

Following the Paper Trail: A One-Day Introduction to Primary Source Research

Overview

Lesson designer: Sophia DeWitt

Learners: 10th-grade high school history students, local Indianapolis high school

Location: High school classroom

Length: 50 minutes

Learning outcomes:

- 3.B. Read, Understand, Summarize: Identify and communicate information found in primary sources, including summarizing the content of the source and identifying and reporting key components such as how it was created, by whom, when, and what it is.
- 4.F. Interpret, Analyze, and Evaluate: Demonstrate historical empathy, curiosity about the past, and appreciation for historical sources and historical actors.

General narrative

This instruction session is designed for a 10th-grade high school history class. The lesson will be a collaboration between the history teacher and the Indiana State Archives, in which the librarian or archivist visits the classroom to provide an overview of how to search digitized records using the National Archives Catalog and its affiliated online resources, such as FamilySearch.org. The plan is for this lesson to be taught alongside a unit on the Great Migration between 1900 and 1930, as this time period was selected to illustrate movement within Indianapolis. Because the archivist will be visiting the classroom, this reduces the logistical barriers, allows the lesson to integrate naturally into the students' ongoing curriculum, and keeps students in an environment where they are already comfortable. While this lesson could be adapted for virtual learning through breakout rooms, in-person delivery gives students the opportunity for direct, hands-on engagement with physical copies that the archivist will bring for small-group work, as well as the ability to ask questions in real time. Archival research offers an endless range of possibilities, but when teaching students who are new to the process, it can quickly become overwhelming. Because of this, I wanted to break this lesson into two very

specific, clearly defined goals that the instructors will introduce before the activity begins, so that students do not feel overwhelmed when working through the census records (Withers et al., 2023, pg. 121).

I chose 10th-grade history students because migration is a recurring theme in history courses, particularly in discussions of cause and effect. However, these themes can often feel abstract or difficult for students to connect with personally. This activity helps humanize those larger historical patterns by having students track a family over 30 years surrounding WWI using census records. Most students have already completed several years of U.S. and world history courses before entering high school, so they bring prior knowledge that will help them to contextualize what they find in the records. At the same time, they will learn to work with primary sources, both physically and digitally, and gain an understanding of how archives function and how these sources are used in research.

I chose to center the timeframe around WWI because during this time the city of Indianapolis was continuing to grow and served as a major hub for migration: German and Eastern European families settled heavily on the near-east and north sides of the city, while a growing Black population developed along Indiana Ave and the Near Westside. At the same time, an influx of rural Hoosiers and Kentuckians moved to the city because of its rapid industrialization and abundance of factory and rail jobs (Baer, 2012). Rather than having students randomly choose a family from across the state, five families will be selected in advance, all of whom once lived in the same ward and district. This anchors the lesson to the city where students currently live and allows them to use a single map to trace family movements rather than multiple state maps. Census records from this period are mostly digitized and widely available online through the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) and other affiliated

websites. Most of these sites are either free to use or require a free account, which makes them easily accessible, especially for students who may want to continue their own research outside of class. These records also provide valuable data points, such as birthplace, parents' birthplace, year of immigration, occupation, and education level. Researchers often use these points to track migration patterns and changes within the city over time. I think this material and approach help humanize not only the topic but also the people involved, because they are everyday individuals who may resemble students' own parents or grandparents. This makes it easier for students to relate to the topic and care about how and why people moved, because these same themes still apply today.

Rather than focus on having students locate the records entirely on their own, outside of the basics of database searching, which can be time-consuming and frustrating, the archivist will either bring pre-made packets with printed sections of the census records and a structured tracking worksheet, or email them to the teacher depending on whether the lesson will be held virtually or in-person (Withers et al., 2023, pg. 117). Students will use these tracking worksheets to identify certain aspects of the family, such as name, age, head of household, occupation, birthplace, and address, for each decade. This targets learning objective 3.B, as students are asked to identify specific information in the primary sources, including key components such as enumeration districts, supervisor districts, and wards (ACRL RBMS1-SAA2 Joint Task Force, 2018). This is the heart of the activity, requiring students to read the entire document and extract specific information carefully. When conducting research with primary sources, answers rarely jump out immediately; students must learn to comb through large amounts of data to find what they need. Once students complete their worksheets for each decade, they will place their families on a shared map for each decade. In collaboration with the archivist and teacher, the

class will then discuss why families may have moved, what changes they observed, why district numbers may change even when the address is the same, and discrepancies in spellings, name changes, and clerical errors can make research with primary documents difficult. This is the second learning objective, 4.F, which asks students to demonstrate historical empathy and curiosity about the past (ACRL RBMS1 -SAA2 Joint Task Force, 2018). The goal is for students to look beyond the data points and see the people who helped shape Indianapolis into the city that it is today (Withers et al., 2023, pg. 117). I want this to be a fun activity that allows students to interact with primary sources while also giving them a method they can replicate at home with their own research questions, whether about their family history or another city that interests them.

