Building History Labs

U.S. History Lessons That Teach Critical Thinking & Other Citizenship Skills

by William Chapman

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“What do historians do?” an eleventh grade U.S. history student asked one morning.

38 years after earning my teaching credential, and I could not remember another time when I’d been asked this question.

I thought for a moment, and then asked what exactly he meant. He said he wanted to know what they did during a normal work day.

I thought again, and then replied that I believed that most were teachers. They did background reading on the topic their class was studying, prepared and delivered lectures and in class activities, wrote tests and assignments, and graded student work.

I went on to say that a smaller number were researchers and writers. I told him that members of this group mostly spent their days in libraries; and at their office computers writing articles and books, and preparing talks to give at professional conferences.

This seemed to satisfy the student, but I couldn’t stop thinking about his question.

The more deeply I thought, the more I realized that what the best research historians do is practice the skills that we as history teachers profess to want to instill in our students; skills that will arm them to be the active, informed, skeptical citizens our nation and world need in order to maintain the societies we have developed and fought to preserve over the centuries.

Defining these skills and illustrating how to use our discipline to help students develop them, is the heart and soul of this book. But, for the moment, it is important to know only that they fall into these categories:

- reading with understanding
- writing and speaking with clarity
- organizing and working effectively in small groups
- making thoughtful, rational decisions

- distinguishing among facts, beliefs, opinions, inferences, conclusions and sophistry
- questioning intelligently and with purpose
- critically analyzing and verifying assertions made orally, and in digital or analog print, audio, video, art, still images, maps, etc.

So, are these the skills that by our actions and assignments we actually ask students to develop in our classrooms? Unfortunately, in most cases they are not. Educator Larry Cuban cites research[i] that shows 97% of high school history students report having teachers that lecture (which at best develops listening and note taking skills), 83% report being asked to memorize (memorization skills), and 89% say their classes focused on a textbook that teaches what Cuban terms heritage rather than history (again, memorization skills).

For more than a century, our society has witnessed an ongoing professional and political war over whether history education should focus on the transmission of heritage (great leaders, great institutions, great battles, great ideas, great documents, etc.) or the development of citizenship and historical research skills such as those falling into the categories listed above. The statistics Larry Cuban cites indicate that the proponents of heritage are prevailing.

In the early 1990s, there was an exceptionally bloody battle over the proposed National History Standards. Gary Nash, UCLA history professor emeritus and director of the National Center for History in the Schools, described it from his perspective in his riveting 1997 book, ***History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past***[ii]. From the other side, Lynne Cheney made the argument for heritage instruction in her 1995 book, ***Telling the Truth: Why Our Culture and Our Country Have Stopped Making Sense – and What We Can Do About It***[iii].

As I type, the war continues, most notably in Texas, where a battle rages over proposed history standards, and whether or not teaching critical thinking skills should be banned in the state. Texas is key because, as the largest single textbook market, whatever standards it adopts will be used by textbook publishers as the basis for the history texts they will produce and offer for sale throughout the nation.

Over the years, I've thought a lot about why it is that heritage instruction, epitomized by lecturing teachers and textbooks that focus primarily on political and military figures and events, maintains such a stranglehold in our classrooms. I believe in large part it is politics. Most successful politicians, at all levels of government, derive benefit from attaching themselves to national myths and symbols, and therefore want to perpetuate them. They do so, in part, by mandating that they be taught in our public schools.

Another reason is the extremely lucrative textbook industry that has developed over the past half century or so. Its representatives work hard, and spend large marketing budgets to insure that its products are purchased for use in schools throughout the nation. These texts are written to be inoffensive and non-threatening so as to be acceptable in the largest possible number of markets. Books that foster thinking and dialog are more likely to engender controversy, thereby scaring off certain segments of the potential market. This makes such books undesirable to the industry. You don't have to take my word alone for this though. Frances Fitzgerald[iv] and Diane Ravitch[v] have written marvelous books that explore this topic in the depth it deserves.

But perhaps most importantly, politicians, teachers and other successful members of our society almost always finished at the top of their classes in our schools. Most likely, they learned history from textbooks and lectures, were rewarded with good grades, and perhaps even enjoyed this instruction. If others didn't, then the fault was theirs not that of instruction that failed to engage them.

However, even teachers who emerge from school with the desire to teach differently, often fall back on the tried and true once they run into students who don't respond as they hope to the methods they employ; or find the social pressures of the environments in which they teach pushing them to conform to traditional methods.

So, if heritage instruction is indeed as prevalent as Cuban's cited statistics indicate, how well does it work? To find out, I looked for statistics to shed light and provide answers. I found them at the web site of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/ushistory/

The NAEP, whose governing board was established by federal law in 1988, is considered to provide the "gold standard" in educational testing. Its tests are not high stakes, and are not administered for profit. Its results are provided for groups (i.e. all fourth, eighth or twelfth grade students), not individual students or schools; and are designed to find out what students know and can do in the various subject areas tested: mathematics, reading, science, writing, the arts, civics, economics, geography, U.S. history, and beginning in 2014, in Technology and Engineering Literacy (TEL). To find out more about the NAEP, visit its web page at http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/about/ (accessed 10/24/2013).

