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Primary Sources for Secondary Students
Life in Early America

Secondary students will certainly benefit from exposure to any of the primary sources included in our elementary collection. But when curating sources for older learners, I generally assume students already have a foundational understanding of daily life in colonial America. They may not know every detail, but they likely have some familiarity with the major groups of people living in the colonies, the role of religion, the institution of slavery, and the basic geography of early America.

That foundation creates opportunities to deepen both content knowledge and disciplinary thinking through increasingly complex source work. Rather than focusing primarily on observation and background knowledge, secondary students can begin wrestling with sourcing, perspective, corroboration, and historical interpretation. As a result, we can introduce more detailed maps, text-heavy documents, and artifacts that require greater contextual knowledge and more nuanced analysis.

Many of the sources below are particularly well-suited for helping students investigate how historians construct knowledge about the past. Some invite students to compare competing interpretations, while others reveal the biases, limitations, and motivations of their creators. Several also highlight voices and experiences that have historically been marginalized in traditional narratives of colonial America.

As you explore these sources, I encourage you to think beyond simply what students can learn *from* them and consider what students can learn *about history* through them. The goal is not just to build content knowledge about early America, but also to help students develop the habits of mind historians use to investigate, interpret, and make sense of the past.

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Source & Citation	Brief Description	Guiding Questions	How I Would Use it with Students
Indian Linguistic Groups, 1650 University of Richmond, Digital Scholarship Lab. (n.d.). *Indian linguistic groups* [Map]. *Atlas of the Historical Geography of the United States*. https://dsl.richmond.edu/historicalatlas/33/	A map showing the diversity and geographic distribution of Indigenous language groups across North America before and during colonization.	• What patterns do you notice in the geographic distribution of Indigenous language groups? • Why might historians organize Indigenous peoples by language family? • How does this map challenge common narratives about North America before European colonization? • What might language similarities reveal about trade, migration, or cultural exchange? • What are the limitations of a map like this for understanding Indigenous societies?	This is another incredible map from the Atlas of the Historical Geography of the United States. I use it to kickstart our study of Native nations in colonial America, often through a "See, Think, Wonder" activity. From there, student groups research a linguistic group represented on the map and create a one-pager highlighting key nations, cultural characteristics, and interactions with European colonists. The activity helps students understand that Indigenous peoples were—and are—not a single group, but hundreds of distinct communities with unique cultures and histories.
The Wonders of the Invisible World, 1693 Mather, C. (1693). The wonders of the invisible world. Massachusetts Historical Society. https://www.masshist.org/highlights/#id=3236	Clergyman Cotton Mather's defense of the Salem witch trials, published at the height of the controversy.	• What arguments does Cotton Mather make about the Salem witch trials? • How does Mather use religion to support his claims? • What does this text reveal about fear, authority, and belief in colonial New England? • Why was this publication controversial even in its own time? • How might different groups in colonial society have responded to Mather's arguments?	Let's be honest: the connections between the Salem Witch Trials and the American Revolution are fairly limited. That said, the Salem Witch Trials are a fascinating piece of history that illuminates the intensity and volatility of life in colonial America less than a century before the Revolution. In my classes, we've used *The Wonders of the Invisible World* in a variety of ways, but probably my favorite was as a dramatic reading, where groups each took sections of the text and performed them for the class—because Cotton Mather *is* the drama. I pair the text with a podcast episode I recorded a few years ago with Professor Liz Matelski at Endicott College, who walks listeners through the trials in-depth and what they reveal about gender, religion, and politics in colonial America.

