

Analyzing primary sources: John White and the "lost colonists"

BY PAULINE S. JOHNSON

This lesson was designed to be used with students who have not had much practice in using primary source documents in the classroom. While the lesson is written as a small group activity, the worksheet can be done individually or in small groups. It can also be a teacher-directed lesson in which the teacher asks the questions and the students/groups answer orally.

One of the objectives in using primary source documents in the classroom is to begin to get students to read and think critically. We need to encourage our students to question source material and realize that the past was experienced in different ways by different individuals, and that there are different interpretations and multiple perspectives for any historical event.

For classes that have had practice with using primary source documents, the teacher may choose to use fewer of the available questions.

Learning outcomes

- Students will read about John White's attempt to locate the "lost colonists" when he went to coastal North Carolina in 1590
- Students will read about clues that we have about the fate of the "lost colonists"
- Students will analyze a primary source document
- Students will engage in critical thinking

Teacher planning

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Computer with internet access for each student or group *or*
- LCD projector and computer with internet access *or*
- Copies of "John White Searches for the Colonists¹" for each student (or several copies for each group)

TIME REQUIRED FOR LESSON

1 hour to 90 minutes

Procedure

SMALL GROUP LESSON

1. Put the class into groups of three.
2. Give each group a copy of the John White worksheet.
3. Have each student access “John White Searches for the Colonists” online *or* pass out paper copies.
4. Allow each group to work through the worksheet while the teacher moves between the groups.
5. At the end of the period, go over the questions together.

TEACHER-DIRECTED LESSON

1. Have each pair of students access “John White searches for the Colonists” online *or* pass out paper copies.
2. Using the teacher’s guide to the John White worksheet, go through the questions allowing the students time to read the required paragraphs.

Assessment

If you conduct this as an individual or small group lesson, the assessment will be a completed, accurate worksheet (see the teacher’s guide to the John White worksheet for answers — some will vary).

If you conduct it as a teacher-directed lesson, the assessment is student participation.

One of the major outcomes for this lesson is to begin to encourage students to think critically about primary sources.

Worksheet: John White Searches for the Colonists

1. This article is part of a larger work. Look carefully at the source information directly under the section title. The article you are going to read was combined with other sources about early voyages into a book. What was the name of the book?
2. Who was the editor of this book?
3. When was it compiled?
4. Now think about the shorter article that you will be reading. What is the name of the full work that it came from? (Clue: this is not the book that you listed as number 1)
5. Who do you think was the author of the shorter article?

This is another example of a primary source document. Remember, when reading and analyzing primary source materials you must consider several questions: under what circumstances was it written, why was it written, who was the author and what did he/she do, who was his/her audience, are there any examples of bias, exaggeration, or assumptions that were made by the author, did the time the author was living in have an impact on the contents, and how reliable is this source? Also, in this particular source, it's important to consider when the document was written, which has an impact on the reliability of the material.

6. By looking at title of the primary source, when would you imagine that it might have been written?

Look at this excerpt from the same source. (From the American Journeys² website):

To the Worshipful and my very friend Master Richard Hakluyt, much happiness in the Lord.

Sir, as well for the satisfying of your earnest request, as the performance of my promise made unto at my last being with you in England, I have sent you (although in homely stile, especially for the contentation of a delicate eare) the true discourse of my last voyage into the West Indies, and partes of America called Virginia, taken in hand about the end of Februarie, in the year of our redemption 1590...

...Thus committing the reliefe of my discomfortable company the planters in Virginia, to the merciful help of the Almighty, whom I most humbly beseech to helpe and comfort them, according to his most holy will and their good desire, I take my leave: from my house at Newtowne in Kylmore the 4 of February, 1593.

Your most welwishing friend,
John White

After reading this introduction to the description of his trip:

7. What were the circumstances under which it was written?

8. Why was it written?

9. Who was the audience for this work?

10. When was the article actually written?

11. Think about when this was written. Now, think about the events it describes. When did they take place? Why is this important to consider when analyzing the document?

Now begin to read the excerpt. Read the first two paragraphs. (“The next morning...” and “By that time...”)

12. Two smaller boats left the ships to go to Roanoke Island. Why did they not leave at the same time?

13. What happened to the first boat?

14. What happened to the second boat?

The group was persuaded to continue. Read the next two paragraphs. (“This mischance did...” and “Our boates and...”)

15. Why did the boats miss the correct landing place?

16. What made the group think that the colonists were nearby?

17. How did they try to attract the attention of the colonists?

Read the next paragraph. (“From thence we...”)

18. White explains that he had asked his colonists to leave a particular sign if they left Roanoke. What was the information he asked them to leave?

19. What were the colonists supposed to do to the sign if they were in danger?

20. What sign did White find?

21. Curiously, White wrote that his planters had actually planned to do what after he left to go back to England for supplies in 1587?

Read the next two paragraphs. (“And having well...” and “Presently Captaine Cooke...”)

