

Weekly Writing Assignment #2: Reading Primary Sources

-- Due in Section, week of 9/20 - 9/22 --

Primary sources -- materials written at the time of the event being studied -- are the basic resource for historians. Primary sources can provide everything from chronologies and narratives of specific events, to theories about why something happened or who was responsible. A good primary source can reveal, in an imperfect way, the inner workings of the minds of people long deceased. However, primary sources are never perfect. Suppose you wanted to find out how English colonists explained disease in 1634. Ideally, a colonist would have written a book, *Disease Theories of Massachusetts Bay Colonists*. If this existed, the historians' task would be easy. Unfortunately, no such book exists. The earliest medical treatise in the English colonies was written in the early 1700s, by Cotton Mather. And even this book does not tell you what you want to know: it reveals only what Mather thought about disease. Is he representative? Would someone from Virginia have had the same theory? What about someone who was not college educated? What about someone who was not a Puritan minister? etc.

What historians end up having to do, at least for early America, is read things that are not primarily medical texts -- diaries, journals, descriptions of explorations, letters written to relatives in England -- and mine them for clues about theories of disease and medicine. This can often be low yield: a 200-page book might include only two or three sentences about disease. But when these scattered statements are compiled, you can reconstruct a broad view of the medical theories of early America. As you will see in the readings by Wood and Flint, you need to read actively, paying less attention to the material unrelated to health, but reading carefully enough so that you find all the relevant material.

So, for this week... imagine yourself a Cambridge resident in 1840, weary of the cold, dreary winters. You and your family start talking about moving to the south or far west (the Mississippi River was then the western frontier). A friend gives you a copy of Flint's book, explaining that the book was written as a guide for potential migrants. You read through the introduction, and flip through his comments about some of the specific states (Florida, Alabama, etc.). As an ambitious farmer, you are interested in the agricultural potential of these areas. But you are also concerned about ensuring the health of you and your family. Based on your reading of Flint's excerpts, which state would you choose, and why? Within that state, what locale would you choose (e.g. port, forest, swamp, hilltop, floodplain, etc.), and why?

As with all of these assignments, keep it short (target: 200 words). There are no right or wrong answers; we are interested in your ability to understand the sources and think creatively about them. If you mention specific material from the text, or use quotations, please provide page numbers.