As stated above, the census records used in this activity are held by NARA. Specifically, the 1910 records are directly available through the NARA catalog at no cost, while the 1900, 1920, and 1930 records are available through FamilySearch.org, a NARA partner platform. For this lesson, I want students to focus on learning how to read, interpret, and synthesize census records, rather than becoming frustrated while trying to locate them. NARA is one of the largest and most accessible digital archives, making it easier for students just beginning their primary-source learning journey to continue using it independently. When searching for records for this lesson, smaller archives such as the Indiana State Archives and the Indiana Historical Society had online collections, but nothing specifically related to census records. I think census records are among the easiest materials to start with because they provide clear data points and encourage deeper conversations about what was happening in the city during that period. As Withers et al. argue, curation of records can be challenging regardless of whether they are physical or digital. Providing students with records that are easily accessible outside of the

classroom and the archive was the main factor in choosing census records. To make it easier for instructors and teachers, the archivist will bring print copies for students to annotate, write on, or highlight during the activity. I also think having physical copies allows students to focus more closely on the record's content (Withers et al., 2023, pg. 119).

Assessment for any age group and subject can be difficult when limited to a single lesson. However, because this lesson is designed to be incorporated into a pre-planned curriculum, it reinforces the larger themes of migration and cause and effect through primary-source research. Success can be assessed through the students' completed tracking worksheets, their participation in the collaborative mapping and the group discussion, and their ability to apply these skills in a later research project or final assignment. Rather than treating this as a one-time lesson that serves as the assessment itself, the lesson is intended to build foundational skills in reading and interpreting primary sources that students can continue to use beyond the classroom. Students will also take home their worksheets and copies of the census records for further review.

Lesson Outline

- Welcome and Introduction (5 minutes)
 - State Archivists introduce themselves and provide an overview of the State archives' purpose. This leads to a brief explanation of census records, their purpose, and who created them.
- Mini-Lecture: How to use a digital database (5 minutes)
 - Demonstrate NARA Catalog (catalog.archives.gov) live: explain NAIDs, and record groups. A brief summary of microfilm and its publications.
 - Show FamilySearch, via NARA Catalog. Same federal records, just a different interface.
 - Introduce key vocabulary terms: arrangement, digitization, surrogate usage, and copyright.
- Primary Source Orientation (5 minutes)
 - Walkthrough of a single 1910 census record live on the NASA website
 - Identify key fields: name, address, birthplace, year of immigration, occupation, and education.
 - Discuss the Enumeration District and Ward numbering/ layout.
 - Model how to complete one row of the tracking worksheet.

- Small Group Activity: Tracking and Mapping (25 Minutes)
 - Distribute family packets (Sims, King, Orr, Jackson, and Clapp) and worksheets to each group.
 - Students complete the tracking worksheet for their assigned family across all three decades.
 - In the large group, students annotate each decade map with their family's locations.
 - Archivist assists with questions when needed.
- Class Discussion (10 minutes)
 - Each group shares one observation about their family's movement
 - Class discussion: What patterns do you notice? What might explain them? What questions do the records leave unanswered?
- Wrap-Up (2 minutes)
 - Share the NARA catalog and FamilySearch URLs for students who want to explore further.

Total Run Time: 52 minutes

Assessment

Assessment for this lesson is based mainly on each group's completion of the tracking worksheet and annotated map, as well as participation in the class discussion. The archivist can quickly review these worksheets to determine whether students correctly identified the information, which directly reflects learning objective 3.B. Assessing the second learning objective, 4.F, is more challenging, as it is more abstract and requires students to continue their research beyond the lesson itself. This could be demonstrated through a final project or follow-up assignment, which the teacher would determine as part of the broader curriculum.

Archival material

The following are digitized census records that will be used as print surrogates in this lesson. All records are for Marion County (Indianapolis), Indiana, and are held by the National Archives and Records Administration. They are categorized by the families chosen for this lesson.