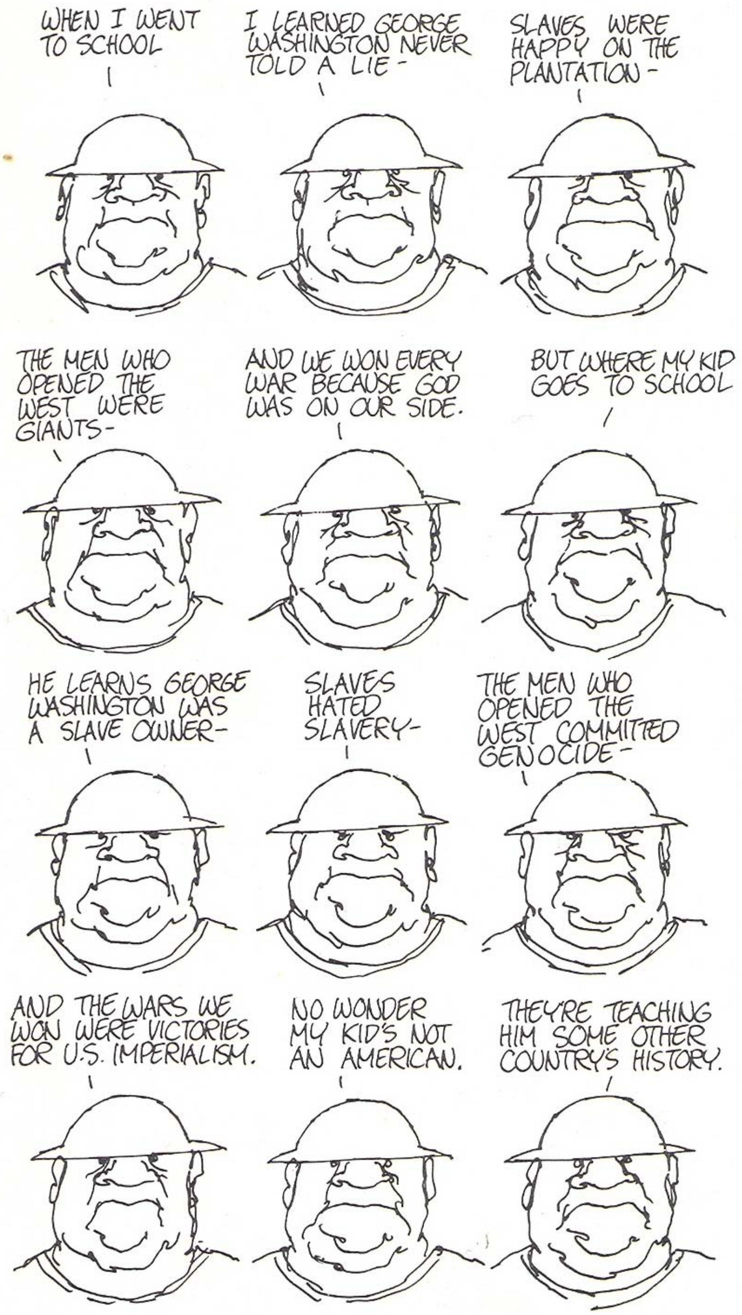
The NAEP completed U.S. History surveys in 1994, 2001, 2006 and 2010. Its most recent report, 2010, shows that in 12th grade, 55% of students scored below the basic level, 33% scored at the basic level, 11% scored proficient, and 1% scored advanced. For a fuller understanding of this survey and what its results mean, you may read the NAEP report at http://nationsreportcard.gov/ushistory_2010/ However, even before developing that fuller understanding, I think it safe to say that the 2010 results (and the not dissimilar ones from previous surveys) show that our current methods of teaching high school U.S. History are failing the majority of our students.

What Is History?

The Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary defines history as, "a chronological record of significant events (as affecting a nation or institution) often including an explanation of their causes"[vi]. Such chronologies are usually presented in story form. Historians are those who research, synthesize and write these chronicles. They may also teach the resulting stories to students, but most history teachers are probably not historians, given that they teach history written by others, but do not research, synthesize or write their own. Most history teachers are storytellers; and the compelling ones are usually considered the best. Indeed, I believe that most of us became history teachers because we were enthralled by the stories told in the lectures we heard from teachers who inspired us. Our efforts to emulate them is the most likely reason that the research cited by Larry Cuban shows that the overwhelming majority of us still lecture to our students.

History instruction would be very straight forward if each event had a single agreed upon narrative. Unfortunately that is almost never the case, despite the best efforts of those who see history as heritage to make it so. On the contrary, the meaning one draws from the same facts and events can differ dramatically depending upon the perspective from which one is looking at them, the evidence upon which one bases his/her conclusions about them, and the truth of that evidence. Consequently, even when we begin with one agreed upon set of facts, different people will synthesize and tell remarkably different stories about them.

For example, the editorial cartoon on the next page, drawn by Jules Feiffer in 1970, illustrates a generation gap in knowledge about U.S. History.


WHEN I WENT TO SCHOOL
I LEARNED GEORGE WASHINGTON NEVER TOLD A LIE-
SLAVES WERE HAPPY ON THE PLANTATION-
THE MEN WHO OPENED THE WEST WERE GIANTS-
AND WE WON EVERY WAR BECAUSE GOD WAS ON OUR SIDE.
BUT WHERE MY KID GOES TO SCHOOL
HE LEARNS GEORGE WASHINGTON WAS A SLAVE OWNER-
SLAVES HATED SLAVERY-
THE MEN WHO OPENED THE WEST COMMITTED GENOCIDE-
AND THE WARS WE WON WERE VICTORIES FOR U.S. IMPERIALISM.
NO WONDER MY KID'S NOT AN AMERICAN.
THEY'RE TEACHING HIM SOME OTHER COUNTRY'S HISTORY.

© 1970 Jules Feiffer, Courtesy Publishers-Hall Syndicate.

The basic facts about U.S. History that underlie Feiffer's cartoon are clear enough:

- One of the leaders of the United States in its earliest years was George Washington.
- Slavery was an institution in the U.S. for the first part of its history.
- During the 19th century the original United States expanded westward to encompass territory across the continent; finally reaching the Pacific Ocean, then moving on to Hawaii, the Philippines and other Pacific islands.
- The United States has been a combatant in many wars.

I don't know of anybody who could successfully challenge the veracity of any item on this list. Nevertheless, conflicts arise around them because different people look at them from different perspectives, make different assumptions about them, and draw different conclusions from them. For example, the narratives written by former slaves tell a much different story of life in the slave south than do those written by white southern slave owners. This is so because those on each side interpret agreed upon facts in different ways; or even focus on entirely different, but just as valid, sets of facts. Likewise, those who write about George Washington while focusing solely on his achievements as Commander of the Revolutionary Army, presiding officer at the 1787 Constitutional Convention, and first President of the nation under the Constitution; tell a very different tale than might one of the so-called Whiskey Rebels who faced an army sent by President Washington to Pennsylvania in 1794.

So, history is much more than the presentation and memorization of a set of indisputable facts. It begins with the selection of specific people and/or events to study from a long list of possibilities, moves to the posing of questions to answer about the selected people or events, proceeds to the search for evidence to examine from which answers to the questions can be mined, goes on to the identification and verification of facts that emerge from this evidence, then concludes in the construction and passing on of stories that give meaning to the verified facts.

Since the historical process, as I see it, requires many choices and much interpretation, different outcomes are almost inevitable. This does not mean that one outcome is necessarily right while others are wrong, although that may sometimes prove to be the case. More often it means that we end up seeing a very complex world in which seemingly contradictory stories might all be true. When the evidence is valid, the facts are verified and the conclusions drawn are logically sound and rooted in those facts; any resulting story is true.

Therefore, the character in Feiffer's cartoon is wrong. His kid is not being taught some other country's history. Rather, our country's history is more complex than the character's schooling led him to believe. We need to stop ignoring this complexity in our history instruction. Rather, we should begin to teach students skills that enable them to understand and work with it. In the process of doing so, we have the power to engage them.

