

## Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace

they lived. They provide answers to specific research questions and context for related issues. This chapter explains the basics of converting kaleidoscopic fragments and the twisted coils of history into a meaningful account of a past time or a past life.

As careful researchers, we cannot apply an easy, generic label—*reliable* or *unreliable*—to any document, much less any *type* of document. We cannot assign numerical values to pieces of information and add up a score to decide whether we should believe something we have found. We cannot base conclusions on the number of times a source or fact is cited; a dubious factoid repeated over and over cannot outweigh a reality correctly reported by a single, impeccable source.

Research is much more than an accumulation of data. It is a process that requires continual comparison of new information against the old. At every step of that process, we appraise the credibility of *each* detail in *each* document. We apply every conceivable test for authenticity, contemporaneousness, and credibility of informants. As we acquire historical and social perspective of a place and time—and gain experience in evaluating its material legacies—evidence analysis becomes a fascinating part of the research process.

### 1.2 **Completeness of Research**

Reliable conclusions are rarely rooted in half-tilled soil. Any relevant record that goes unexamined is a land mine waiting to explode our premature theories. The risk is great enough when, in a rare run of luck, we are blessed with documents all leaning toward the same conclusion. The risk cannot be chanced when—as more often happens—we must interpret a trail of implications marked by spotty records, instead of the gloriously explicit document we had hoped to find.

If we know that potentially relevant records exist, we should use them. If records are unknown to us but discoverable by a thorough literature search, we are expected to find them. Even so, research can never be *complete*. An intensive search in all relevant catalogs, guides, and other finding aids can still fail to turn up random records of potential value. Some materials remain hidden to the world, and others are not available for public scrutiny.

All things considered, our task as history researchers is to learn the sources, learn the methods, learn the standards, and apply them all as carefully and diligently as possible.