



NHD @ the USMM

Secondary Sources

Secondary sources can be a great place to start researching your topic. They can give you a good base knowledge about your topic, and show you the quality and amounts of information that are out there. If you have picked a very obscure topic and there is shortage of secondary research, there will mostly likely be a shortage of primary sources as well. If there is an abundance of secondary research, digging a little deeper may help you more clearly define your question. This document will give you a few tips about doing secondary research.

Parameters for Secondary Research

First- what is a secondary source? This is very important to understand! Secondary sources are sources that were written based on primary source research. This rules out sources such as Wikipedia and other crowd- sourced databases, encyclopedias, textbooks, and other similar sources, which are often referred to as tertiary sources. A few examples of good secondary sources include: well-researched articles from peer-reviewed journals, biographies, commentaries, and history or other scholarly books. This is not to say that sources like Wikipedia and encyclopedias don't have their place, but it's important to understand what that place is. Tertiary sources can be a great place to start a project- get basic information and background- but you cannot stop there.

Tips for Doing Secondary Source Research

Here are a few tips for doing research with secondary sources:

- When considering a history or other scholarly book, do a quick scan of the index in the back. The sources used by the author should be mostly primary, and should include a good variety of primary sources.
- If your topic is something that is widely written about, you may be overloaded with secondary sources. Start with headlines/titles that sound closest to your exact topic or question to help narrow them down.
- Use a variety of secondary sources. Don't stick to just books, just journal articles, etc.
- Use secondary research to help define the boundaries of your own research and to tighten your historical argument/question, based on what other researchers have done.

Strategies for Finding Quality Secondary Online Research

- The most reliable sources of information on the web generally come from sources ending in .edu, .org, and .gov. These will include institutions such as libraries, universities, museums, and government agencies. This is not to say that these are all perfectly reliable sources, and you should always check the source of your source.
- Many local libraries offer online access to databases containing scholarly journal articles.
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- University libraries will sometimes offer access to their databases for the general public if you visit in person, or sometimes online with a local library card. Check with your local university library.
- Museum Blogs- Museums will often have blogs where they post articles about items in their collections, current research on their topic, etc, researched and written by their staff. These can be good sources of secondary information. A few noteworthy blogs are: the Smithsonian museums, the National Science & Media Museum (considering this year's topic), and the Missouri Historical Society, and the National Archives. Just remember to make sure they are reliable sources of information, and as stated above, they should be written based on primary source research.

Secondary Sources @ the USMM

The USMM hosts a small library of books related to U.S. Marshals, law enforcement, events the marshals were involved in (which are many), American government, and more. We are happy to share these resources with you by appointment, or during our scheduled NHD student work days. (Coming Soon) The USMM also offers our Educator Resource Series, a collection of guides on different periods of marshal history. These can be accessed for free on our Online Learning page. (Coming Soon)

Links to Other Secondary Sources

During this time of social distancing, you will probably be doing more of your research online than you have before. Here are a few links the USMM suggests for good secondary source research.

- Smithsonian Libraries (<https://library.si.edu/books-online>) – The Smithsonian offers a variety of old books from their collections online. They are old (think 1800s), but can still be useful for expanding your research and looking at how research on different subjects has changed over the years. You may also want to check more current research to compare.
- The Historical Journal on JSTOR (<https://www.jstor.org/journal/historicalj>) offers all articles from the Journal from the 1950's through the 2010s. Articles cover a variety of subjects in European and World History.
- Many historical journals that are not fully online, such as the Arkansas Historical Quarterly, offer full indexes of their journals online (<http://arkindex.uark.edu/AH>). You can use the indexes to locate the articles that will be useful to you. Most also contain information about where the articles themselves can be found.
- The National Archives maintains several blogs on a variety of topics. A few that may be useful to you include Pieces of History, covering holdings of the National Archives (<https://prologue.blogs.archives.gov/>), Rediscovering Black History (<https://rediscovering-black-history.blogs.archives.gov/>), The Text Message, from the textual records division of the Archives (<https://text-message.blogs.archives.gov/>), and The Unwritten Record, from the NARA special media division (<https://unwritten-record.blogs.archives.gov/>). Some of the presidential libraries also have blogs.



- If you find a reference to something that sounds useful online but can't find the actual source, reach out to the organization and see if they can send something to you, or photocopy or scan selections for you. Especially during this time of business and agency closures, or limited access, more places are willing to do this.