Archival Artifact Analysis Worksheet

Archival collections consist of many categories (textual, visual, material, digital) and can include many types of “artifacts.” Letters, city planning records, sound recordings, out-of-print books and pamphlets, personal diaries, government documents, maps, and video testimony are just a few of the “artifacts” you may encounter in an archive. Archival artifacts are primary sources—that is, original materials that emerge from a unique and specific historical context. Researchers draw on primary sources in order to develop secondary sources such as scholarly articles and books. Whether you visit a material or digital archival collection, the following worksheet will help you prepare for independent research by facilitating your analysis of an artifact that interests you.

1) Identify the type of “artifact” you are working with. For example, if it is a document, is it a newspaper article? Map? Letter? Telegram? Press release? Advertisement? Pamphlet? Government record? If it is in another media category, is it a photograph? Sound recording? Video testimony? Website?

2) Describe the artifact. What is its topic or theme? What are some unique characteristics of the artifact? If it is a document, is it hand- or type-written? Does it have any seals, stamps, or notations? Does it feature any people, acronyms, organizations, or institutions that you can learn about in a quick online search?

3) Where did the artifact originate? Who created the artifact? When was it created, and why?

4) To what audience does the artifact appeal? How can you tell? What features of the artifact provide clues?

5) If the artifact has a clear creator or author, can you detect any bias or prejudice? Note any tone or language that may indicate bias.

6) List three things you find particularly striking or important about the artifact.

7) What questions do you have about the artifact? What information might you seek in order to gain a fuller understanding of the artifact?

8) Does the artifact reinforce, contradict, or raise questions about expert opinions you have read or heard about the artifact’s topic or theme?

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