History Labs to the Rescue

Even though I've taught what I now call "history labs" for just about as long as I've been teaching, I didn't come across the term itself until I read Bruce Lesh's book, ***"Why Don't You Just Tell Us the Answer?"***[vii]. Lesh attributes the model he follows in building the lessons that make up his book, and the term itself, to West Morris, New Jersey high school teachers Phil Nicolosi and Mike Walsh.

I don't know who coined the term "history lab", nor when; but it seems to have been around at least since 1996 when the Washington State Historical Society began designing its History Lab Learning Center Project[viii]. In 2001, the Society put up its "History Lab" web site[ix]. Then in 2002, Technology in the Service of Learning put up its web site, TIELab The History LabTM[x].

Lesh and most others who promote the "history lab" model for history instruction want to change the focus from the current acquisition of "facts" (primarily heritage) model to teaching students to "think like historians". Their lessons are almost exclusively centered on presenting students one or more primary sources on a given topic, then having them frame, investigate and answer questions about these documents and their interpretation.

A broader approach was suggested by Nancy Shoemaker in her January 2009 essay, "Where is the History Lab Course?", published in the American Historical Association's Perspectives on History[xi]. Shoemaker proposes that we move beyond primary source work alone, broadening studies to include the entire historical research process in high school and college courses.

In the history lab lessons that follow this introduction, I present another, somewhat different model. My goal is to teach students to think like citizens – identifying questions about public matters (past and present) that need answers, then using research, reason and logic to identify and evaluate relevant evidence (past and present, primary and secondary) upon which to construct supported, clearly presented answers. In many cases, thinking like a historian and thinking like a citizen are one and the same; requiring the same skills. In others, however, they differ. Historians think primarily about the past, and in our culture, mostly about political and military events and figures in that past. Citizens, on the other hand, think about the present as well as the past; frequently using information from the past to inform decisions and actions in the present. Therefore, the difference between history lab lessons that attempt to teach students to think like historians, and those that attempt to teach them to think like citizens have mostly to do with subject choice.

As you'll see, the subjects investigated in my history lab lessons frequently deal with issues and concerns citizens of their times faced in their daily lives, as well as contemporary issues and concerns rooted in the past; rather than on the great leaders, great events, great battles, great ideas, etc. found in many existing history lab lessons.

Truth be told, very few of our students will become historians, but virtually all of them will be citizens. They will be best served by us, both as individuals and as members of the community, if we help them to become the most thoughtful, effective citizens possible. Their participation in history labs that enable them to think like citizens will do that.

Principles Upon Which Citizenship History Labs Are Built

My citizenship history labs are based on the following principles. Share and discuss them with students as they work through the labs. Not all principles will necessarily be in play in every lab, but one or more will be.

Principle 1 – Truth is not binary

Undoubtedly, this is the most counter intuitive principle. If something isn't true, mustn't it then be false? It is difficult for us to conceive of any other options since most institutions in our culture reinforce this binary approach.

Our schooling is filled with true-false and multiple choice tests where only one answer from each set of choices is correct. Most history instruction consists of stories with clear heroes and villains; specific names, dates and places to memorize; and good grades for those who provide the most "correct answers".

And it is not just in school that our culture presents us with binary choices.

* As voters we must choose one candidate from a multiple choice list in each race on our ballots, and yes or no on each proposition presented to us.
* In criminal courtrooms, defendants are judged guilty or not guilty after trials where two sides fight it out.
* Our football, basketball, baseball, hockey and other sporting events always produce a winner and at least one loser.
* Our businesses make money or they lose it.
* Our wars (presented as battles between good and evil) are always won or lost.
* News media claim that they try to present both sides of every issue.

Given all of this, how can it be that an assertion could be anything other than true or false?

I assert that it not only can be, but almost always is. Why? Because, the real world is much more complex than what we see when looking through institutional cultural lenses such as history texts, encyclopedias, etc.

Here are a few examples to illustrate what I mean.

Ex. 1 - True or False? George Washington was born on February 22, 1732.

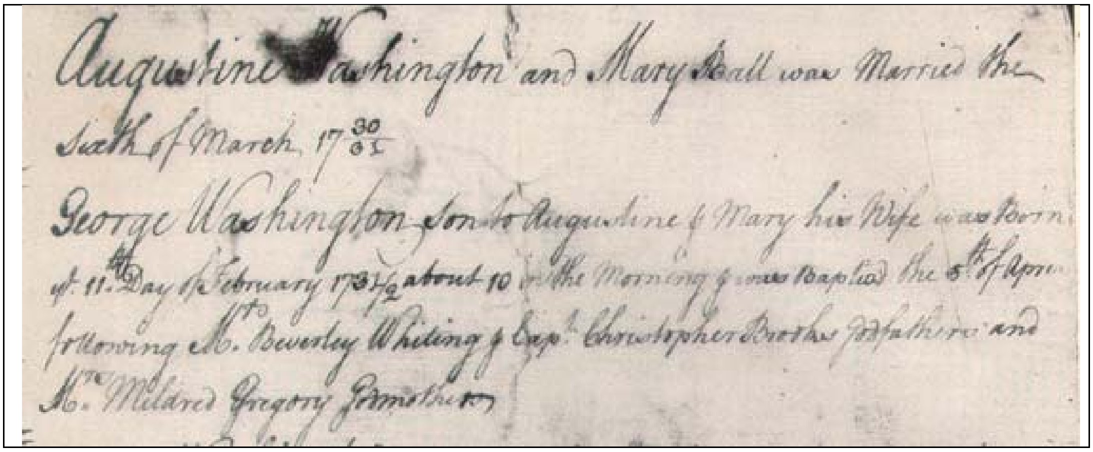
This would seem pretty straight forward. Most authorities (encyclopedias, history textbooks, biographies, etc.) tell us that Washington was indeed born on February 22, 1732. However, if we could board a time ship and travel back to Washington's birth place, we would find that calendars and local people would tell us the date was February 11, 1731/2[xii].

How can that be?

The answer is that when George Washington, the first President of the United States under the constitution that went into effect in 1789, was born, the British Empire had not yet switched from using the Julian calendar to the Gregorian calendar. That switch took place in 1752.

In the first half of the 18th century, the Julian calendar was running 11 days behind the more accurate Gregorian calendar. Therefore, the day we now identify on our Gregorian calendars as February 22 was February 11 in Britain and her colonies then. Additionally, New Year's Day was March 25 under the Julian calendar system. So at the time Washington was born, the last day of 1731 was March 24.

However, we don't need a time ship to know what people present at Washington's birth saw. They left this for us.



