well in a gallery walk, I've also used it with students as a launching point for word study. Using the portrait and its accompanying label, I ask students to select one word or phrase from the painting's title or the SABB Research Center's description to investigate through a field note activity. (Check out our video on creating field notes at the end of this unit.)</p> <p>Many of my students chose the word "sachem," which leads them into a rich exploration of Native American leadership structures, diplomacy, and political systems during the colonial period.</p>
<p>Possessions of European States in East North America after the Treaty of Paris, 1763</p> <p>University of Richmond, Digital Scholarship Lab. (n.d.). <i>Indian tribes and linguistic stocks, ca. 1650</i> [Map]. <i>American Panorama: Atlas of the Historical Geography of the United States</i>. https://dsl.richmond.edu/historicalatlas/41/a/</p>	<p>A historical atlas visualization showing European settlement patterns in North America around 1763 following the French and Indian War.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What do you notice first about this map? ● What colors or labels do you see? ● How many different Indigenous groups can you identify? ● What does this map suggest about who lived in North America before 1763? ● How is this map different from maps of the thirteen colonies? ● What questions does this map make you wonder about Indigenous communities? 	<p>If you aren't familiar with the Atlas of Historical Geography of the United States, allow me to introduce you to one of the coolest resources you can use in your history class. This free, interactive digital atlas contains more than 700 historical maps covering a wide range of topics and time periods.</p> <p>I've used the map "Possessions of European States in East North America after the Treaty of Paris, 1763" to help students explore how territorial claims contributed to tension and conflict in colonial America. In addition to studying the political geography of North America at the end of the French and Indian War, I've had students annotate printed copies of the map with major physical features, symbols for colonial imports and exports, and a color-coded key for the three colonial regions.</p>

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<p>Ms. George Watson, Painting, 1765</p> <p>Copley, J. S. (1765). <i>Mrs. George Watson</i> [Oil on canvas]. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC, United States. https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/mrs-george-watson-32432</p>	<p>Painted by John Singleton Copley in 1765, this portrait depicts Elizabeth Oliver Watson, the wife of Boston merchant George Watson. Like many colonial portraits, the painting communicates wealth, social status, and cultural values through clothing, pose, and material possessions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who do you think this person is? What makes you think that? • What details do you notice about her clothing? • What colors, objects, or symbols stand out to you? • What do you think her life might have been like? • Why do you think someone wanted this portrait painted? • What does this painting tell us about some people who lived in colonial America? 	<p>This stunning portrait, created by master painter John Singleton Copley, offers a compelling representation of elite urban women in colonial America.</p> <p>In my classes, I've used this painting as part of inquiry-driven gallery walks that ask students to compare portraits of colonial women and infer what these portrayals reveal about identity, status, gender expectations, and daily life in the colonies.</p>
<p>Runaway Ad: Isaac Bee, 1774</p> <p>Burwell, L. (1774, September 8). Isaac Bee advertisement [Newspaper advertisement]. Virginia Gazette. Encyclopedia Virginia. https://encyclopedia.virginia.org/isaac-bee-advertisement/</p>	<p>This 1774 runaway advertisement describes Isaac Bee, an enslaved young man who escaped bondage in Virginia. The advertisement notes that Isaac could read and believed he had a right to freedom because his father was a free man. Historians have linked Isaac to the Williamsburg Bray School.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who was Isaac Bee? • Why did Lewis Burwell place this advertisement in the newspaper? • What details does the advertisement provide about Isaac? • What does this source tell us about slavery in colonial Virginia? • Why do you think Burwell mentioned that Isaac could read? • What does the advertisement suggest Isaac believed about his own freedom? • What information about Isaac's thoughts and experiences is missing? 	<p>This advertisement documenting Isaac Bee's self-emancipation is one of my favorite texts to use with younger students for a found poem activity. The language of the ad provides students with powerful opportunities to analyze voice, perspective, and humanity within historical documents while also helping them engage emotionally and creatively with the text. (Be sure to check out our video on creating found poems to see how you can use this resource with your class.)</p> <p>I also love using this advertisement as an entry point into conversations about self-emancipation during slavery. Students are often struck by the line stating that Isaac Bee "thinks he has a Right to his Freedom," which helps us discuss literacy, resistance, identity, and the ways enslaved people actively fought for their own freedom rather than waiting passively for liberation.</p>

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<p>Story Map: Adam & Fanny's World</p> <p>William & Mary Bray School Lab, & Special Collections Research Center, Earl Gregg Swem Library. (n.d.). Adam & Fanny's World [Interactive story map]. William & Mary. https://uploads.knightlab.com/storymapjs/1b4039ba81379c075642e38bad29638c/adam-and-fannys-world/index.html</p>	<p>Adam & Fanny's World is an interactive story map that explores what life may have looked like for two Bray School students, Adam and Fanny, in colonial Williamsburg. Using maps, primary sources, images, and historical context, the project helps viewers better understand the experiences of Black children living in eighteenth-century Virginia.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Who were Adam and Fanny? ● What can we learn about their lives from this story map? ● What challenges did enslaved children face in colonial Virginia? ● What places were important in Adam and Fanny's lives? ● How does the map help us understand their experiences? ● What surprised you about Adam and Fanny's story? ● What questions do you still have about their lives? ● Why is it important to learn about the experiences of children in the past? 	<p>Adam & Fanny's World from the Bray School Lab is one of my favorite examples of a story map—and I love story maps. They're always a hit with my students. I often use this resource as a class read-aloud because it naturally supports literacy development while exposing students to a rich mix of primary sources, images, maps, and historical narratives in an accessible format.</p> <p>I've also used this story map as a mentor text for student writing and inquiry projects. Students quickly begin to see how historical evidence, geography, narrative writing, and visual design can work together to tell a story about the past. Honestly, I've been dying to facilitate a full student-created story map project, so if you decide to try one with your students, let me know—I'd love to hear how it goes (or brainstorm ideas with you!).</p>