Senior Capstone Project
Neighborhood History
Directions: Read and annotate.

Looking at Artifacts, Thinking About History
By Steven Lubar and Kathleen Kendrick

Artifacts—the objects we make and use—are part of American history. If we know how to look at them, they can be sources for better understanding our history. While textbooks focus on the great documents of the American past, or the important events, artifacts can show us another kind of history, another way of approaching the past. This Web site will tell you how to look closely at artifacts and how to think about the ways they shape and reflect our history.

Why bother looking at artifacts, which can be hard to understand, when there are so many documents around, and when documents seem so much more straightforward? Why do museums save artifacts at all, when it would be so much easier just to save pictures of them?

There are two ways to answer this question. Artifacts, we believe, are, and were, important. According to anthropologist Daniel Miller, objects "continually assert their presence as simultaneously material force and symbol. They frame the way we act in the world, as well as the way we think about the world."[1] To understand the past, we have to understand the artifacts of the past.

But they are also important to us as a way to approach the past. Museum Director Elaine Gurian suggests that artifacts provide us a way into history. "Objects, in their tangibility," she writes, "provide a variety of stakeholders with an opportunity to debate the meaning and control of their memories." Artifacts are the touchstones that bring memories and meanings to life. They make history real. Moreover, it is a reality that can and should be viewed from different perspectives.

When museums choose not to enshrine and isolate an artifact but instead open it up to new interpretations and different points of view, they provide opportunities to challenge and enhance our understanding of the past. Look at the artifacts on this web site, and around you, as reminders of the complexity of the past. To fully appreciate the complexity of artifacts—and of history—we must not only acknowledge their multiple and conflicting meanings, but embrace them.

As you look at the artifacts on this web site, think about them not as simple, unproblematic things—things with one story, one role to play in history. Rather, consider each artifact with its many stories as holding diverse meanings for different people, past and present. Think of them as

bits of contested history. It is because of the contest and conflict they embody, and the way they combine use and meaning, that artifacts are such valuable tools for exploring the past.

Looking closely at artifacts, putting them into historical context, and using them to understand the past, is exactly the kind of work that goes on in a museum. Curators make it their mission to discover and tell these stories, to put objects back into history. So as you look at these artifacts, and the documents with them, imagine that you're curating your own exhibit. What stories do the objects tell? What documents, and what stories from you history books, help you to understand what the objects meant to the people of the past? What can you say about the past by using objects? How can you tell visitors to your exhibit what you've learned?

We suggest five ways to think about artifacts in history:

- Artifacts tell their own stories.
- Artifacts connect people.
- Artifacts mean many things.
- Artifacts capture moments.
- Artifacts reflect changes.

You can look at any object in any or all of these ways. Here, we suggest some questions to ask, and give some examples. As you consider the artifacts in this web site—or any artifact in museums, or in your daily life—you can ask similar questions. Think like a curator: use the artifacts to understand, explain, and present history.

Artifacts tell their own stories.
Looking at the artifact helps answer questions about its own history. What is it? When was it made? Where is it from? What is it made of? Who made it? How was it used? These kinds of questions establish basic information about the object; they help to identify and locate it in time and place.

This way of looking at an object can be thought of as looking inward. We put an object under a microscope–literally or figuratively–and discover the object's own history. Often, these are the first questions to ask of an artifact. (On this Web site, we've provided much of this information.) But this is only the beginning–a way to establish basic facts. (For a document, the similar questions would be: Who wrote it? When? Why?) The next step, for an artifact as for a document, is to take the object as a point of departure, opening up the world beyond the artifact.

When we do that, we learn a different kind of history. Imagine the artifact not in a spotlight by itself, but rather against a variegated backdrop of people, places, and events. Now, many stories emerge. Here, we begin to ask questions about the people who used the artifact, the events that

surrounded it. If we ask the right questions, and do the right research, we begin to understand the role an object played in people's lives, the meanings it held to different individuals and communities, the way it reflected the knowledge, values, and tastes of a particular era. In short, we see the object as part of American history.

When placed in context like this, museum artifacts become passageways into history. Through a single object, we can connect to a moment in time, a person's life, a set of values and beliefs.

You can find more examples here:

http://www.smithsonianeducation.org/idealabs/ap/essays/looking.htm

https://www.history.com/news/letter-found-on-titanic-passengers-body-sold-for-record-amount

http://money.cnn.com/2017/10/22/news/titanic-sinking-letter-auction/index.html

Senior Capstone
Practice 1: Archival Research

Try I: Together
Examining An Artifact

Together with Ms. Crilly we will examine some historical artifacts from the City of Boston Archives. The objective is for you to practice finding details in the archives that you could use to put a history together of Boston.

Answer the questions below as you analyze each artifact.

Description of the Artifact

Questions to Consider:
Who is the author?
Creation date?
Who is the audience?
Summarize or describe the artifact.
Other:

Who or what is the subject of the record?

Questions to Consider:
Who created this record and why?
What is the significance of what it means to have a record created about you?
Does this record created about a person or group actually reflect that person or group's viewpoints/perspective? Explain why or why not.

What We Learn

Questions to Consider:
What insights does this artifact give us into this neighborhood/part of Boston?
What important historical information is learned?
Other:

Continued Impact

Questions to Consider:

What are the artifact's implications today?

How does this artifact continue to hold value?

What connections can we make to 2019?

Other:

Try II: Small Groups
Drafting A Story About An Artifact

Directions: Working in small groups, your task is to create a story using one of the artifacts examined today.

Criteria for Success

Ensure your component meets all of the following requirements.

___ **Describe** the artifact

___ **Explain** both why and how your artifact matters

___ **Tell a story** that incorporates your artifact

___ **Use quotes** from your artifact (if it has written text)

___ **Cite all sources** when applicable, adhering to the in-text citations and Works Cited rules

Metacognitive reflection:
One skill I practiced and strengthened today was:

I'm wondering:

I'm confused about: