

CASE #21

Incorporating Primary Source Literacy into Junior History Interpretation

AUTHORS

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Scott.keefe@doc.orgLEARNING OBJECTIVES ENGAGED FROM [GUIDELINES FOR PRIMARY SOURCE LITERACY](#) BY THIS CASE STUDY

- 1.A. Distinguish primary from secondary sources for a given research question. Demonstrate an understanding of the interrelatedness of primary and secondary sources for research.
- 1.D. Understand that research is an iterative process and that as primary sources are found and analyzed the research question(s) may change.
- 2.D. Understand that historical records may never have existed, may not have survived, or may not be collected and/or publicly accessible. Existing records may have been shaped by the selectivity and mediation of individuals such as collectors, archivists, librarians, donors, and/or publishers, potentially limiting the sources available for research.
- 3.A. Examine a primary source, which may require the ability to read a particular script, font, or language, to understand or operate a particular technology, or to comprehend vocabulary, syntax, and communication norms of the time period and location where the source was created.
- 3.B. Identify and communication information found in primary sources, including summarizing the content of the source and identifying and reporting key components such as how it was created, by whom, when, and what it is.
- 3.C. Understand that a primary source may exist in a variety of iterations, including excerpts, transcriptions, and translations, due to publication, copying, and other transformations.

- 4.B. Critically evaluate the perspective of the creator(s) of a primary source, including tone, subjectivity, and biases, and consider how these relate to the original purpose(s) and audience(s) of the source.
- 4.C. Situate a primary source in context by applying knowledge about the time and culture in which it was created; the author or creator; its format, genre, or publication history; or related materials in a collection.
- 5.A. Examine and synthesize a variety of sources in order to construct, support, or dispute a research argument.

CASE STUDY LOCATION Daughters of Charity Archives, Province of St. Louise
Emmitsburg, Maryland
<https://daughtersofcharity.org/our-legacy/>

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Introduction and Institutional Context

The National Shrine of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton in Emmitsburg, Maryland, is the final resting place of the first recognized American-born saint of the Roman Catholic Church, Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton. Mother Seton lived in the colonial United States, and in 1809 founded the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph's, the first community of women religious in the newly independent nation. The St. Joseph's Academy and Free School, which she and her community began, are widely considered the first establishments of Catholic education in the country.

In addition to the basilica in honor of Mother Seton, the Seton Shrine also manages a historic cemetery, conducts tours of two house museums on campus that were important to her life and work, and operates a museum telling her story. The homes are notable as the founding places of both the Sisters of St. Joseph's and St. Joseph's Academy (hereafter Academy).¹ Alongside other ministries and living quarters, the campus is the home of the Provincial Archives of the Daughters of Charity, Province of St. Louise.

The Daughters of Charity are a community of Catholic sisters founded in 1633 in Paris by Saints Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac. They are a global community, divided for administrative purposes into 46 provinces.² Under canon law—or church law—each of these provinces owes its obedience to a General Superioress in Paris, but maintains autonomy in operation. In 1850, Mother Seton's Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph's merged with the Daughters of Charity community. The Daughters of Charity Archives (hereafter Archives) is not the archive of the Shrine, but has artifacts on long-term loan to the Shrine for display and interpretation purposes, and the Shrine utilizes the Archives for its research.

In August 2019, Bridgett Bassler, education programs manager at the Shrine, approached Scott Keefer, provincial archivist of the Daughters of Charity, about a pilot Junior History Interpreter (JHI) Program. She wished to develop a program for the Shrine based upon a similar one at Colonial Williamsburg, which allowed for a more interactive guest experience and provided a historical fieldwork and educational experience for children. The program includes aspects such as historical interpretation, interaction with guests, period costuming, and time-appropriate pastimes and schooling.³ Alongside Lisa Donahue, education and lead interpreter at the Shrine, she designed the program for children in grades 4–12.

