

An Introduction to Historical Sources

When you decide to conduct research into a particular theme, issue or family you can use a wide variety of sources to answer questions and provide evidence about the past. There are two types of sources:

Primary sources are actual records of the time such as letters, files, photographs etc. Some primary sources can be published documents. These were created for large audiences and were distributed widely. Published documents include government reports, advertisements, maps, pamphlets, posters, laws, and court decisions. Primary Sources are unique and irreplaceable. Primary sources are found in archival institutions such as Archives New Zealand, or the Documentary Research Centre at Canterbury Museum.

Secondary sources are works which interpret or analyse an historical event. They are often accounts of the past created by people writing about events after they happened, such as books, films, essays etc. Secondary sources are not unique and can be replaced if lost or stolen. Secondary Sources can be found at institutions such as libraries or on websites eg Canterbury Public Library, New Zealand History Website.



Archives Ref: CH 287, ICPW 204/71875 Fendal Town Map

The New Zealand Government creates thousands of records every year. They cover a wide range of subjects, from citizenship to deceased estates, land ownership to health policy. Some of the records are valuable not only at the time, for the administration of government, but also into the future both as evidence and information. When using these **primary** sources you should remember that they were created to service a particular need of government and this may have been the reason why the records were kept. The historical information they contain is additional to this evidential data. *Archives New Zealand* was established to care for these public records.

Publications:

Publications are material that have been printed, published and made available to a wide audience. In terms of historical research, published material can be used to interpret or analyse an historical event. Publications should be evaluated for reliability, bias and accuracy. When using publications you should think about who the intended audience was as their bias is often reflected in published materials. You can find a range of published sources at the *Christchurch City Libraries*.

Manuscripts/Unpublished material:

Many manuscripts and unpublished documents have survived and are in museum, library or private collections. These **primary** sources include personal letters, diaries and journals, family histories. Sometimes

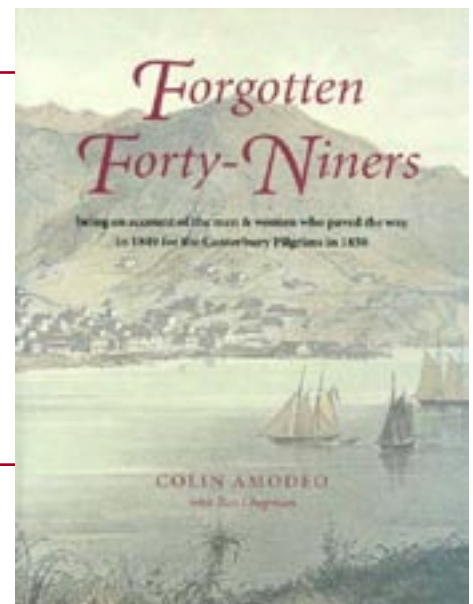


Image Courtesy of Colin Amodeo



special archives are established to look after documents and records from a particular organisation like church archives (eg. the Methodist Church of New Zealand Archives) or a business (eg Bank of New Zealand Archives). These records can give evidence about the past. These unpublished resources were often created by people interested in history, who wanted to keep a record of events. You can find these sources in places like *Canterbury Museum*.

Newspapers/Magazines:

Some **primary** sources are also publications. Publications were created for large audiences and were widely available. Newspapers and magazines are very useful resources when looking at particular periods in history. They contain first-hand accounts of events, editorials and advertisements. When using newspapers and magazines to research a history topic, remember that just because something was published in a paper does not make it accurate, truthful, or reliable. Reporters also have a point of view and prejudices. But even these bias can help you understand the past. You can find sources like these at *Christchurch City Libraries*.

Websites:

Websites can contain primary sources (such as digital images of documents) but those type of sites are in themselves **secondary** sources. Some websites may be considered a **primary** source if it capturing evidence of an organisation's activity (eg. filling in an on-line enrolment form for a Polytech course). You can search on the web using *Google* to access some of these sites, or you can visit a site like www.nzhistory.net.nz

Movies:

There are a lot of 'historical' movies available today (eg. *Braveheart*, *Gladiator*, *Troy*, *Emma*). Although the story they tell may be based on history some dramatic license may be taken with historical events and personalities to make the movie more interesting. These **secondary** sources can be useful for helping researchers visualise a particular era. You can find these, and other, movies at your local *videostore*.

Art/Visual:

The types of primary, visual sources include photographs, paintings, and other types of artwork. Visual documents, like art works, capture a particular moment in time. They can provide evidence of what that time was like and they can be used to compare changes over time. Art and visual records can present evidence about a culture at a specific era in history (eg Maori customs in the late nineteenth century). It is important to remember that like all primary sources, a visual record has a creator with a point of view or bias (eg. painter). Even photographs cannot be taken at face value. You need to look behind the lens to the photographers who used film and cameras to create desired results. You can find artworks at the *Christchurch Art Gallery*.



Archives Ref: AAAC 898, NCWA 237 Sergeant O'Malley

Oral/Sound:

Oral histories were how our ancestors passed down stories about the past. Before writing became popular this how generations passed on their traditions and knowledge. Historians can find out about the lives of ordinary people through their oral stories. Oral histories are important **primary** historical sources that give us important information about people, particularly minority groups who may have been excluded from published records, who did not leave behind written sources.

Sound recordings may document events, meetings, interviews or oral histories and form invaluable records and archives. The recordings help give meaning to New Zealand history and both enhance and expand the cultural identity of New Zealand. You can find oral histories at the *Alexander Turnbull Library* and old sound recordings can be found at *The Radio New Zealand Sound Archives*.