1. King Family
 - a. 1900: Precinct 15, Ward 1, ED 33 Indianapolis pg. 2; Samuel King - Head
<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:S3HY-6W37-LS5?wc=9BWQ-W3B%3A1030552501%2C1030809801%2C1034148601%26cc%3D1325221&cc=1325221&lang=en&i=1>
 - i. "United States, Census, 1900," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:S3HY-6W37-LS5?cc=1325221&wc=9BWQ-W3B%3A1030552501%2C1030809801%2C1034148601> : 5 August 2014), Indiana > Marion > ED 33 Center Township, Precinct 15

Indianapolis city Ward 1 > image 2 of 19; citing NARA microfilm publication T623 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.).

- b. 1910: Ward 9 ED 164 Indianapolis pg. 3; Samuel King - Head
<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33SQ-GRNV-3L9?wc=QZZQ-7X7%3A133640401%2C135614601%2C140718201%2C1589089236%26cc%3D1727033&cc=1727033&lang=en&i=2>
 - i. "United States, Census, 1910," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33SQ-GRNV-3L9?cc=1727033&wc=QZZQ-7X7%3A133640401%2C135614601%2C140718201%2C1589089236> : 24 June 2017), Indiana > Marion > Indianapolis Ward 9 > ED 164 > image 3 of 20; citing NARA microfilm publication T624 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.).
- c. 1920: Ward 1 ED 37, Indianapolis pg. 299; Hattie King - Head
<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33SQ-GR6N-Z52?view=index&personArk=%2Fark%3A%2F61903%2F1%3A1%3AMFWV-R37&cc=1488411&lang=en&groupId=&action=view>
 - i. "Indiana, United States records," images, *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33SQ-GR6N-Z52?view=explore> : Apr 19, 2026), image 299 of 1196; United States. National Archives and Records Administration. Image Group Number: 004965829

2. Orr Family

- a. 1900: Precinct 15, Ward 1, ED 33, Indianapolis pg. 6; James Orr - Head
<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:S3HY-6W37-PV2?wc=9BWQ-W3B%3A1030552501%2C1030809801%2C1034148601%26cc%3D1325221&cc=1325221&lang=en&i=5>
 - i. "United States, Census, 1900," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:S3HY-6W37-PV2?cc=1325221&wc=9BWQ-W3B%3A1030552501%2C1030809801%2C1034148601> : 5 August 2014), Indiana > Marion > ED 33 Center Township, Precinct 15 Indianapolis city Ward 1 > image 6 of 19; citing NARA microfilm publication T623 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.).
- b. 1910: Ward 8 ED 149, Indianapolis pg 528; James Orr - Head
<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33SQ-GRNJ-C9D?view=index&personArk=%2Fark%3A%2F61903%2F1%3A1%3AMKPT-R3H&action=view&cc=1727033&lang=en&groupId=>
 - i. "Indiana, United States records," images, *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33SQ-GRNJ-C9D?view=ex>

plore : Apr 19, 2026), image 528 of 1501; United States. National Archives and Records Administration. Image Group Number: 004971225

- c. 1920: Ward 2, ED 54, Indianapolis pg 956; Hattie Orr - Mother
<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33S7-9R68-8ZD?view=index&personArk=%2Fark%3A%2F61903%2F1%3A1%3AMFWJ-6LC&action=view&cc=1488411&lang=en&groupId=>
- i. "Indiana, United States records," images, FamilySearch
(<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33S7-9R68-8ZD?view=explore> : Apr 19, 2026), image 956 of 1159; United States. National Archives and Records Administration. Image Group Number: 004965828

3. Jackson Family

- a. 1900: Precinct 15, Ward 1, ED 33, Indianapolis pg 9; Ellis Jackson - Head
<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:S3HY-6W37-58Q?wc=9BWQ-W3B%3A1030552501%2C1030809801%2C1034148601%26cc%3D1325221&cc=1325221&lang=en&i=8>
- i. "United States, Census, 1900," database with images, *FamilySearch*
(<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:S3HY-6W37-58Q?cc=1325221&wc=9BWQ-W3B%3A1030552501%2C1030809801%2C1034148601> : 5 August 2014), Indiana > Marion > ED 33 Center Township, Precinct 15 Indianapolis city Ward 1 > image 9 of 19; citing NARA microfilm publication T623 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.).
- b. 1920: Ward 4, ED 78, Indianapolis pg 84; Ellis Jackson - Head
<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33SQ-GR6H-4KT?view=index&personArk=%2Fark%3A%2F61903%2F1%3A1%3AMFW2-HS4&action=view&cc=1488411&lang=en&groupId=>
- i. "Indiana, United States records," images, FamilySearch
(<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33SQ-GR6H-4KT?view=explore> : Apr 19, 2026), image 84 of 1191; United States. National Archives and Records Administration. Image Group Number: 004965830
- c. 1930: Ward 8, ED 49, Indianapolis pg 581; Ellis Jackson - Head
<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33S7-9RH7-X7W?view=index&personArk=%2Fark%3A%2F61903%2F1%3A1%3AX4YX-XX6&action=view&cc=1810731&lang=en&groupId=>
- i. "Indiana, United States records," images, FamilySearch
(<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33S7-9RH7-X7W?view=explore> : Apr 19, 2026), image 581 of 1144; United States. National Archives and Records Administration. Image Group Number: 004950627