22. What other sign did White find?

23. What was the condition of the village where White had left his colonists? What was found in the village?

24. What had happened to John White's personal objects that he had left?

25. What made White joyful in the midst of the destruction that he and the sailors found?

Read the next paragraph. ("When we had...")

26. They left the island very quickly. Why?

27. One of the boats left its "caske" on the island? Why did they do this?

28. Why was that important enough for White to mention it?

Read the last paragraph. ("The next morning...")

29. What was the plan that White and the Captain made next?

30. Why were they not able to follow the plan?

Read the “Notes” in the right sidebar.

31. How do you think he felt during his search?

32. Do you see any way that his feelings might have affected his judgment? For example, he concludes in his report that the colonists were chased off by local Indians but went safely to Croatoan. Do you think that is a reasonable conclusion, or was he being overly optimistic? Explain your answer.

33. Was he right to want to continue the search despite the problems of weather and navigation? Why do you think so?

After reading and analyzing this source:

34. Do you think this is a reliable source in describing the search for the colonists? Why or why not?

Extra thinking. Look at the map.

35. Why do you think John White drew this map with west at the top?

Worksheet: Teacher's guide

1. This article is part of a larger work. Look carefully at the source information directly under the section title. The article you are going to read was combined with other sources about early voyages into a book. What was the name of the book?

Early English and French Voyages, Chiefly from Hakluyt, 1534–1608

2. Who was the editor of this book?

Henry S. Burrage

3. When was it compiled?

1906

4. Now think about the shorter article that you will be reading. What is the name of the full work that it came from? (Clue: this is not the book that you listed as number 1.)

The Fifth Voyage of M. John White, 1590

5. Who do you think was the author of the shorter article?

John White

This is another example of a primary source document. Remember, when reading and analyzing primary sources materials you must consider several questions: under what circumstances was it written, why was it written, who was the author and what did he/she do, who was his/her audience, are there any examples of bias, exaggeration, or assumptions that were made by the author, did the time the author was living in have an impact on the contents, and how reliable is this source? Also, in this particular source, it's important to consider when the document was written, which has an impact on the reliability of the material.

6. By looking at title of the primary source, when would you imagine that it might have been written?

1590

Look at this excerpt from the same source. (From the American Journeys³ website):

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Sir, as well for the satisfying of your earnest request, as the performance of my promise made unto at my last being with you in England, I have sent you (although in homely stile, especially for the contentation of a delicate eare) the true discourse of my last voyage into the West Indies, and partes of America called Virginia, taken in hand about the end of Februarie, in the year of our redemption 1590...

...Thus committing the reliefe of my discomfortable company the planters in Virginia, to the merciful help of the Almighty, whom I most humbly beseech to helpe and comfort them, according to his most holy will and their good desire, I take my leave: from my house at Newtowne in Kylmore the 4 of February, 1593.

Your most welwishing friend,

John White

After reading this introduction to the description of his trip:

7. What were the circumstances under which it was written?

This was most likely a report.

8. Why was it written?

John White was recounting his expedition in 1590 to locate the colonists he had left behind in 1587.

9. Who was the audience for this work?

Richard Hakluyt

10. When was the article actually written?

1593

11. Think about when this was written. Now, think about the events it describes. When did they take place? Why is this important to consider when analyzing the document?

The events took place in 1590. The students need to realize that John White was writing about events that had occurred two to two and a half years before. We don't know if he had taken notes or kept a journal of his journey. It is possible that he is recording events from his memory only. You may want to ask the students how much they can remember from two years ago. Explain that while they need to consider this, it does not totally repudiate his writings. Often, people who testify in trials are asked to report on events that had occurred years previously.

Now begin to read the excerpt. Read the first two paragraphs. (“The next morning...” and “By that time...”)

12. Two smaller boats left the ships to go to Roanoke Island. Why did they not leave at the same time?

One of the captains had sent his boat for fresh water.

13. What happened to the first boat?

The first boat actually took on quite a bit of water, but they were able to steer to the coast and land. The materials that they had with them were ruined by water.

14. What happened to the second boat?

The second boat was the later one. A big wave hit them; some men stayed in the boat and some were hanging on to it. The boat hit ground, waves continued to hit it, and turned the boat over several times. Seven of the men were drowned when they were thrown out of the boat or let go. Four others were saved by members of the other boat's crew.

The group was persuaded to continue. Read the next two paragraphs. (“This mischance did...” and “Our boates and...”)

15. Why did the boats miss the correct landing place?

It was dark.

16. What made the group think that the colonists were nearby?

They saw a fire on the island.

17. How did they try to attract the attention of the colonists?

They played a trumpet, played English songs, and called out.

Read the next paragraph. (“From thence we...”)

18. White explains that he had asked his colonists to leave a particular sign if they left Roanoke. What was the information he asked them to leave?

He asked them to carve or write on the trees or on the posts of the doors the name of the place they were going to.

