

# Accurate readings of past events: historians and the importance of primary source...

[History](#)



Primary source documents are significant tools for historians when trying to acquire a complete picture of civilizations and events from the past. The most crucial piece of information for historians to remember when analyzing primary documents, whatever the source may be, is to consider: who the source was written by, who their audience was, and the author's purpose for writing the document. Looking at colonial North Carolina newspapers historians can gain a detailed understanding of the characteristics of those from the period. Such characteristics include political, social, and economic traits.

One of the most interesting sections of the colonial newspapers to study is the area of paid advertisements. This section grants the reader the ability to observe colonial characteristics but on a more person level. While the rest of newspapers are focused on broader topics, such as the Continental Congress or proclamations from the King of Britain, the personal advertisement section is more concerned with local events. These ads were written and paid for by everyday people, or at least those that could afford to pay for the ad. Ads that must have been ordinary requests at the time, such as rewards for runaway slaves or lost items, can now grant us an illustration of colonial life in North Carolina.

An article written by John Foy is an example of being able to use these personal ads as a way to analyze the political characteristics of colonial North Carolina. In his ad John Foy is offering a one hundred pound reward to whoever can apprehend two individuals that have robbed him (North Carolina Gazette, May 5, 1775). This ad, along with others offering a reward for stolen goods, illustrates the lack of a strong law enforcement in the <https://assignbuster.com/accurate-readings-of-past-events-historians-and-the-importance-of-primary-source-documents/>

period. Instead of having the sheriff and local law enforcement locate and secure the men who had attacked and robbed him, John Foy is forced to pay for an ad and offer a reward to the general public to locate the two men and his property.

Social characteristics of those from the colony can also be interpreted from the personal advertisements. Colonial North Carolinians perceived slaves as less than people, and men were viewed as superior to women. Slaves were seen as nothing more than property that could be sold along with any other goods, such as furniture and livestock (Cape Fear Mercury, Sept. 22, 1773). No distinction was made between the slaves and any other object that could be sold, illustrating the economic notion stating slaves were seen as property worth a monetary value. At goods worth a monetary value men were considered more valuable than women. The reward for a runaway male indentured servant was four pounds while for a woman was only three pounds (Cape Fear Mercury, Sept. 22, 1773). This difference in reward also illustrates the colonial economic characteristic of men and women slaves or indentured servants being not seen as people but as a way to make money. Since men could do more labor they were seen as a more profitable tool than women; therefore worth a higher reward.

Primary documents are significant tools when studying the past; they can give you a view inside the political, social and economic characteristics of those from the period. Such documents as newspapers can give the reader an idea of how colonial North Carolinians perceived the world around them. However, primary sources are not without their faults. Bias and authors

intent are a major aspect of documents that a historian must be concerned with. But one of the biggest problems with primary documents is that they do not tell the whole story, sometimes leading to confusion within the historian study. An example from the advertisement section of the colonial North Carolina newspapers is that concerned with the selling of excerpts from the American Continental Congress (North Carolina Gazette, May 5, 1775) and speeches from people such as the Earl of Chatam (North Carolina Gazette, July 7, 1775). Why did the paper make certain speeches and information about the Congress and beginning of the revolution available to the entire public while other information was made available to only those who could afford it? Did only the wealthier citizens of North Carolina care about what was going on with the colonies and therefore the extracts deemed not newsworthy for the general public, or was there a different reason? Primary documents can only give so much information, leaving the reader with many unanswered questions.