

# PRIMARY SOURCE ANALYSIS



## INSTRUCTIONS



1. Read the introduction to learn more about primary and secondary sources.
2. Read the two letters from sailors, one from the Civil War and the other from World War II.
3. Use the Document Analysis Worksheet to examine each document like a historian.
4. Tag the National Museum of the American Sailor on social media with your finished worksheets:



National Museum of the American Sailor



@ntlmuseumamericansailor

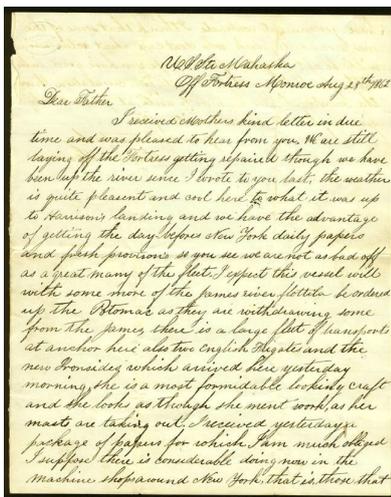
## INTRODUCTION

What is a primary source document? A **primary source** document provides direct or firsthand evidence about an event, object, or person. A primary source document is written by someone with a direct connection to the topic. Letters, diaries, and newspaper articles are all examples of primary source documents.

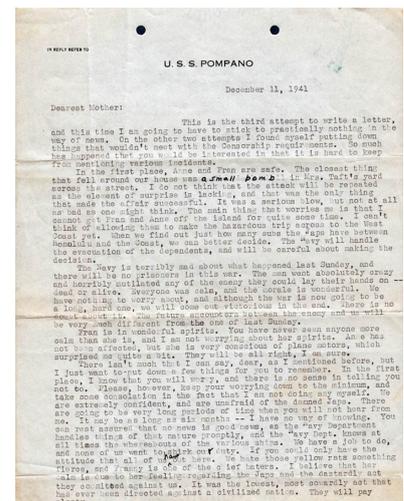
Primary source documents are different from secondary source documents. A **secondary source** document is created by someone who did not experience an event

first-hand or participate in the event covered in the text. History textbooks are examples of secondary sources.

Historians use primary source documents to understand the past. Letters and diaries are some of the most valuable primary source documents, because they are written accounts of history in the words of people who lived at that time. Letters and diaries are as close as historians get to speaking with people from history!