4. Clapp Family

- a. 1900: Precinct 15, Ward 1, ED 33, Indianapolis pg. 12; Herbert Clapp - Head
<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:S3HY-6W37-L43?wc=9BWQ-W3B%3A1030552501%2C1030809801%2C1034148601%26cc%3D1325221&cc=1325221&lang=en&i=11>
 - i. "United States, Census, 1900," database with images, *FamilySearch* (https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:S3HY-6W37-L43?cc=1325221&wc=9BWQ-W3B%3A1030552501%2C1030809801%2C1034148601 : 5 August 2014), Indiana > Marion > ED 33 Center Township, Precinct 15 Indianapolis city Ward 1 > image 12 of 19; citing NARA microfilm publication T623 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.).
 - b. 1910: Ward 1, ED 41, Indianapolis pg. 626; Herbert Clapp - Head
<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33S7-9RK4-Q3D?view=index&personArk=%2Fark%3A%2F61903%2F1%3A1%3AMKPG-93V&action=view&cc=1727033&lang=en&groupId=>
 - i. "Indiana, United States records," images, FamilySearch (https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33S7-9RK4-Q3D?view=explore : Apr 19, 2026), image 626 of 1115; United States. National Archives and Records Administration. Image Group Number: 004971224
 - c. 1920: Ward X, ED 20, Indianapolis pg. 497; Herbert Clapp - Head
<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33S7-9R68-XSD?view=index&cc=1488411&lang=en&groupId=&personArk=%2Fark%3A%2F61903%2F1%3A1%3AMFWN-2VQ&action=view>
 - i. "Indiana, United States records," images, FamilySearch (https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33S7-9R68-XSD?view=explore : Apr 19, 2026), image 497 of 1159; United States. National Archives and Records Administration. Image Group Number: 004965828
5. Sims Family
- a. 1900: Precinct 15, Ward 1, ED 33, Indianapolis pg. 16; Martin - Head
<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:S3HY-6W37-KVC?wc=9BWQ-W3B%3A1030552501%2C1030809801%2C1034148601%26cc%3D1325221&cc=1325221&lang=en&i=15>
 - i. "United States, Census, 1900," database with images, *FamilySearch* (https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:S3HY-6W37-KVC?cc=1325221&wc=9BWQ-W3B%3A1030552501%2C1030809801%2C1034148601 : 5 August 2014), Indiana > Marion > ED 33 Center Township, Precinct 15 Indianapolis city Ward 1 > image 16 of 19; citing NARA microfilm publication T623 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.)

- b. 1910: Ward 1, ED 41, Indianapolis pg. 629; Martin - Head
<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33S7-9RK4-Q6T?view=index&cc=1727033&lang=en&groupId=>
 - i. "Indiana, United States records," images, FamilySearch
 (https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33S7-9RK4-Q6T?view=explore : Apr 20, 2026), image 629 of 1115; United States. National Archives and Records Administration. Image Group Number: 004971224
- c. 1920: Ward 1, ED 34, Indianapolis, pg. 184; Martin - Head
<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33S7-9R6N-Z5G?view=index&personArk=%2Fark%3A%2F61903%2F1%3A1%3AMFWV-4B4&action=view&cc=1488411&lang=en&groupId=>
 - i. "Indiana, United States records," images, FamilySearch
 (https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33S7-9R6N-Z5G?view=explore : Apr 20, 2026), image 184 of 1196; United States. National Archives and Records Administration. Image Group Number: 004965829
- d. 1930: Ward 1, ED, Indianapolis, pg 1117; Martin - Head
<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33S7-9RH3-82D?view=index&personArk=%2Fark%3A%2F61903%2F1%3A1%3AXH9T-WXN&action=view&cc=1810731&lang=en&groupId=>
 - i. "Indiana, United States records," images, FamilySearch
 (https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33S7-9RH3-82D?view=explore : Apr 19, 2026), image 1117 of 1145; United States. National Archives and Records Administration. Image Group Number: 004950622

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