

Evaluating Primary Documents: Letters, Journals, and Diaries

by Paula Gammell

No ‘interpreter’ at some historic site, no report, no analysis by even the most knowledgeable researcher can come close to a document that says: “I was there; I saw it and this is what happened.”

In their own words, *this* is what happened!

Oh, but let’s not be so excited to find such a treasure that we fail to scrutinize it objectively and thoroughly. Is it wholly accurate? Might it be biased? Did the writer have an agenda? If so, can we explain any error or compensate for any slant?

Before I consider something worthy of being published in “East Tennessee Roots” I evaluate the document based upon these questions, in no particular order:

- *What was the writer’s purpose or motive?*

It could have been simply to make a note of what happened, such as in a journal or diary, or to make a record “for posterity” of what life was like back in the olden days. Or it could have been to inform, such as a letter written home. Or it could have been to influence or persuade someone.

Certainly something written to make a note to oneself carries a high degree of accuracy. Letters home *may* also be unbiased; however, perhaps the writer wanted to reassure the family that everything was fine when in fact it wasn’t – such as the danger the writer faced in battle. And if the document’s purpose was to influence or persuade, that slant should be glaringly obvious to spot. These situations, once recognized, can be accounted for when evaluating the document.

- *When was it written down?*

Was it written down at the time it happened? Or, was it written down afterwards, and, if so, how long afterwards? Of course, the closer to the fact, the better; memories can fade or be embellished over time.

- *How likely is it that the writer knew of what he wrote?*

Was the writer an eyewitness? Was the writer told of it later, and, if so, how much later? Was the writer told by an eyewitness or was it third- or fourth-hand information?

An eyewitness account carries the highest degree of reliability. The more the account is told and retold, the greater the chance of errors creeping in.

- *Did the writer use documents unavailable to us?*

The writer may be using documents that are now lost. If so, does the rest of the article indicate we can rely on this?

- *How accurate is the writer in verifiable facts?*

Certainly some statements the writer made can be verified. Are they accurate? If not, is there a reasonable explanation why? And if the writer made numerous inexplicable errors, one can infer that the bulk of his writings are unreliable.

But did the writer acknowledge the *possibility* he made errors? Did he differentiate between statements he knew for a fact and others he simply thought were probably accurate?

Let’s see how this applies to documents we’ve printed:

- John Brabson Shields, born in Grainger County in 1840, wrote reminiscences of his youth, young adulthood, and Civil War service in several missives he sent to his local paper some 80+ years later. His description of paper mills and iron furnaces could have come from no one other than an eyewitness, as he was. And his account of experiences during the Civil War could come from no one other than a participant, as he was.

- Col. Samuel Wear in 1802 wrote to authorities explaining the circumstances of the death of a Cherokee Indian. He wrote the letter a few days after the fact: that’s good. His purpose was not only to report what happened, but also to *persuade* that it was an accident. And maybe it was. However, other people – including the dead Cherokee – might have had a different version of events; we will never know. This doesn’t make Col. Wear’s letter *wrong*, it just makes it one-sided, and we need to keep this in mind when evaluating his letter.

- Marcus J. Parrott wrote in the 1870s of his experiences working on steamboats many years earlier. He did make a couple of errors – minor ones, but errors nonetheless. Now, several factors render these errors of little consequence to the document as a whole. First, they are explainable: they were not from his memory but were what he had been told. Second, his ready acknowledgment that there might be errors in what he had been told shows his intent on accuracy. Third, the bulk of his lengthy account consists of his own experiences and is remarkably accurate in verifiable facts. Thus in this case a couple of minor errors in no way disqualifies the document.

When you’re lucky enough to find documents like these, before you believe everything as written, first evaluate them for reliability and accuracy. Practice, experience, and common sense will help you learn how to tell if a document is compromised, whether through bias or agenda or inadvertent error.

Each of these documents passes the test. And they tell us better than anything else ever could: “I was there; I saw it and this is what happened.”

If you’d enjoy reading these articles in full, find John B. Shields’ reminiscences and Col. Wear’s letter in Vol. 7, No. 1, and read Marcus Parrott’s reminiscences in Vol. 10, No. 3 of “East Tennessee Roots.”

Lastly, briefly by contrast, consider a 1900 newspaper article we reprinted on the “Secret Silver Mines in Copper Ridge” (excerpt in Info Sheet #4). Who wrote it? We don’t know. Why was it written? Primarily to entertain the reader. That’s not to dismiss it and say it’s all made up. On the contrary, I suspect it is not only based in fact, but is mostly true. Or, at least, mostly an accurate account of the legend. Some claims are verifiable; others are not. This is a tale, a story, a myth. Yes, it is based in truth. But the story itself is the important part, not the precise details. So enjoy stories. Just don’t confuse them with primary documents like journals, diaries, and letters.