**Left:** Letter from Elisha Harsen, aboard Union steamer *Mahaska* in 1862.



**Right:** Letter from Slade Cutter, aboard *USS Pompano* at Pearl Harbor in 1941.

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# PRIMARY SOURCE ANALYSIS

## DOCUMENT #1: LETTER FROM ELISHA HARSEN, ABOARD UNION STEAMER MAHASKA IN 1862.

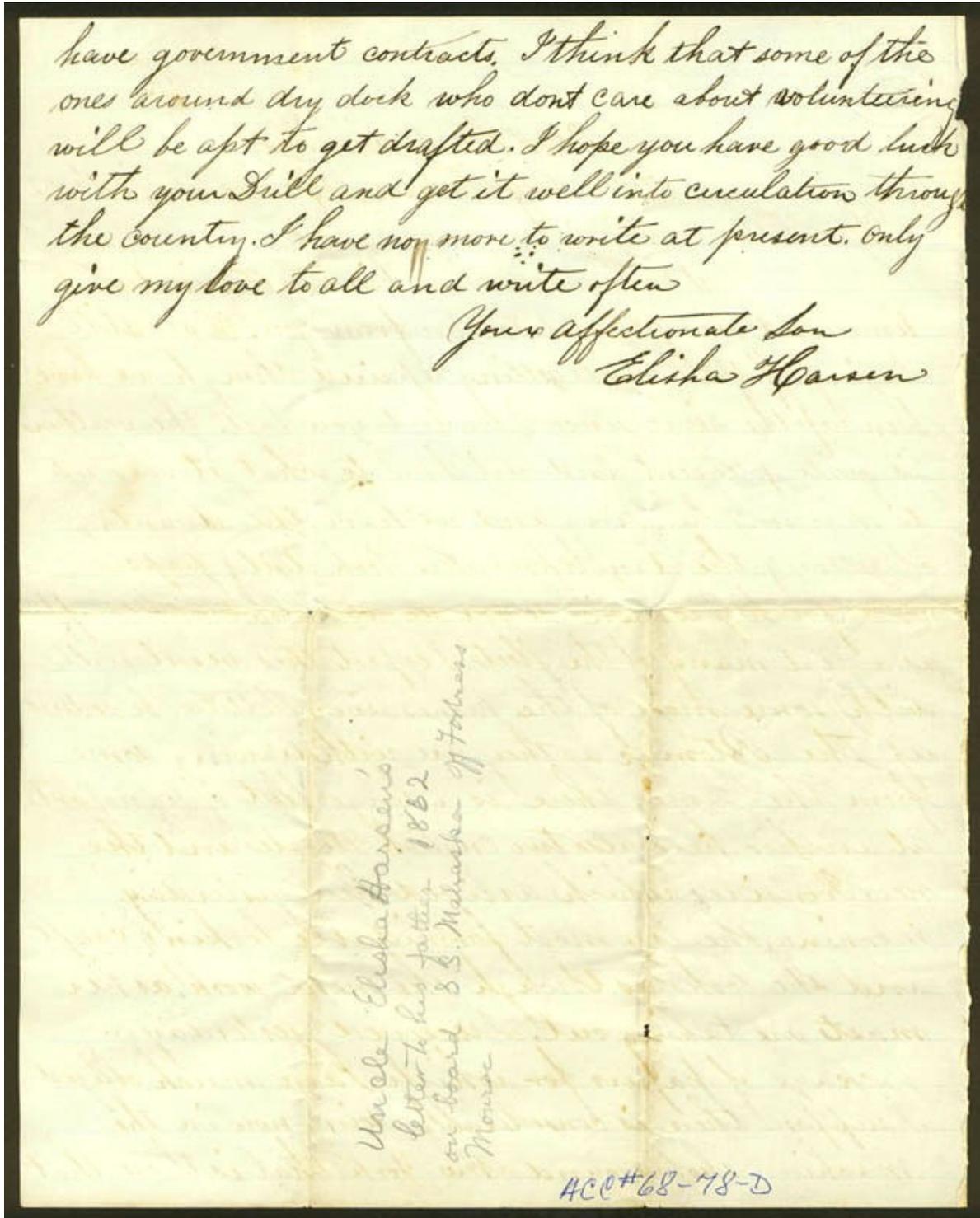
U.S. Steamer Mahaska  
Off Fortress Monroe Aug 28<sup>th</sup> 1862

Dear Father

I received Mothers kind letter in due time and was pleased to hear from you. We are still laying off the Fortress getting repaired though we have been up the river since I wrote to you last, the weather is quite pleasant and cool here to what it was up to Harrison's landing and we have the advantage of getting the day before New York daily papers and fresh provisions so you see we are not as bad off as a great many of the fleet. I expect this vessel will with some more of the James river flotilla be ordered up the Potomac as they are withdrawing some from the James, there is a large fleet of transports at anchor here also two English frigates and the new Ironsides which arrived here yesterday morning, she is a most formidable looking craft and she looks as though she meant work, as her masts are taking out. I received yesterday's package of papers for which I am much obliged I suppose there is considerable doing now in the machine shops around New York, that is, those that

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have government contracts. I think that some of the ones around dry dock who don't care about volunteering will be apt to get drafted. I hope you have good luck with your Drill and get it well into circulation through the country. I have no more to write at present, only give my love to all and write often.

Your affectionate Son

Elisha Harsen

[Written in pencil across the back of the letter: Uncle Elisha Harsen's letter to his father in 1862 on board SS *Mahaska* off Fortress Monroe.]

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## DOCUMENT ANALYSIS WORKSHEET #1

1. Who is the author or creator of the document?

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2. Is the document dated? If yes, what is the date? \_\_\_\_\_  
If no, are there clues to help date the document? For example, references to a specific event or battle.