Augustine Washington and Mary Ball was Married the Sixth of March 1730/31

George Washington Son to Augustine & Mary his Wife was Born ye 11th Day of February 1731/2 about 10 in the Morning & was Baptis'd the 5th of April following Mr Beverley Whiting & Capt. Christopher Brooks Godfathers and Mrs Mildred Gregory Godmother

The image above shows the first two entries at the top of a page in the family Bible belonging to Washington's parents. I have cropped them from a scan of the whole page placed on the web by the University of Virginia[xiii]. The first entry records the marriage of Augustine Washington and Mary Ball on March 6, 1730/31. The second records the birth of their first child, George, on the "11th day of February 1731/2 about 10 in the morning".

A good summary of the calendar system changes that took place in Britain and her colonies in the mid 18th century can be found on this page of the Connecticut State Library's web site: http://www.cslib.org/CalendarChange.htm (accessed successfully by me on November 11, 2012).

At this point I need to note that the Julian and Gregorian calendars were and are not the only ones in use by humans then or now. To see where George Washington's birth date falls using some of the other systems, I visited the web site http://isotropic.org/date/ on November 16, 2012. I entered the Gregorian date for Washington's birth, and was shown the web page that displays via this link:

http://isotropic.org/cgi-bin/date.pl?date=2-22-1732

The page shows these calendar dates:

Gregorian:	Friday, 22 February 1732
Mayan:	Long count = 12.5.15.1.9; tzolkin = 3 Muluc; haab = 17 Mac
French:	
Islamic:	25 Sha'ban 1144
Hebrew:	26 Shevat 5492
Julian:	11 February 1732
ISO:	Day 5 of week 8 of 1732
Persian:	3 Esfand 1110
Ethiopic:	16 Yakatit 1724
Coptic:	16 Amshir 1448
Chinese:	Cycle 73, year 49 (Ren-Zi), month 1 (Ren-Yin), day 27 (Yi-You)
Julian day:	2353712
Day of year:	Day 53 of 1732; 313 days remaining in the year
Discordian:	Pungenday, Chaos 53, Year of Our Lady of Discord 2898

Another thing we need to consider when thinking through an answer to this true-false question is the name George Washington itself. I am quite confident that everyone reading this automatically assumed that when I wrote, “George Washington was born on February 22, 1732”, I was referring to the George Washington who commanded the American Army in the Revolutionary War, served as presiding officer of the Constitutional Convention of 1787, and later was elected to serve two terms as the first president of the United States under that constitution. Most people who’ve been schooled in U.S. History would probably make that assumption. However, I didn’t state that explicitly in the true-false question with which I began this example.

I could just as easily have been referring to one of the people named George Washington whose name appeared as a result of a search I just ran at switchboard.com, a telephone white pages look up site. Here is what I found there when I searched for individuals named George Washington on November 11, 2012[xiv]:

Name	Age	City/State
George Washington	69	Berkeley, CA
George Washington	49	Killeen, TX
George Washington	59	New York, NY
George Washington	51	Fort Myers, FL
George Washington	59	Homewood, IL

Had I been referring to one of the above, the answer to the question would clearly have been False.

However, even assuming I was referring to the George Washington who lived and served in the 18th century, was he the only George Washington born in British North America in the 18th century? To find out, I searched the 1790 census records[xv]. I examined the records from all states. In these records, Heads of Families were listed by name. The only state listing George Washington was Virginia, and its Index showed three entries. Listed there were “Washington, General”; “Washington, Gen Geo.”; and “Washington, Gen George”.

Examining the detailed Virginia records for Fairfax County (where Mt. Vernon is located), I found that “Gen Geo Washington” was listed as head of a family with 30 “white souls”, 39 dwellings, and 21 other buildings. In Stafford County, “Gen. George Washington” is shown as head of a family of 6 “white souls”, 1 dwelling, and 10 other buildings. I assume this is Ferry Farm, Washington’s childhood home and birthplace. “General Washington” is the listing in the Fairfax County record that shows the census totals for white and black at each household. On that row, “General Washington” is shown as Head of Family for 2 white and 188 black people. Apparently there were no slaves at his Stafford County property.

So, it appears that at the time the 1790 census was taken, there was only one George Washington living as a head of family in the United States. That was not the case, however, for the nation's 1st Vice President, later the 2nd President, John Adams.

Examining the 1790 Census indexes for the various states, I found 14 entries for John Adams in Virginia, 30 in Massachusetts, 8 in Maryland, 7 in Maine, 3 in Vermont, 7 in Connecticut, 12 in New York, 13 in North Carolina, 15 in Pennsylvania, 11 in South Carolina, and 0 in Rhode Island. Therefore, it would seem that anyone looking for birth records for our 1st Vice President would need to be extra careful to make sure s/he found those for the correct John Adams.

So, how is one to correctly answer the question, "True or False? George Washington was born on February 22, 1732." That depends on the assumptions one makes. The correct answer is false if we assume that George Washington refers to one of the men with that name living today, or if we assume that the date is from the Julian calendar. On the other hand, the correct answer is true if we assume that the date is from the Gregorian calendar, and that George Washington is the man born in the 18th century who served as commanding General of the American Revolutionary Army, presiding officer of the Constitutional Convention of 1787, and 1st President of the United States under that Constitution. However if, like most, one hasn't thought through assumptions or examined available evidence, the correct answer must be, "I haven't enough information to know with any degree of certainty."

Of course if we changed the question to ask if it is true or false that George Washington was born on June 1, 1731; the answer would have to be false, unless we could find evidence of a man named George Washington born on that date under either the Julian or Gregorian calendars. I know of no such evidence.

Truth is not binary, and history is more complex than it usually appears when presented to us in school or by popular culture.

Ex. 2 - True or False? The Log Christopher Columbus kept on his voyage of discovery in 1492, showed that he first sighted land in what we now call The Americas on Friday, October 12, 1492.

Having read through my response to the assertion about George Washington's birth date, you may be asking yourself, "Is the date in Columbus' log Julian or Gregorian?"

As the Gregorian calendar was decreed in a Papal Bull in February 1582, we know that the date in Columbus' log had to have been Julian, since the Gregorian calendar did not exist in 1492. Therefore, if October 12 is Julian, the equivalent date on our Gregorian calendar would be October 21 (as the Julian calendar was 9 days behind in 1492). If on the other hand, the date (like Washington's birth date) has already been converted in various transcriptions and translations that have been published since the early 19th century, then the Julian date appearing in the originals would be October 3.

However, we don't know for certain what Columbus wrote because we do not have his log to check. That apparently disappeared sometime shortly after his return to Spain in 1493[xvi].