In Bassler's schedule for this initial JHI pilot, she incorporated a number of "workshop" sessions, in which the JHI students would have the opportunity to see archival documents and original artifacts that were otherwise only on display in replica. The schedule of the program covered the length of a typical school year, from September to May. Bassler scheduled one session per month in the Archives during this time period, excluding December. Many of these sessions incorporated show-and-tell formats, although some principals of active learning were included in the sessions in

¹ National Shrine of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, "Explore the Shrine," 2021, accessed December 15, 2021, <https://setonshrine.org/explore-the-shrine/>.

² Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, "Where Are We," accessed December 15, 2021, <https://www.filles-de-la-charite.org/en/where-we-are/>.

³ Crews, Ed, "Junior Interpreters Enliven Historic Area," *Colonial Williamsburg Journal* (Winter 2001–2002), https://research.colonialwilliamsburg.org/Foundation/journal/Winter01-02/Jr_Interpreter.cfm.

January and February of 2020, before much of the program was vastly modified due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Bassler also made a point to emphasize that, although both the Shrine and the Daughters are Catholic religious institutions, these lessons would not be about expressing religious values or ideas. Instead, they would be about utilizing archives and artifacts for the purpose of historical interpretation, not religious interpretation. Thus, Mother Seton, the sisters, and the Academy and its students would all be studied as historical figures of their time period, not studied in a theological way.

In August 2020, Bassler again approached Keefer about collaborating to involve the Archives with JHI students in a second year of the program, to begin in September 2020. Compared to the pilot year, Keefer proposed a higher level of input regarding the archival sessions in order to ensure that all of them involved active learning activities. The model he proposed skewed closer to that of an embedded archivist in a university course, allowing the archivist to further teach students the research and interpretation process step-by-step.⁴

Narrative

The second 2020 JHI program again encompassed the entire academic year. Each month had a theme and lesson goal, which included workshops and visitor engagement, as well as a public event where the JHI students interacted with the museum-going public in some capacity. Bassler's initial schedule included one afternoon per month to visit the Archives, with a requested object or session topic (Appendix 1).

The largest administrative difference between the pilot and second years of the JHI program was the shift from a free program to a paid one. This, like all administrative aspects of the program, was made by the Shrine, and came from the decision that the staff input time required to run the program, alongside costs for supplies and costumes, mandated a student fee. There were, however, financial aid programs in place for interested students who were unable to cover the costs. Nine students enrolled for the entire year.

In Kathryn G. Matheny's article "Instruction Consultation for Archives Visits: Why No One Talks about It, and Why They Should," she encourages teaching archivists to ensure that they and their partner course instructors have the same goals.⁵ Thus, at least a few days before each session occurred, Keefer and Bassler met to discuss the upcoming session. They used these to determine what activities could be used in association with archival materials to meet the learning objectives that Bassler had determined for the month. While Keefer accepted plans as presented for some of the sessions, he had alternative suggestions for others that would better fit active learning goals. Holding these discussions helped to assuage some points of initial divergence between the two,

⁴ See, for example, Christy Fic, "Working as an Embedded Archivist in an Undergraduate Course: Transforming Students into Scholars through an Archival Workshop Series," in *American Archivist* 81, no. 2 (2018): 293, <https://doi.org/10.17723/0360-9081-81.2.290>.

⁵ Kathryn G. Matheny, "Instruction Consultation for Archives Visits: Why No One Talks about It, and Why They Should," in *American Archivist* 82, no. 2 (2019): 485–486, <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc-82-02-03>.

which came from Bassler having an incomplete knowledge of materials in the Archives or Keefer envisioning a session with different materials and outcomes than Bassler.

Finally, although the JHI program was designed for students in grades 4–12, the core age range for the program has been between 5th and 7th grade, with a small number of outliers. Thus, lessons conducted in the archives were designed with a middle school audience in mind, while also attempting to be flexible to appeal outside of this range.