\_\_\_\_\_

3. Who is the author's audience?

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4. List three things the author wrote that you think are important.

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

5. Does the author state opinions? If yes, give an example.

\_\_\_\_\_

6. List two things the document tells you about life in the sailor's life and experiences.

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

7. Write one question you have for the author of this document.

\_\_\_\_\_

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8. Does the document have any unique characteristics? For example, drawings, misspellings, written by hand, etc.

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# PRIMARY SOURCE ANALYSIS

## DOCUMENT #2: LETTER FROM SLADE CUTTER, ABOARD USS POMPANO AT PEARL HARBOR IN 1941.

IN REPLY REFER TO

U. S. S. POMPANO

December 11, 1941

Dearest Mother:

This is the third attempt to write a letter, and this time I am going to have to stick to practically nothing in the way of news. On the other two attempts I found myself putting down things that wouldn't meet with the Censorship requirements. So much has happened that you would be interested in that it is hard to keep from mentioning various incidents.

In the first place, Anne and Fran are safe. The closest thing that fell around our house was a *small bomb* in Mrs. Taft's yard across the street. I do not think that the attack will be repeated as the element of surprise is lacking, and that was the only thing that made the affair successful. It was a serious blow, but not at all as bad as one might think. The main thing that worries me is that I cannot get Fran and Anne off the island for quite some time. I can't think of allowing them to make the hazardous trip across to the West Coast yet. When we find out just how many subs the Japs have between Honolulu and the Coast, we can better decide. The Navy will handle the evacuation of the dependents, and will be careful about making the decision.

The Navy is terribly mad about what happened last Sunday, and there will be no prisoners in this war. The men went absolutely crazy and horribly mutilated any of the enemy they could lay their hands on -- dead or alive. Everyone was calm, and the morale is wonderful. We have nothing to worry about, and although the war is now going to be a long, hard one, we will come out victorious in the end. There is no doubt about it. The future encounters between the enemy and us will be very much different from the one of last Sunday.

Fran is in wonderful spirits. You have never seen anyone more calm than she is, and I am not worrying about her spirits. Anne has not been affected, but she is very conscious of plane motors, which surprised me quite a bit. They will be all right, I am sure.

There isn't much that I can say, dear, as I mentioned before, but I just want to put down a few things for you to remember. In the first place, I know that you will worry, and there is no sense in telling you not to. Please, however, keep your worrying down to the minimum, and take some consolation in the fact that I am not doing any myself. We are extremely confident, and are unafraid of the damned Japs. There are going to be very long periods of time when you will not hear from me. It may be as long as six months -- I have no way of knowing. You can rest assured that no news is good news, as the Navy Department handles things of that nature promptly, and the Navy Dept. knows at all times the whereabouts of the various ships. We have a job to do, and none of us want to shirk our duty. If you could only have the attitude that all of us <sup>have</sup> out here. We hate those yellow rats something fierce, and Franny is one of the chief haters. I believe that her calm is due to her feeling regarding the Japs and the dastardly act they committed against us. It was the lowest, most cowardly act that has ever been directed against a civilized nation. They will pay plenty.