When Columbus turned his log over to the court of Ferdinand and Isabella upon his return, it was copied, and the original has never again been seen. The copy made by the court was returned to Columbus prior to his second voyage, and was later used by his son Ferdinand as a source for his biography of his father, which was published in about 1538. The copy was also used by Bartolome de Las Casas to prepare an abstract of the log in approximately 1530. It is de Las Casas' handwritten abstract that is the closest source scholars have available to determine what Columbus actually wrote during his Voyage of Discovery in 1492. We are unable to check de Las Casas' abstract against the copy of the original he used, as that copy was lost sometime after 1534. Indeed, the de Las Casas abstract itself disappeared for nearly two centuries. A single copy was discovered in 1790.

The most recent, and probably the most complete, transcription and translation of de Las Casas' abstract was published in English on the occasion of the quincentennial of Columbus' landing in 1992. ***The Diario of Christopher Columbus's First Voyage to America, 1492-1493***[xvii] contains images of de Las Casas' handwritten pages for the key dates of October 10 and 11 (on pages 60 and 61 in the book). On these pages, one sees that de Las Casas transcribed the dates as October 10 and 11 (land was sited about 2 hours after midnight on October 12, but reported in the October 11 entry). Therefore, the October 12 date is Julian; so on our Gregorian calendar, Columbus landed on October 21.

The facsimile copies on pages 60 and 61 of *The Diario* may be viewed on the web in the preview of the book available at http://books.google.com/books?id=nS6kRnXJgCEC&printsec=frontcover&dq=diario+columbus&hl=en&sa=X&ei=rlnGUM64EubC0QHfoICoDw&ved=0CC0Q6AEwAA#v=onepage&q&f=false (accessed 12/8/2012). The original handwritten pages reside at the National Library, Madrid, Spain.

So, what is the "correct answer" to the question, "True or False? The log Christopher Columbus kept on his voyage of discovery in 1492 showed that he first sighted land in what we now call The Americas on Friday, October 12, 1492."

As with the question about George Washington, there are several possible "correct answers" depending on the assumptions we make. If we assume that the date in question is Julian, then the answer must be true. If, however, our assumption is that the date in question is Gregorian, then the answer must be false. In either case we also have to assume that the de Las Casas abstract is accurate, and that the dates he includes actually appeared in the missing copy of the log with which he worked. We also must assume that the copy made by the Royal court in 1493 (which de Las Casas used) was faithful to the original. As we are unable to check against either the original or the copy, there is no way to validate these assumptions. If at some point in the future, the original, the copy or both come to light, these assumptions may then be checked. Our answer to this true-false question can then be given with more certainty.

Once again we see that even when dealing with what would appear to be the simplest details, understanding historical evidence can be quite complex. Of course, not all true-false questions on this topic are so complicated. If I asked, “True or False? Your textbook says that the log Christopher Columbus kept on his voyage of discovery in 1492 showed that he first sighted land in what we now call The Americas on Friday, October 12, 1492.”, the “correct answer” would almost certainly be true, as this is what is found in every U.S. history text I’ve seen.

It is important to make a distinction though between what a textbook (or a history teacher) says, and what evidence shows actually happened. Determining the latter is almost always a complicated, but most important, task. And, the skills necessary to do so just happen to be the same as those a citizen needs to determine whether the statements made by political, business, religious, scientific and other leaders of society, as well as those made by friends, families and neighbors on a daily basis – statements that urge us to support wars, make purchases, convict criminals as members of juries, be swept up in the actions of a crowd, etc. – are true or false. As we make choices in daily life, choices that can dramatically affect our futures and well being, as well as the futures and well being of others, we need to know the extent to which the information on which we base those choices is true or false. Without the ability to do so, it is impossible to think for oneself or make sound decisions.

Ex. 3 - True or False? In 2010 (the last year for which statistics are available as of the date I am writing) 11,078 people in the U.S. were murdered with firearms.

This would seem pretty straight forward. One simply has to find the agency responsible for tracking the number of firearm murders in the U.S., then see how many it recorded for 2010. After all, since 1 + 1 always equals 2 (at least in base 10); it would seem that there must be only one possible correct answer. If it is 11,078, then the answer to this question has to be true; otherwise it must be false.

The problem is that there are two federal government agencies that track firearm murders in the U.S., and each year they report different numbers.

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC), which counts the number of death certificates that list firearm murder as the cause of death, did indeed report 11,078 deaths in this category for 2010. The most recent number they have is always available on their web page located at http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/homicide.htm (Accessed 2/5/2013)

On the other hand the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), which counts the number of firearm murders reported by law enforcement agencies throughout the nation to its Universal Crime Reporting system (UCR), reported 8,874 deaths in this category for 2010. The FBI number appears in this table from its 2011 UCR report: http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/crime-in-the-u.s/2011/crime-in-the-u.s.-2011/tables/expanded-homicide-data-table-8 (Accessed 2/5/2013)

The difference between the two numbers for 2010 is just over 2,200. That difference is roughly the same every year. I haven’t been able to find an explanation as to why this is. However, there are similar, although greater, yearly discrepancies between the UCR numbers for other crime categories (rape, robbery, burglary, auto theft, etc.) and the results for the related categories from the Bureau of Justice Statistics' National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS). NCVS does not report murder statistics, since victims do not survive and therefore cannot be surveyed.

In 2002, statisticians Michael R. Rand and Callie M. Rennison looked at possible reasons for the UCR - NCVS differences in an article they wrote for ***Window on Washington***[xviii]. They concluded that the UCR and the NCVS use different methodologies to measure different aspects of crime in the U.S. Consequently, we should not be surprised when the two measures present different results. Furthermore they argued, since crime "is a phenomenon that is not directly observable", no one measure can provide all of the information we need in order to understand its characteristics and extent. They wrote, "The UCR and NCVS measure different aspects of the crime problem, much the same way that the S&P Indexes and Dow Jones Averages measure different aspects of the stock market." Since murder is also a crime, their reasoning might explain the differing number of yearly murders reported by the FBI and the CDC too.

However, I want to emphasize that while it is apparently not possible to know a single "true" number for firearm murder deaths in the U.S. each year, this does not mean any other number might also be acceptable. For a number to be considered true, it must be based on verifiable evidence that can be examined and reproduced by others following the same methods used to produce it initially.

As far as I know, there are only two numbers that can be considered correct today, those from the FBI and the CDC. Currently, I would consider any other numbers to be false. However, this may change in the future if new methodologies are created and validated that produce additional, different numbers.

This was convincingly illustrated in 2012 when new historical research techniques produced a dramatically higher number for United States Civil War deaths than that which had been accepted for more than a century. The story is fascinating, and is reported remarkably well in a New York Times column published on April 2, 2012. The column is available on the web at http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/03/science/civil-war-toll-up-by-20-percent-in-new-estimate.html?pagewanted=all (accessed 2/14/2013).