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Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God, 1741 Edwards, J. (1741). Sinners in the hands of an angry God. https://minio.la.utexas.edu/webeditor-files/coretexts/pdf/174120sinners20angry20god.pdf	Jonathan Edwards's famous sermon from the First Great Awakening (1730s-1750s), known for its vivid descriptions of divine judgment and salvation.	• What is Edwards's central argument? • How does he use imagery and emotion to persuade his audience? • What does the sermon reveal about religious beliefs during the First Great Awakening? • Why might listeners have found this sermon compelling? • How does the sermon reflect broader cultural and social changes in colonial America?	*Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* is another huge hit as a dramatic reading in my classroom—but this time, we flip the process a bit. Before students perform the text, they first have to explicate it and identify Edwards' core argument. Students work together to narrow the sermon down to no more than four sentences that they believe best encapsulate Edwards' message and rhetorical purpose. Then they dramatically read those selected lines aloud to the class, preferably with as much theatrical intensity and gusto as possible. 😂 The activity pushes students to engage in close reading and argument analysis while also helping them experience the emotional force Edwards was trying to create for his audience during the First Great Awakening.
Rebecca Tailer's Wedding Shoes, 1747 Massachusetts Historical Society. (n.d.). Green silk wedding shoes worn by Rebecca Tailer [Artifact]. https://www.masshist.org/database/viewer.php?item_id=3293&img_step=1&mode=large&pid=36	[A pair of green silk wedding shoes worn by Rebecca Tailer in 1747, offering insight into fashion, status, and consumer culture in colonial America.	• What can this object tell us about wealth and status in colonial America? • How do material goods reveal participation in global trade networks? • What does the artifact suggest about gender expectations and social customs? • Why might historians study everyday objects alongside written documents? • How might different colonists have viewed or accessed luxury items like these shoes?	Students are always surprised by how modern these shoes look. I use the artifact to complicate assumptions about colonial America and to explore trade, consumer culture, social status, and the ways colonists participated in an increasingly global economy. I also love pairing objects like this with advertisements, portraits, or runaway ads from the same period so students can compare how clothing functioned differently depending on class, race, gender, and status in colonial society.

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An Evening Thought, 1760 Hammon, J. (1760). An evening thought: Salvation by Christ, with penitential cries. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/52545/an-evening-thought-salvation-by-christ-with-penetential-cries.	A religious poem by Jupiter Hammon, the first published African American poet.	• What themes does Hammon explore in this poem? • How does Hammon use religion to communicate his message? • What does the poem reveal about literacy and education among enslaved people? • How might Hammon's experiences have shaped his writing? • In what ways does the poem reflect both colonial religious culture and the realities of slavery?	I love using this poem with Phyllis Wheatley's "On Being Brought from Africa to America" as part of a class discussion about the intersections between slavery and religion in colonial America. Hammon's writing opens up powerful conversations about literacy, faith, race, and the complicated role Christianity played in both justifying and challenging slavery during the colonial period. I've also had students choose a single line from the poem and illustrate it in the margins, which slows down the reading process and encourages deeper engagement with Hammon's language.
Property qualifications for suffrage, 1775. University of Richmond, Digital Scholarship Lab. (n.d.). Property qualifications for suffrage [Data visualization]. Atlas of the Historical Geography of the United States. https://dsl.richmond.edu/historicalatlas/124/b/	A historical visualization showing how property ownership determined voting rights in colonial America.	• Who was allowed to vote in colonial America according to this source? • How did property requirements shape political power? • What groups were excluded from participation in government? • How do colonial voting qualifications compare to voting rights today? • What does this source reveal about colonial ideas of citizenship?	This source is a great reminder that many of the freedoms we associate with American democracy were not available to everyone. I use it to help students investigate who held political power in colonial society and why. Students often compare colonial voting qualifications to modern voting rights and quickly realize that the story of expanding democracy in the United States is far more complicated than they initially assumed.