19. What were the colonists supposed to do to the sign if they were in danger?
They were supposed to carve a cross over the letters.
20. What sign did White find?
He found the letters CRO carved into a tree.
21. Curiously, White wrote that his planters had actually planned to do what after he left to go back to England for supplies in 1587?
They were going to move 50 miles into the mainland.

Read the next two paragraphs. (“And having well...” and “Presently Captaine Cooke...”)

22. What other sign did White find?
On one of the posts was carved the word CROATOAN without a cross.
23. What was the condition of the village where White had left his colonists? What was found in the village?
They found iron, lead, guns, and shot thrown around. The houses were taken down and the area was overgrown.
24. What had happened to John White’s personal objects that he had left?
The chests that he had left had been broken open and the items that had been inside were destroyed. Books were torn up, his paintings and maps were ruined by rain, and his armor was rusty.
25. What made White joyful in the midst of the destruction that he and the sailors found?
He believed that the signs told him that the colonists were on Croatoan Island.

Read the next paragraph. (“When we had...”)

26. They left the island very quickly. Why?
The weather was getting stormy.
27. One of the boats left its “caske” on the island? Why did they do this?
The sailors couldn’t get them to the ship due to the weather.
28. Why was that important enough for White to mention it?
The ships needed to have fresh water for the return trip.

Read the last paragraph. (“The next morning...”)

29. What was the plan that White and the Captain made next?
They were going to travel to Croatoan so John White could see if the colonists were there.
30. Why were they not able to follow the plan?
Their anchor cable broke. They were moving so fast that they dropped another anchor and almost went aground. They got into deeper water, but they only had one cable and anchor. Since the weather was getting worse and they had only a little food and no more fresh water, they decided to go to another island.

Read the “Notes” in the right sidebar.

31. How do you think he felt during his search?
Answers will vary, but students should include that White was probably anxious and possibly hopeful as he was looking for his daughter, son-in-law, and granddaughter. They may include that he was very sad when they weren’t able to get to Croatoan on this trip.
32. Do you see any way that his feelings might have affected his judgment? For example, he concludes in his report that the colonists were chased off by local Indians but went

safely to Croatoan. Do you think that is a reasonable conclusion, or was he being overly optimistic? Explain your answer.

Answers may vary. Most students will probably say that his feelings did affect his judgment. Students may say that his judgment that the settlers went to Croatoan was reasonable since he had found the signs that were left.

33. Was he right to want to continue the search despite the problems of weather and navigation? Why do you think so?

Students will have different answers to this. Make sure that they support their answer.

After reading and analyzing this source:

34. Do you think this is a reliable source in describing the search for the colonists? Why or why not?

Students will have different answers to this. Most students will probably say that this is a reliable source, but that John White may not have remembered all the details correctly from two years before.

Extra thinking. Look at the map.

35. Why do you think John White drew this map with west at the top?

Answers may vary. One guess could be that the way the map was drawn is the way that sailors would have seen the coastline as they neared it from the Atlantic.

North Carolina Curriculum Alignment

SOCIAL STUDIES (2003)

Grade 8

- **Goal 1:** The learner will analyze important geographic, political, economic, and social aspects of life in the region prior to the Revolutionary Period.
 - **Objective 1.01:** Assess the impact of geography on the settlement and developing economy of the Carolina colony.

National Standards

In addition to meeting objectives of the North Carolina Standard Course of Study, this lesson plan addresses the following national standards.

HISTORICAL THINKING STANDARDS

Standard 2: Historical Comprehension

- A. Identify the author or source of the historical document or narrative and assess its credibility.
- B. Reconstruct the literal meaning of a historical passage.
- C. Identify the central question(s) the historical narrative addresses.
- D. Differentiate between historical facts and historical interpretations.
- E. Read historical narratives imaginatively.
- F. Appreciate historical perspectives.

Standard 3: Historical Analysis and Interpretation

- A. Compare and contrast differing sets of ideas.
- B. Consider multiple perspectives.

On the web

John White searches for the colonists

<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-twoworlds/4.6>

In this excerpt from the report of his voyage, John White explains how he and the crew of two ships searched for the lost colonists on Roanoke Island but could not find them.

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Visit us on the web at www.learnnc.org to learn more about topics related to this article, including .

Notes

1. See <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-twoworlds/4.6>.
2. See <http://www.americanjourneys.org/aj-038/index.asp>.
3. See <http://www.americanjourneys.org/aj-038/index.asp>.

About the author

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I am currently the Director of a Teaching American History Grant for Buncombe County Schools, Asheville City Schools, and Madison County Schools. I have taught history and English in the seventh and eighth grades for over twenty-six years at Reynolds Middle School in Asheville, North Carolina. I am currently doing adjunct work for Mars Hill College and Western Carolina University. I have a Masters Degree from Western Carolina University and am Nationally Board Certified in Early Adolescence/Social Studies-History. I am certified to teach K-12 and I also have Academically-Intellectually Gifted certification.