Once again we see that history, like other information and questions we face in our daily lives, is complex. It cannot be understood in its complexity when we teach students to memorize names, dates, numbers, events and places from stories told in books and lectures, no matter how engaging those stories might be.

Ex. 4 - True or False? The historical evidence showing that Betsy Ross sewed the first American flag is compelling.

The key to answering this question lies in defining "historical evidence". There are certainly many authorities (textbooks, encyclopedias, even dictionaries) that assert unequivocally that Betsy Ross did indeed sew the first American "stars and stripes" flag after being requested to do so by George Washington, Robert Morris and George Ross in early 1776. If these authoritative assertions are considered historical evidence, then the answer to the question may be true. If however, historical evidence must include at least one reliable primary source, then unless we can find that, the answer is false.

Asserting something, even with absolute sincerity and belief, does not make it true. Citing someone else's assertion that something is true, does not make it true. What makes an historical assertion true is the existence of primary source evidence (evidence from the original period) that can be verified as original, evidence that supports the truth of the assertion. The evidence might be diary entries written by one or more of the people directly involved, newspaper articles written by reporters on the scene, government records, photographs, paintings, or archaeological artifacts. Whatever it is, however, it must be from the time in question, it must be verified, and it must logically support the assertion that has been made. And, the more pieces of it that exist, the more certain we can be of the assertion's truth.

In the case of the assertion that Betsy Ross sewed the first U.S. flag, there is absolutely no primary source evidence available to support its truth.

The first Betsy Ross mention in the historical record is in a paper written by her grandson, William Canby, read before the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in March 1870[xix]. In it he recounts a fruitless search for primary source evidence that would show the maker of the first flag, and the circumstances that brought it into existence. He then recounts the oral legend told in his family about his grandmother, who died in 1836, when he was eleven years old. Given the absence of supporting primary sources, how did a family legend become accepted truth in so many U.S. History texts and classrooms?

Historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich provides an answer in the opening sentences of her 2007 essay, "How Betsy Ross Became Famous""[xx], "For scholars, the story of how Betsy Ross made the first American flag is about as credible as Parson Weems's fable about little George Washington cutting down the cherry tree. Yet for more than a century, it has been an established part of American education. Among the general public, it shows no signs of going away." Further on Ulrich writes, "She survives because children, teachers, and publishers love her story; because her house is located near the shrines of American liberty; and because, as with so many national legends, the legend of Betsy Ross has something to do with who we Americans believe ourselves to be. Betsy and her story are endlessly deployed as exemplars of some distinctive and noble American spirit."

So, if there is no primary source evidence that Betsy Ross created the first U.S. flag, do we have any that suggests who did?

In her essay, Ulrich says we do not. She writes, "There is really no point in arguing over who made the first flag because there wasn't one. The stars and stripes that we know today had multiple parents and dozens of siblings."

On the other hand, Duane Streufert, writing at http://www.usflag.org/history/francishopkinson.html (accessed 3/1/2013), points to what could be substantial and persuasive primary source evidence that founder Francis Hopkinson deserves credit for creating the first U.S. flag.

In any event, the answer to our question, "True or False? The historical evidence showing that Betsy Ross sewed the first American flag is compelling.", would appear to be false; but only so long as we define evidence to mean primary sources that can be independently validated. If we mean by evidence authoritative assertions such as those that appear in history textbooks and lectures, and on plaques affixed to national shrines; then the answer might well be true.

This brings us to our final question in this section of the book.

What is Truth?

If truth is not binary, and the preceding examples show it is not, then what is it?

In his book*, **TRUTH: A History and a Guide for the Perplexed***[xxi], historian Felipe Fernandez-Armesto writes that his research shows that throughout history individuals and societies have used one, or a combination from among four methods to determine what is true:

1) Personal revelation
2) Statements from authority figures
3) Reasoned analysis
4) Experimentation on and interpretation of data collected via sensory input

Personal revelation is probably the most convincing way people believe they experience truth. It is also the most likely to be deceptive. If one experiences an intense mental phenomenon, it is hard not to accept it as real; after all, you just experienced it. And, in that sense it is real. However, it is most likely not related to the reality that exists outside of what has happened in one's mind. Mind altering drug use and experiences of the mentally ill - both show that malfunctioning or interfered with neurons can create intense, realistic hallucinations and delusions. While feeling super real to the individual, they bear absolutely no connection to external reality - they were created by internal, not external stimuli. Because of the intensity of the experience, the affected individual can be quite sincere, persuasive, convincing and compelling to those with whom s/he communicates about it. But truth must be subject to verification and validation by others before it can be accepted. Personal revelation is not usually subject to such testing; and thus to my mind can never be considered evidence for truth of anything other than what an individual says s/he has experienced.

Observation and personal experience have shown me that most of us use #2 (reliance on authority) to determine truth in most instances. How could it be otherwise? Aside from the fact that we are taught to respect our elders and those in positions of authority, there is not enough time to allow us to personally test the validity of every asserted truth we encounter each day. This would be so even if we had the education and training to make us competent in every one of the topics that come before us. Since new knowledge and disciplines are being generated at an ever accelerating pace, trying to stay abreast of the developments in even one area becomes more difficult with every passing day. We are left with no option but to follow the lead of the authorities in our lives (reporters, teachers, parents, scientists, politicians, religious leaders, books, etc.) most of the time.

However, we need not do so blindly and in all instances. After all, authorities are human too, and therefore can be mistaken or in conflict with each other. Additionally, like all of us their knowledge is circumscribed, and their perspectives are limited. There are also situations when it behooves us to stop, ask questions, then seek out and test answers for ourselves regardless of how much expert testimony is available. Education must leave us with the tools to know when and how to do so.

For me, the line has always been this: if I am beseeched to act in a situation whose outcome will directly affect my life or the lives of others, I know I must examine arguments and evidence very carefully. I need to ask for sources, carefully evaluate their validity; then make sure that conclusions drawn from them demonstrate reason and logic, not fallacious argument. I also need to do the same for positions that represent other points of view on the topic at hand. Then, and only then, am I in a position to make an informed judgment or an enlightened decision to serve as the basis for the most defensible action possible.

History is unique among the disciplines in giving us huge amounts of real life content that can be molded into engaging lessons where students learn when to make these efforts, and how to test evidence and arguments for truth using Fernandez-Armesto's options 3 (reasoning) and 4 (experimentation and testing). I've designed the history lab lessons in this book (and many of those that will follow) to do just that. Use them, see how they work, then model your own after them.

With his statement, "I think therefore I am", 17th century French philosopher Rene Descartes proved that the only thing of which we can be absolutely certain in life is our own existence. Everything else can only be known with degrees of certainty – approaching, but never reaching, 100 percent. We may be close to certain about something, but we can never be absolutely certain of it. New evidence may come to light that disproves older evidence and argument, or a new perspective may shed new meaning on existing evidence. Always leave room for doubt and, when something new and relevant appears, be willing to re-examine topics that may have seem settled.

