

Be a Historian

A historian studies things that happened in the past. They are like detectives. They look for clues to figure out what happened and why it happened.

They use both primary and secondary sources.

Primary sources are records made by people who saw an event when it happened. Photographs, diaries, newspaper articles, and letters are primary sources.

Secondary sources are records written by someone who was not there at the time. Town and county histories and textbooks are secondary sources.

Now it's your turn to be a historian. Look at each of these and think like a historian.

Example #1

Sometimes historians find objects and they try to find out who, what, when, where, why, and how they were used.

Who would have used this?

What is this?

When would it have been used?

Where would it have used it?

Why was it used?

How was it used?

What were the clues that helped you?



Notes: This is a school handbell. It was used in one-room schools by the teacher. The teacher used it to tell students they needed to come inside for school. It would have been used mainly at the end of recesses. The ring on was so it could be hung on a peg or hook.

Example #2

Helen M. Parr Memories of Maple Rapids Area

It was pretty near wilderness when my folks first settled on their place... We lived in what was called a double log house with a shake roof with a porch across the whole length of the house. Two front doors with wooden latches and hinges. There was a big fireplace in the south end of the kitchen.

We youst to have the Fourth of July celebrations there because it was the biggest house there was anywhere around. The neighbors went in together and cooked for the dinner. I remember one Fourth of July they brought milk to our house about four weeks before the Fourth for my mother to make cheese for dinner. I tell you they got some lovely dinners in them days. I tell you I liked them old pioneer days.

We didn't have much fruit them days except wild fruit, which was plenty. Strawberries, blackberries, raspberries, huckleberries, gooseberries, wild plums, and cranberries. You could go and get berries anytime in the season and preserve and dry them for winter. They didn't know anything about canning them days, but I think I lived just as well as I do now.

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What kind of source is this?

What is Helen Parr describing?

When were these events?

Where were these events?

What would a historian learn from reading this?

Notes: This is a primary source. Helen describes her house, celebrating the 4th of July, and picking and preserving wild fruit.

A historian could use records to find that Helen M. (Beach) Parr was born in 1836. So, these events would have been in the 1840's or early 1850's.

Example #3



What kind of source is this?

What is happening in this photo?

When and where do you think this photo was taken?

What are the clues?

On the next page is a photo of the same location taken in 1875. There is also a map of the same location from the time of the event.

Note: This is a circus parade heading south on Clinton Avenue at Higham Street, St. Johns in 1890. The photographer was across the street from the Steel Hotel facing southwest.

In looking at the first photograph there are power lines (installed in late 1880's) and no automobiles. There is also a music store on the second floor of the second building to the left.

In the second photograph we can see the first building on the right is the same as the one to the left of the music store in the first photograph. We can also see the courthouse at the end of the street. The 1890 St. Johns map shows a music store on the second floor of the second building from the corner of Higham and Clinton Avenue.



What is different?

What is at the end of the street?

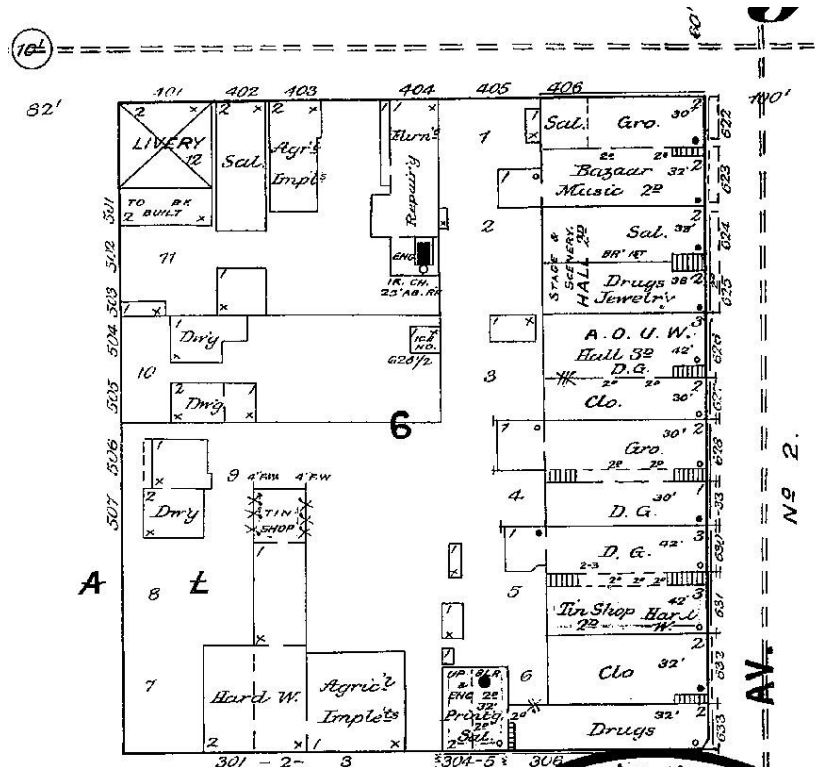
How did historians know this was the same street?

Did you see a music store on the first photograph?

Can you find the same store on this map?

Historians would use other sources to make sure they were right.

Note: Historians would use old newspapers, other photos, and maps.



Example #4



Here's a photograph of students and their teacher at a one-room school.

What would a historian look at to decide the year it was taken?

How is this school different from yours?

What can you tell about the kids who went to school here?

Note: This is a photograph taken at the Round School, Lebanon Township. (The school was an octagon). Historians would look at clothing and hair styles to help date the photo. If any of the people in the photo were identified their birthdates would be looked up in records. This photo is probably early 1900's.

Kids will probably speculate on why some of the boys are barefoot.

Example #5

Here are photographs of the same location taken at different times.



What happened/changed?

Why do you think it happened?

How could you find out why these changes took place?

Note: This is the southwest corner of Bridge and Main Streets, DeWitt. The Clinton House burned in a 1930 fire. Later a gas station was on the corner. When the gas station closed it became a parking lot.



You could look at old newspapers and records and read a town history. You could talk to someone who lives nearby, a member of the family that owned the gas station, or a town official. The last is a drawing of Reed Insurance & Lofts under construction in the summer of 2023.