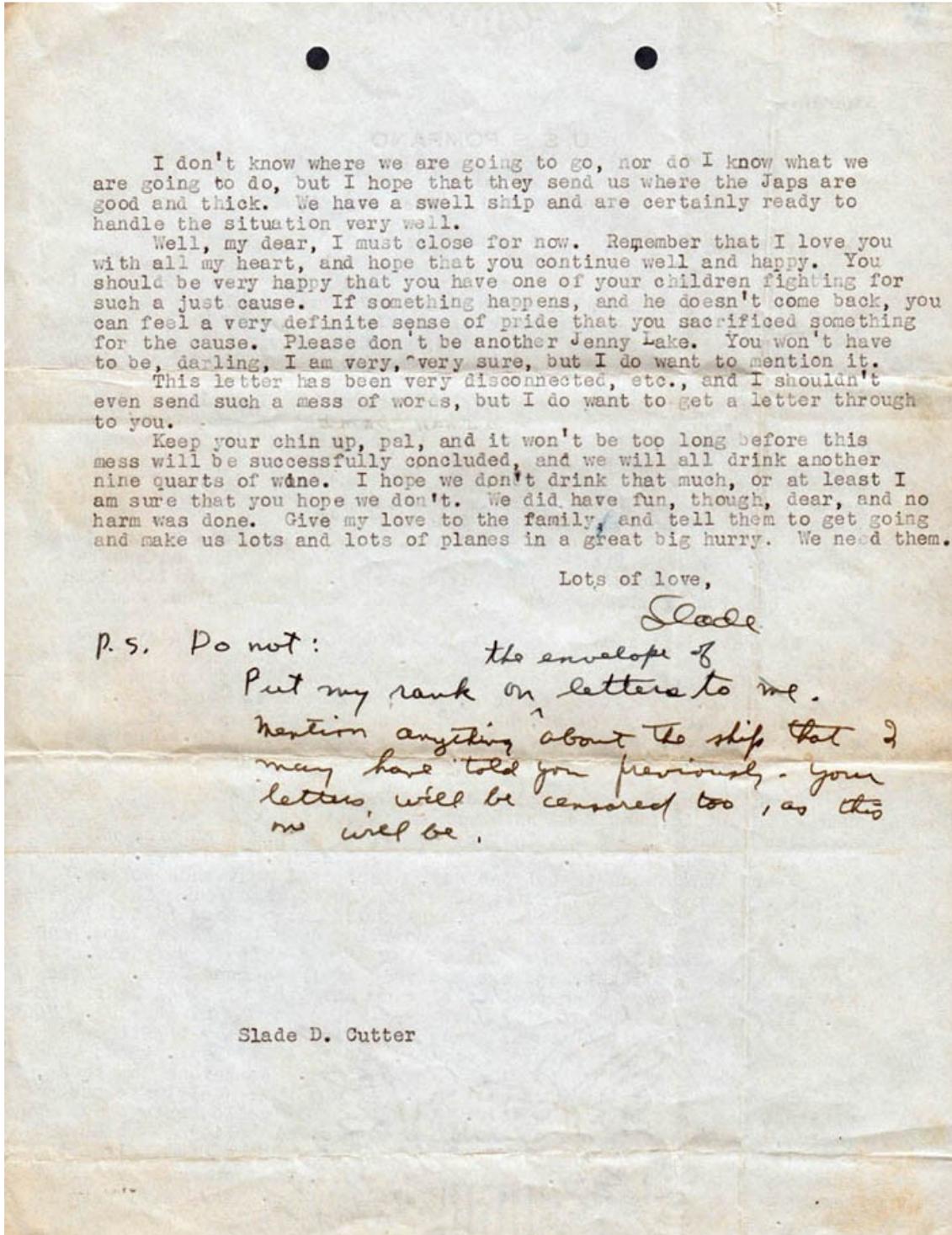
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I don't know where we are going to go, nor do I know what we are going to do, but I hope that they send us where are Japs are good and thick. We have a swell ship and are certainly ready to handle the situation very well.

Well, my dear, I must close for now. Remember that I love you with all my heart, and hope that you continue well and happy. You should be very happy that you have one of your children fighting for such a just cause. If something happens, and he doesn't come back, you can feel a very definite sense of pride that you sacrificed something for the cause. Please don't be another Jenny Lake. You don't have to be, darling, I am very sure, but I do want to mention it.

This letter has been very disconnected, etc., and I shouldn't even send such a mess of words, but I do want to get a letter through to you.

Keep your chin up, pal, and it won't be too long before this mess will be successfully concluded, and we will all drink another nine quarts of wine. I hope we don't drink that much, or at least I am sure that you hope we don't. We did have fun, though, dear, and no harm was done. Give my love to the family, and tell them to get going and make us lots and lots of planes in a great hurry. We need them.

Lots of love,

Slade

[Handwritten: P.S. Do not: Put my rank on the envelope of the letter to me. Mention anything about the ship that I may have told you previously. Your letters will be censored too, as this one will be.]

Slade D. Cutter

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