The first session in September focused on penmanship, writing, and letters. This provided Archives staff with the opportunity to glean the students' knowledge primary sources, and discuss how we can know history in the present day. Museum staff divided the students into small groups. After briefly discussing the need to simply be able to read historical documents, and the fact that many of them are in manuscript handwriting, students had the opportunity to work in their groups to read—in the original handwriting—a letter written by Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, as well as portions of a diary written in nearby Frederick, Maryland from 1824–1834. These selections were purposefully picked due to the existence of transcribed surrogates. Thus, once students had put in the effort to read the handwritten versions, they could experience the ease of transcription. This fulfilled objectives 3.A., 3.B., and 3.C. of the *Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy*. Keefer then took the opportunity to briefly introduce students to crowdsourced transcription projects run by the National Archives, Smithsonian Institution, and Library of Congress.⁶

In October, Bassler requested the students be given the opportunity to see some of the surviving historic needlework from the Daughters' collections and begin to interpret objects as they would for visitors to the museum. Given the prominence of needlework as one of the feminine skills taught to students at St. Joseph's Academy, whose lives the JHI students would be interpreting, the October session utilized surviving needlework samplers. Among, the common topics for the needlework designs were simple alphabets and numbers; aspects of religious life and education, such as the words of prayers or Bible quotes; and more artistic images of the school building and landscape. Each needlework was on display in the room, and students had the opportunity to do a gallery walk to examine them. Keefer then invited the students to respond to a series of questions that they might encounter as interpreters, related to the "Five W" questions—who, what, when, where, and why?" This allowed the students to practice objective 4.C., by using the context to explain an object. By building upon knowledge the students had already acquired through lessons given by staff at the Shrine, Keefer was able to let the students go further in their own interpretation in preparation for their roles acting as historical figures. Since many of the students would be portraying students at the Academy, they were able to discuss what they would make themselves as students as an assessment activity, and begin to design the needlework that they would create as a student and offer a brief explanation of what they did.

Bassler designed the lesson in the month of November to focus on aspects of interpreting the historic homes. Keefer used this as a starting point to design a session around the interpretation of

⁶ See "Citizen Archivist Project" by the National Archives and Records Administration, www.archives.gov/citizen-archivist; Smithsonian Digital Volunteers: Transcription Center by the Smithsonian Institution, <https://transcription.si.edu/>; and "By the People" by the Library of Congress, <https://crowd.loc.gov/>.

a single object with substantial documentation behind it. This allowed the students to practice objective 5.A., the synthesizing of sources for a research argument. The object in question was one that the students already had some familiarity with, Saint Elizabeth's icon of Our Lady of Guadalupe, a replica of which was on display in one of the historic homes. Similar to the October session, the work was displayed on an easel, and the seats were arranged in three-person pods. Each student got the chance to examine the work first, and volunteers were invited to talk briefly about it. Students were provided transcriptions of the documents that supported the accepted interpretation of the icon, including letters between Saint Elizabeth and the individual who gifted her the painting around the year 1811, Matthias O'Conway.⁷ As students were given additional documents, they then had a minute to read each quietly to themselves, discuss among their groups, and ask questions about anything confusing or incomplete. The letters and accounts selected never totaled more than two pages, and they were selected to build upon each other to show how we know the things we know about the icon. The opportunity for students to ask questions as they learned of new information or sources also reinforced objective 1.D.

There was no session scheduled for December 2020, and the winter months coincided with the resurgent spikes in COVID cases. In January, Keefer, Bassler, and Donahue met to discuss the year of the program going forward. They decided to cancel the January session and ensure that February and March lessons could take place virtually. For materials that did not have digital surrogates, Keefer planned to come into the Archives as the sole staff member present and create the necessary surrogates for the lesson. Thus, the final sessions were conducted virtually.

For the virtual February session, the goal was to understand the role of research in interpretation. Using Zoom breakout rooms and scans of three documents, no more than five pages in length transcribed, Bassler and Donahue divided the class into three groups. Each group was given a document without any background information. Each breakout group had an adult chaperone to facilitate discussion, and a set of questions to answer based on what they thought the document was, developed by Keefer and Bassler (see Appendix 2). Questions focused on whether it was a primary or secondary source, their thoughts on who, what, and when it had been created, and the information contained in the source. The documents for each group were a historical fiction written by an Academy student, the recorded memories of a retired sister taken several decades after the events she described, and a day-to-day chronological journal kept by a sister.

