What Does a Historian Do?: Primary Source: Lesson 1 What is History?

Primary Source Activity
WHAT DOES A HISTORIAN DO?

Lesson 1 What is History?

The White House Renovation

Historians use primary sources to learn about the events of the past. They look for explanations of why things happened. They try to decide the causes and effects of an event. Primary sources help them understand why people made the decisions that led to a historical event.

For example, in 1947–1948, the White House in Washington, D.C., underwent a major renovation. Walls were taken down, floors were rebuilt, and hanging lamps were re-hung. All this happened during the presidency of Harry S. Truman. Historians can understand why this project happened by reading the words of Truman’s daughter, Margaret, who lived through the renovation.

Directions: Read the following passages and look for details that help you understand why the White House was renovated during the presidency of Harry S. Truman and how the renovations affected the Truman family.

Reading 1 Signs of Danger at the White House
Margaret Truman Daniel recalls the events that made her father worry about the White House.

Just in time, Dad discovered that the White House was literally falling down. For more than a year he had been prodding [asking] the Commission of Grounds and Buildings to take a good look at the place. He had begun to worry about it one night in 1947 at an official reception, when the guard of honor came in to take the colors away* As the husky young color bearers stamped across the floor in precise military unison, Dad looked up and saw the big chandelier [hanging lamp] above his head—and the heads of all his guests—swaying. A few weeks later, when the butler brought him breakfast in his study, he felt the whole floor sway, as if it was floating in space. Several weeks after he reported these alarming observations to the commission, he learned his fears were well founded.

*to take the colors away: to remove the flag of the United States
Reading 2 The Trumans Move to Blair House
The Blair House is a small, pleasant home where a president’s family often allows special friends or important visitors to stay. During the renovation of the White House, the president’s family used the house as their own.

This meant that we had to move across the street to Blair House. There were no complaints on my part, except the usual moans during the packing and unpacking days. As I’ve explained earlier, I much preferred Blair House to the White House. But Blair House created serious entertainment problems for Dad and Mother. As he told his sister, Mary, “It is a nice place but only half as large—so we have no place to put guests.” This applied not only to overnight guests but the standard official visitors at White House receptions. Instead of being able to entertain 1,200 or 1,500 at a single reception, everything had to be scaled down to half size and this meant that poor Mother was in perpetual motion as a hostess. But Mother, good soldier that she is, "met the situation" Truman-Wallace* style. There was, Dad pointed out in a letter he wrote toward the end of 1948, one consolation:
"It’s a shame the old White House had to fall down. But it's a godsend it didn’t when we had 1,500 people in it."

*Harry S. Truman’s wife was born Bess Wallace.

1. Analyzing Primary Sources
Identifying Causes and Effects Which excerpt explains the causes that led to the White House renovation? Which one explains some of the effects of the renovation?

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2. **Analyzing Primary Sources**
   **Identifying Causes** In the first excerpt, what were two events that caused the president to worry about the White House?

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3. **Analyzing Primary Sources**
   **Identifying Effects** In the second excerpt, what were two effects of the White House renovation on the president’s family?

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4. **Analyzing Primary Sources**
   **Analyzing Effects** What was the effect of the White House renovation on the first lady?

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5. Critical Thinking
   Predicting List the quotation by President Truman in the excerpt. What effect was the president worried would happen if the White House had not been renovated?

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Answer Key

1. The first excerpt explains the causes leading to the renovation. The second excerpt describes the effects on the president’s family.

2. The president saw the chandelier sway as the color guard was taking the flag down. He felt the floor sway as the butler was bringing breakfast.

3. The family had to move to Blair House. They were not able to entertain large gatherings, so they had to entertain more often.

4. The first lady had to entertain much smaller parties. Since she could not entertain the large groups, she had to entertain more often. It meant that she had more work to do.

5. "It's a shame the old White House had to fall down. But it's a godsend it didn't when we had 1,500 people in it."); Truman was worried that many people would be killed if the White House fell down while he was entertaining 1,500 people.