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Runaway ads Cornell University. (n.d.). Freedom on the Move [Database]. https://freedomonthemove.org	Newspaper advertisements seeking the capture and return of enslaved people who escaped bondage. These ads often contain detailed physical descriptions and reveal the realities of slavery in colonial America.	• What information did enslavers include in runaway advertisements? • What can historians learn about enslaved people's lives from these documents? • How do these advertisements reveal the perspectives and priorities of enslavers? • What evidence of resistance appears in these sources? • What are the strengths and limitations of using runaway advertisements to study slavery?	I use the Freedom on the Move database as a way for students to practice foundational historical research skills. Students learn how to isolate the specific information they want to find, skim sources for relevant details, and track a key concept across multiple documents. For example, one of my students wanted to investigate how many ads documented enslaved people who self-emancipated from Montpelier. Another tracked the ages of enslaved children mentioned in runaway ads, while another looked for patterns in the skills and trades enslaved people were described as having. What I love about this database is that it allows students to ask their own questions and pursue answers through real archival research. It also pushes them to wrestle with the limitations and biases of the historical record, since these ads reveal far more about enslavers' perspectives than the lives of the people they sought to recapture.

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Ould Virginia, 1624 Smith, J. (1624). Ould Virginia [Engraving]. In The Generall Historie of Virginia, New-England, and the Summer Isles. Encyclopedia Virginia. https://encyclopediavirginia.org/	An illustrated account of John Smith's experiences in Virginia that portrays his encounters with Indigenous peoples and his role in the colony's survival.	• What story does this image tell about Smith & the Virginia colony? • Why do historians question some of the events depicted in this engraving? • How does this source illustrate the difference between historical evidence and historical interpretation? • What might Smith have hoped readers would think about Virginia after viewing this image? • How do the artistic choices shape the viewer's understanding of colonial encounters? • What other sources would you want to consult before accepting Smith's account as accurate?	**Native American Gallery Walk:** For this gallery walk, I include the contextual information provided by the museums and historic sites connected to each object (including those from the elementary source collection), and students engage in a simple "See, Think, Wonder + Inquiry" routine. The activity builds on the traditional See, Think, Wonder structure by asking students to add one additional inquiry question for each source. In this case, the guiding inquiry is: What does the museum want you to understand about this object? I love this activity because it encourages students not only to analyze the artifact itself but also to think critically about interpretation, storytelling, and public history. Students evaluate how museums make intentional choices about which information to highlight, which stories to tell, and how audiences are meant to understand the past.
Unus Americanus ex Virginia. Aetat 23, 1645. Hollar, W. (1645). Unus Americanus ex Virginia. Aetat 23 [Engraving]. Encyclopedia Virginia. https://encyclopediavirginia.org/	A seventeenth-century engraving depicting an Indigenous man from Virginia as imagined by European artist Wenceslaus Hollar.	• What details does the artist emphasize in this portrait? • How does this image compare to other depictions of Indigenous peoples from the colonial period? • Who was the intended audience for this engraving? • How might a European artist's perspective have influenced the way this individual was portrayed? • What can historians learn from visual sources like this one? • What information about this	

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		person's life is missing from the image? • How might Indigenous people have represented themselves differently?	
Genesis, chapter 1, verses 1-24, of the "Eliot Indian Bible", 1663 Eliot, J. (1663). The Holy Bible translated into the Massachuset language.	A portion of the first Bible printed in North America, translated into the Massachuset language by missionary John Eliot.	• Why was the Bible translated into Massachuset? • What does this source reveal about interactions between Native peoples and missionaries? • How might Indigenous communities have viewed these efforts? • What role does language play in cultural exchange?	
Bowl Attributed to Wampanoag, 1655-1675. Massachusetts Historical Society. (1655-1675.) Bowl attributed to Wampanoag [Wooden bowl]. Massachusetts Historical Society.	A carved wooden bowl created by Wampanoag artisans and used to serve samp, a corn-based dish common in Indigenous communities of New England.	• What can this object tell us about daily life in Wampanoag communities? • What does the bowl reveal about foodways, technology, and resource use? • How does the museum's interpretation shape our understanding of the object? • What other sources would help you better understand the people who created & used this object?	