After each group had a chance to discuss their document, Keefer then presented the students with the background of each, along with a new set of questions (Appendix 3), framed around how learning the context changed how they viewed the document and the information. This methodology allowed the students to practice a number of objectives, including distinguishing primary and secondary sources based on the context (1.A.), assessing bias in a source (4.B.), and situating a primary source within its time and culture (4.C.).

The session in March was originally proposed as a second session on research. In their meetings, Keefer suggested looking at some of the surviving materials from St. Joseph's Academy. With

⁷ Elizabeth Ann Seton to Matthias O'Conway, June 5, 1811, in *Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings Volume II*, ed. Regina Bechtle, S.C. and Judith Metz, S.C. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2002), 140.

instruction in-person remaining ill-advised, Bassler proposed showing some of the St. Joseph's Academy materials in the repository itself. Thus, for the March session, the remote session was streamed live as Keefer showed the repository and a number of selected documents, including surviving student poetry, student created books, and the earliest known photographs of the Academy. While this regressed slightly back to the "show-and-tell" lessons of the first year of the program, recording and moderating live allowed for Keefer to ask questions of the students and for the students to ask questions and comment in real time. It also allowed students to get a grasp of primary sources as a world much more vast than compiled document readers, and, even if it did not go in-depth into some of the tenets of archival literacy, gave the students a baseline to conduct research as interpreters with a lower level of archival anxiety.⁸ By showing that there are collections of a half-size archival box, collections of hundreds of boxes, and various collections in states of reprocessing or disarray, it allowed Keefer to introduce objective 2.D. and demonstrate the potential and limits of archival access.

Results

Keefer, Bassler, and Donahue were all in agreement at the end of the second academic year that this class of Junior History Interpreter Students had fared far better than the pilot. Bassler and Donahue noted that this was likely due in part to shifting the program to a paid model, thus encouraging students who had a higher interest in the subject, a higher investment in the program, and making the program extracurricular rather than mandatory. Although this shift created a risk of pricing some students out of the program, the Shrine had structured the fee to be economically manageable, allowing for monthly payment plans, and offering discounts and sponsorships for families with low incomes.

In addition, everyone involved felt that being able to interact with the documents in an active learning manner had been more beneficial than the show-and-tell model used in the pilot year of the program. While the reactions among students certainly varied even in individual sessions, the majority of the class was willing to speak up with ideas, thoughts, or questions during sessions with the Archives. Keefer also noted that different sessions seemed to engage students better than others. The November session seemed to particularly intrigue students with the question of "How do we know what it is that we know?" as they worked through and discussed the documentation of the Guadalupe icon. Other sessions received a more muted reaction from the students, particularly the October session on needlework. Here, the students seemed reluctant to discuss their designs for their own, or possibly to share their own artwork with the class. In the future, closer coordination between the Shrine's programs for the JHI students and the Archives could better align this session with activities conducted by the Shrine, which does include needlepoint lessons, to make this more relevant to the students, and also making it more personal and less public.

Other reactions of students were more surprising. For example, Keefer had felt like the goals of the September session had not been met in the moment, only to be surprised in the March session

⁸ Among the factors that caused archival anxiety, Sammie Morris, Lawrence J. Mykutiuk, and Sharon A. Weiner named "Rules on accessing and handling archives differ from those for circulating collections" and "Archival collections cannot be browsed." "Archival Literacy for History Students: Identifying Faculty Expectations of Archival Research Skills," *American Archivist* 77, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2014): 397–398, <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.77.2.i270637g8q11p460>.

when students over Zoom were interested in keeping copies of the digital scans in order to try to read them themselves in the original writing. The programs that were conducted over Zoom went very well, and Keefer and Bassler determined that they could be shifted to an in-person format for future JHI groups easily. This includes seeing the facilities of the Archives, so long as structure and supervision are provided in the repository.

