

How to Read a Photograph: Pre-Visit

Unit: From Barter to Big Business

Destination(s)

Philipsburg Manor Upper Mills

(914) 631-3992
381 North Broadway

Sleepy Hollow, NY 10591

<http://www.hudsonvalley.org/historic-sites/philipsburg-manor>

County

Westchester

Grades

4th Grade

Author

Gwen Kopeinig and Diane Moller

Summary

The ability to "read" and interpret primary sources can enhance our understanding of history and the work historians do. This lesson uses photographs to help students learn these skills. It can be used to introduce a visit to Philipsburg or Lyndhurst manor or can be taught independently.

Question

What can historians learn and infer from primary sources such as photographs or drawings?

Content Understanding(s)

Strategies for viewing and interpreting historical photographs to better understand the past.

Concept Understanding(s)

The same strategies can be used to interpret other primary sources.

Vocabulary

- Primary sources
- Secondary sources
- Documents
- Observe
- Infer

Suggested Time Frame(s)

Approximately 45 minutes.

Narrative

Ask students to brainstorm role of an historian. If necessary, ask questions such as: How do they discover what happened in the past? What clues or evidence do historians use? What information do they use to interpret events? List students' ideas on a large pad of paper or board.

Explain that historians learn techniques to help them read or observe, analyze, make inferences, and understand documents and other evidence from long ago. Show students an old photograph (we used one from the Library of Congress, see Resource list) and tell them that, as a group, you can use it to learn from the past.

Ask students to tell you what is actually present in the photograph. Record what they tell you they observe, e.g., a girl and a woman, a table. Now explain that by adding what they already know about history to what they see in the photo, they can draw tentative conclusions and make inferences about what is happening. Record students' inferences and then ask them to create questions they would like to have answered about the photo. The questions can be the basis for later research by your budding historians.

Independent Practice: Divide students into groups of two or three. Give each group a large historical photograph to analyze. (We used photos from Jackdaw, see Resource list.) Depending on the size and quality of the photo, you may need to provide magnifying glasses. Have each group complete a sheet including their observations, inferences, and questions about their photo. When the groups are finished with their sheets, each can share their photo with the class and explain their conclusions. At this point, show students actual explanations of the photos.

Extensions: Using facsimiles of primary source documents, have students practice reading and interpreting photos, drawings, maps, letters, official documents, etc. Mix things up by using facsimiles from different time periods and places, e.g., early Dutch colonies, Philipsburg Manor, American Revolution, Erie Canal, or focus on a particular place or topic. Keep your collection of facsimiles as resources for subsequent student research projects.

Supplies Used

PowerPoint introduction to sites, optional (see attachments & worksheets)

Photographs (see resource section for suggestions)

Magnifying glasses, optional

Site Tips