Principle 2 – Context counts

Here is the Merriam-Webster online dictionary pronunciation guide for a word I just looked up: \ˈrīt\

Imagine that I've shouted it out as I stand next to you. What word is it, and what did I mean by it?

Actually, it could be any one of four words: right[xxii], rite[xxiii], wright[xxiv] or write[xxv].

As for meanings, the online M-W.com entry for right lists seventeen; that for rite lists four; that for wright lists one; and that for write lists twenty five.

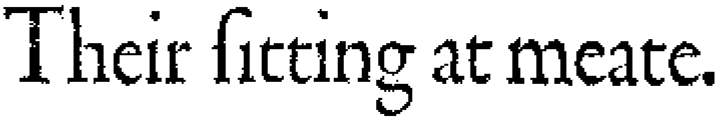
The only way the listener can know which of those 47 possibilities I intended when I shouted \ˈrīt\ is to know the context in which I was speaking.

If someone in my class had just given an answer to a question I'd asked, I meant right as in correct. If someone asked me which direction to turn when they reached a corner, I meant turn to the right. If someone asked me for the name of a job that could be held by a wood worker, I meant wright. If we were studying indigenous tribes in South America and someone asked me for the word that begins the phrase, "____ of passage", I meant rite. Finally, if I was proctoring an essay exam and wanted to give the signal to begin, I would have shouted the command, "Write!"

When determining the meaning of a symbol, whether it is a word, photo, archaeological artifact, or any other human construct; context is critical. Yet, I believe that most of us rarely consider it. It is no more possible to stop and think about the context for every word we read or hear than it is to test the truth of every assertion directed at us. But just as in the case of truth testing, we must learn when to check context for meaning - especially in history.

Struggling with meate

The following English sentence appears exactly as it was published in 1590.



Their ſitting at meate.

What do you think it means? How would we write it today, more than 400 years later?

Like the question about the meaning of \ˈrīt\, answers will depend completely on context. However, context in this instance is much more complicated. Our contemporary lives and language are vastly different than those we would have experienced 400 years ago. Therefore as we seek to determine the context that gave meaning to the 1590 sentence and its component words at the time they were written, we must also do our best to block out the potential influence of the context of our current daily lives, most of which is subconscious.

After looking carefully at the sentence, I expect you will conclude that a number of things have changed in English since 1590. First, it seems that the alphabet may have changed. Second, acceptable sentence construction appears to be different. Third, the spelling of specific words may not be the same.

Let's begin with the last point. Check almost any contemporary English dictionary and you will not find a word spelled MEATE. Notice that I wrote "almost any". There is only one current English language dictionary in which I have been able to find the word MEATE. That is the ***Oxford English Dictionary*** (OED); the accepted authority on the history, meaning and pronunciation of the more than 600,000 words that make up English. Looking at its entry in the OED, it is clear that the 1590 word meate has lost its final e to become our current meat.

However, there is another problem to consider. The prepositional phrase "at meate" has no meaning today, even when meate is spelled meat. According to the OED though, it had a meaning in 1590 that it has since lost (or in the language of the OED, become archaic). That meaning was, "3. A meal, a feast. Sometimes: spec. the principal meal of a day, dinner. Also in various prepositional phrases (mostly somewhat arch.). at (†the) meat , †at meat and meal: at table, at or during a meal or meals. Similarly after meat, before meat, †to go to meat , etc. Now arch. and regional."[xxvi] So, today instead of writing "at meate", we would most likely write "dinner" or "meal".

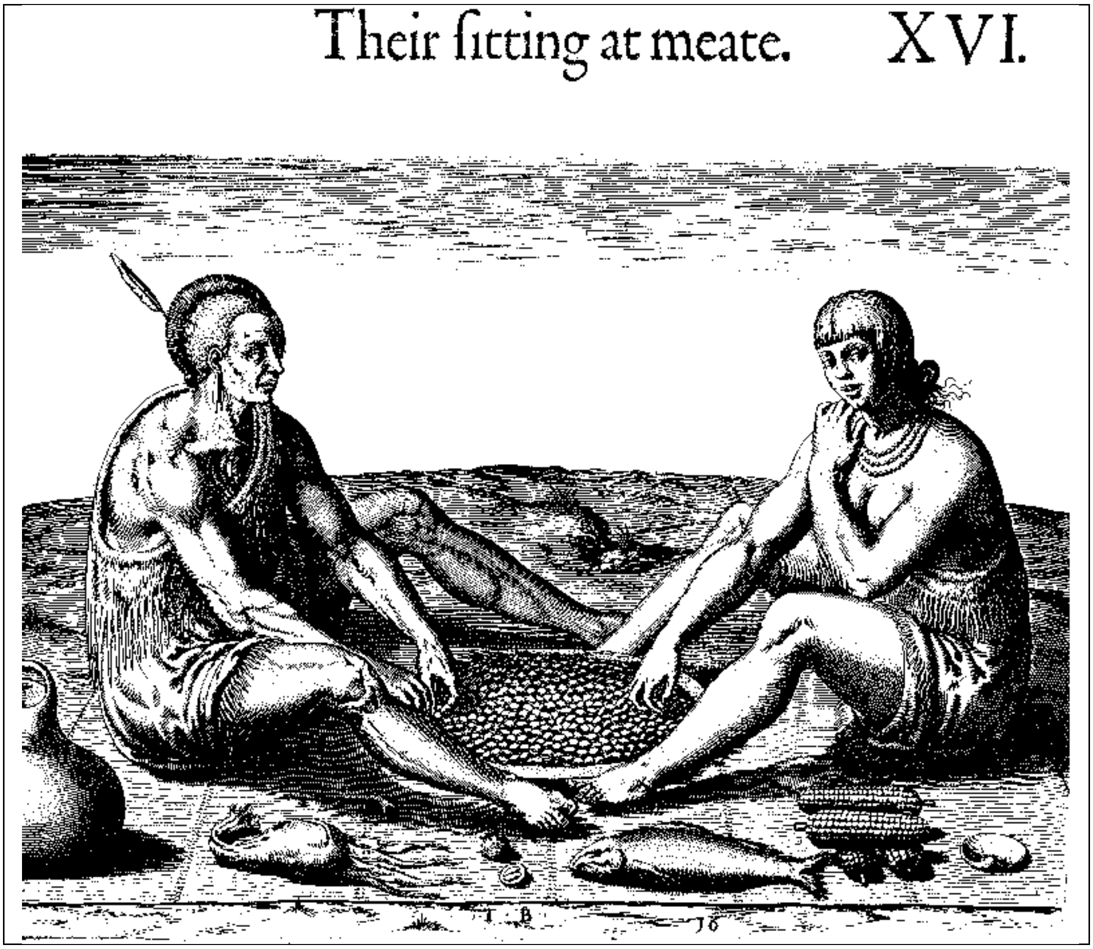
Moving on from "meate", there is the problem of the second word in the sentence. What exactly is it? To a modern eye it would seem to be "fitting", but fitting makes no sense; especially once we have a better idea of what the author most likely meant when he wrote "meate".