In terms of the public-facing nature of the JHI program, Bassler and Donahue noted that the pilot class had more opportunities for public engagement due to having more time before the COVID pandemic began. However, they also noted that the second-year class was quicker to showcase the knowledge that they had learned and were far more proactive in interacting with the public, without prompt from any program mentors. Bassler and Donahue interpreted this as the more active archival sessions having a greater impact, being a more enriching experience, and creating better junior history interpreters, which ultimately helps their mission of interpreting the past.

All members of the leadership team recognized the potential for further sessions outside of the established lesson plans for “graduated” Junior History Interpreters, as well as a way to instill the notion of “always learning new things” for future museum interpreters. Among lessons in the planning stages, as of writing, are “Academy Recreation,” teaching about the different ways of recreation among students, and “Reading Photographs,” a lesson on photo interpretation.

Lessons Learned

This experience provided the Daughters of Charity Archives the opportunity to expand the encounter of their resources with a K–12 audience in an explicit way that it had not done before. Exposing a new group of interpreters to a wider variety of materials also benefits the Seton Shrine Museum by forming better Junior Interpreters and exposing them to more possibilities of what is available for research and interpretation. Depending on how much experience Junior Interpreters acquire if they stick with the program, this curiosity and exposure to the archival collections can lead to a wider range of programming in the future.

The Archives also learned that its own capacity for active learning programming was not hampered by the younger age of these users; if anything, it enhanced it. By using the collections related to the lessons on interpretation, St. Elizabeth, and the time period, the Archives were able to achieve a relevance and utilization for a K–12 audience that had not been explored before. That this use went beyond a show-and-tell experience into actually using the records and artifacts for historical interpretation only aided in connecting the mission of the Shrine and the mission of the Archives to users beyond the Daughters of Charity organization.

Like so much that came from the COVID era, the Archives and Shrine both increased their ability to provide programming remotely. Even though all parties decided to move forward with in-person programming—and while all of them prefer it as a more experiential way to help children connect to primary source documents—this program has shown everyone involved that active learning is possible in a remote virtual setting.

The entirety of this year of collaboration between the Daughters Archive and the Seton Shrine was marked by a constant stream of communication between Keefer and Bassler. Just as a collaboration between a university archivist and a professor, even for a one-shot session, requires a level of mutual respected input and dialogue, even more of such was necessary for an extended partnership. Furthermore, by opening up the dialogue to the Archives for collaboration, rather than simply asking for specific materials that Bassler and Donahue already knew about, the members of the Shrine staff were able to learn about a wider range of the Archives' resources and potential for research and interpretation. Increasing this level of knowledge will improve Shrine programming for all age levels, as they have become more aware of what the Archives has to offer for visitors of all age levels.

Lastly, while the Daughters Archives had never done programming explicitly for K–12 students before, the JHI program opened up the opportunity to use active learning in a wider variety of settings. This program can encourage use in places where there are already connections between the Daughters and K–12 groups, including church groups and schools in which the Daughters are involved. Since the year of programming included both in-person and virtual models, there is precedent for both, and lessons have been proven possible in either format. Although this program may be unique for the Daughters Archives in terms of the potential for long-term teaching programs, we hope that this will be a start of greater involvement with K–12 engagement.

