Evaluating Primary Sources

As a historian, you are often required to make use of primary sources in your historical research. Evaluating primary sources requires a thorough examination of the item. Use this worksheet to help you analyze primary sources.

1. Who created your item? When was it created?

2. What are its unique physical characteristics? Are you examining the original item or a reproduced copy? Does the physical nature of the item impact how you interpret it?

3. Why was this item officially created? What does this item provide evidence of?

4. Does the item provide historical evidence in ways it was not originally intended?

5. What are the inherent bias’ exhibited by the item?

6. List at least two things that this item tells you about life at the time that it was created.

7. How does the item fit in the rest of the collection of which it is a part? If it is a reproduced copy, what can you tell about the collection in which the original is located? If you can't tell, how might that change your analysis of the item?

8. What questions does examining this item raise for you?

9. What impact does this record have on your larger understanding of what was happening historically at this time?

10. Place this record in historical context of what is happening nationally at this time – does it support or refute general historical narrative of the period? How?