The key is that first letter of the second word. What looks to our modern eyes like a lower case f is actually a symbol we no longer use in English – the elongated s, which was used when an s began a word or appeared in its middle. Those of you who've read facsimile copies of the Declaration of Independence or the United States Constitution will have seen it used in those documents; but it disappeared from English by the middle of the nineteenth century.

The difference between the lower case f and the elongated s is subtle. The crosspiece on the lower case f runs through the upright piece of the letter, appearing half on the left side and half on the right. On the elongated s, only the left side half appears.

The second word then is sitting, not fitting. "Their sitting at dinner" seems to make a little more sense to modern readers, but we really still do not have enough context to know with any degree of certainty that this was the 16th century author's intended meaning. Most importantly, we do not know to whom "Their" refers.

The image at the top of the next page will give us more context. It was engraved by Theodor de Bry after a drawing by John White, and published just below the sentence we've been examining in the addendum to the 1590 edition of Thomas Hariot's ***A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia***[xxvii].



Thomas Hariot and John White were two members of the first English expedition to visit and live in North America. The expedition's effort was planned and financed by Sir Walter Raleigh, acting under the authority of the Queen. It landed in 1585 off the North Carolina coast on what is now called Roanoke Island. The settlers named the land they claimed Virginia, in honor of the Virgin Queen, Elizabeth I. They stayed one year before returning to England.

Hariot, a scholar and linguist, was a key member of the expedition. Through his interactions with two natives who had been brought to England by earlier voyagers, he had learned to speak the language of the inhabitants of the area where they planned to visit, and therefore was able to act as a translator. He was also a scientist, and kept notes on the experiences they had. On his return to England, he prepared a written report on the adventure. He published it in 1588. Theodor de Bry republished it in 1590 with an addendum of 28 engraved drawings that he modeled on water colors painted by John White, the expedition's artist and mapmaker.

Using de Bry's engraved image for context, it seems safe to say that "Their" in the sentence refers to the native couple depicted in the engraving; or perhaps, more likely, to natives in general.

Now that we have 16th century context for all four words in the sentence, how would a modern writer express its thought?

There are many possibilities. Here are some of them.

The first time I had students work with this document, in 1977, I translated the headline as **Dining Habits**. In 1999, after rethinking it, I translated it as, **Sitting Down to a Meal**. After rethinking it today I might write, **How Natives Dine**.

Of course, I am not alone in working with this headline.

In 2003, a team from the University of North Carolina published an electronic edition of Hariot's Report[xxviii]. They chose to preserve its original grammar, punctuation, capitalization and spelling; but used a modern typeface, which replaced the elongated s with our contemporary s. The headline at which we've been looking appears as follows on page 55 of their edition.

XVI. Their sitting at meate.

In 1976, Michael Alexander published an edited version of de Bry's work[xxix] that included the engravings. His rendering modernized Hariot's spelling and punctuation. On page 79, our headline appears as:

Their sitting at meat

In 1946, Stefan Lorant edited a volume titled, ***The New World: The First Pictures of America***[xxx]. It too included de Bry's engravings. "Their sitting at meate" appears on page 257. Lorant completely modernized the text. The headline he published reads:

HOW THEY EAT

All of these headlines are legitimate translations of the same primary source. Is one "correct" while the others are not? No, they are all "correct" since it is not possible to know with certainty what Hariot (or White, most likely the author of this headline since it appears in his hand on the original watercolor[xxxi]) would have written had he been able to view events from the context in which we now live, speak and write.

Of course, this is not to say that anything would be correct. It is important to remember that one could come up with many other headlines (perhaps an infinite number) that would clearly be incorrect. **Sleeping at Noon**, **Bathing in a River**, and **Making Garments** all fall into this category. They have nothing to do with the image or the 16th century vocabulary we see. Valid interpretations must be grounded in the available evidence.

Another thing to consider is that eating and dining, while closely related, are not the same thing. The context in which we eat and dine today is different from the that in which our 16th century counterparts engaged in those activities. And while we know that eating and dining in England in 1590 was different than eating and dining in Roanoke; those two would most likely be more closely related than either would be to our contemporary experience. The purpose of the image, and its accompanying text, was to convey the 16th century differences in ways that literate Englishmen of the time would understand.

To almost everyone reading this, the words meal and dine most likely bring to mind images such as fast food franchises, more formal restaurants, or Norman Rockwell's Thanksgiving[xxxii]. Perhaps you'll think of a brown bag lunch or your school cafeteria at noon. You might even think about going shopping for ingredients, then preparing them in a home kitchen. What I am certain that you won't think about is hunting and capturing a live animal, killing and butchering it, then eating it raw or cooking it over an open fire. These along with things like harvesting wheat or corn, milling it, preparing flour from it, then using that to create bread are outside our contemporary experience. To the extent that we think we understand the daily lives of 16th century humans, we are probably wrong; since our "understanding" comes from unreliable contemporary media.

Determining the meaning of a short four word sentence has taken up several pages, and we still do not have a single definitive meaning. Undoubtedly, this is one reason history teachers most often teach narratives blessed by authorities, rather than attempt to work with material like this. Narratives are so much cleaner, neater, more compact and easily transmitted. However, unless they are fabrications (remember the tale of Betsy Ross) all such narratives are put together from documents like the **Briefe and True Report** – documents open to multiple interpretations, often subject to violent disagreement about meaning.

Once again we find ourselves eye to eye with the fact that understanding the past is a complicated affair. Whenever we attempt to present it simply, we do our students, the past, and our society a disservice. On the other hand, if we make our instruction too complex, we run the risk of turning students away from historical study. Balance here is difficult, but is something for which we must constantly strive.

Finally, this example is instructive because it reminds us that communication is always an attempt to transfer meaning from one person to another. Confusion and misunderstanding are not things associated only with historical study. They are common occurrences in daily life, as a look at any classroom, newspaper or court docket will attest. Just because a person believes s/he has said or written something clearly, does not mean that it will be understood by its target audience as it was intended. When it is important, and possible, all parties to a communication should verify meaning intended and received with one another. The clarifications that come from such attempts are invaluable.

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