Appendix 1: Bridget Bassler's Initial 2020-21 Calendar for Archives Sessions

	Month's Theme and Goals	Requested Object	Date of Workshops
September	<p>Level I:</p> <p>Penmanship was considered to be <i>the</i> most important lesson in early American schools. Using this platform will provide the JHIs their first experience of an interpretive program and use it as a stepping stone to becoming history interpreters themselves.</p>	<p>Actual Letter written by Mother Seton or one that she received.</p> <p>JHIs will be learning about penmanship, importance of letters and journaling, early 19th c postal service, and the commonplace book.</p>	<p>Friday, September 18</p> <p>Saturday, September 19 time tbd</p>
October	<p>A Task in Life: Samplers:</p> <p>JHIs will be learning about how the wash and sewing was a vital aspect for the early community, and that a working a needle and thread was a life skill essential for girls to learn. Youth Pastime of Sampler (take a trip to archives to see CS's sampler and the Chenille embroidery)</p>	<p>Catherine Seton Sampler and the Chenille Embroidery; Sewing Kit</p> <p>JHIs will be learning that a youth pastime is creating samplers and other artwork as they master the fine motor skill of handling needle and threads.</p>	<p>Friday, October 16</p> <p>Saturday, October 17 time tbd</p>

November	<p>Stitch in Time:</p> <p>JHIs will continue to work with mentors on memorizing facts of the Historic Homes Tour module and begin to include Christmas anecdotes to be ready for December's Candlelight tours.</p>	<p>Textiles: Mother Seton's Slippers, Louise DeMarillac's kneepads</p> <p>JHIs will learn about the "living practice" method. With this method, one can be influenced in their own learning, the learning of others, and the learning of social formations through persons of the past and/or objects.</p>	<p>Friday, November 20</p> <p>Saturday, November 21 time tbd</p>
December			
January	<p>Level II:</p> <p>JHIs will be introduced on the importance of research and how context can shape and form the historical interpretation. Understanding the technique of research will help JHIs to develop their own living history character, a person from the year of 1818.</p>	<p>Collaborative effort with Archives in which Scott introduces the methods of research and Shrine provides worksheets for small group activities to reinforce the lesson.</p>	<p>Friday, January 15</p> <p>Saturday, January 16 time tbd</p>
February	<p>First-Person:</p> <p>Youth will continue to work with interpreters on researching and developing their fictional character within the historic home(s)</p>	<p>Paintings: St. Joseph, Christ the Redeemer, OLG, etc</p> <p>This opportunity may allow the JHI to explore deeper in the personal connection/relationships to objects which showcases the value of preservation.</p>	<p>Friday, February 19</p> <p>Saturday, February 20 time tbd</p>

Appendix 2: February 2021 “Developing Research Skills” Questions for Students (Before Document Reveal)

February 2021

JHI II – Developing Research Skills

Archives Activity: Understanding how a source can impact your interpretation and the historical perspective

Archives will provide a copy of a source. In small teams work together to answer the following questions. Some or all the questions may apply to the source you are working from.

1. What are your initial reactions to the source? Give your best guess.
*Definition of **source**: A place, person or thing from which something comes from or can be obtained.*
 - a. What do you think the source is? (title, subject, people involved)
 - b. Where was it created?
 - c. When was it created?
 - d. Why was it created? Why then? (A letter to a sick relative, a daily journal, commemorate an event...)

2. Where did the source come from (letter, newspaper, journal, etc.)?
Definitions:
Primary Sources: Immediate, first-hand accounts of a topic; from people who had a direct connection with accounts/topic.
Secondary Sources: Information that are from primary sources; often quotes or derives from primary source. They can cover the same topic but add a layer of interpretation and analysis.
 - a. Is it a primary or secondary source?
 - b. How was it created? (paper and pen, typed, photograph, etc.)

3. Did anything in the source stand out to you?
 - a. What was the main take away from the source?
 - b. Any other notes or main points about the source?
 - c. Is the source/author credible?
Definition of credible: able to be believed; convincing.

4. Was anything missing from the source that you would have found helpful?
 - a. Was there anything left out or unanswered?

Appendix 3: February 2021 “Developing Research Skills” Questions for Students (After Document Reveal)

Further Discussion after the primary source or additional context is shared:

What does the source tell you about society at that time (patriarchal, secular, hierarchical)?

- a. When was the source written? Does it differ from the time discussed in the source?
- b. What was going on in the world during that time (politically, socially, culturally)?
- c. What was the social position of the source’s subject(s)? (rich, religious, high society)

Has context changed your understanding of the source?