

## DOCUMENTS

Interpreting Alternative Viewpoints  
in Primary Source Documents

# Henry Clay's American System

*The young American republic was growing. Would it have thrived even more under Henry Clay's American System?*



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*Debating* the  
**DOCUMENTS**

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# Teacher Introduction

## ★ Using Primary Sources

Primary sources are called “primary” because they are first-hand records of a past era or historical event. They are the raw materials, or the evidence, on which historians base their “secondary” accounts of the past.

A rapidly growing number of history teachers today are using primary sources. Why? Perhaps it's because primary sources give students a better sense of what history is and what historians do. Such sources also help students see the past from a variety of viewpoints. Moreover, primary sources make history vivid and bring it to life.

However, primary sources are not easy to use. They can be confusing. They can be biased. They rarely all agree. Primary sources must be interpreted and set in context. To do this, students need historical background knowledge. *Debating the Documents* helps students handle such challenges by giving them a useful framework for analyzing sources that conflict with one another.



*“Multiple,  
conflicting  
perspectives are  
among the truths  
of history.  
No single  
objective or  
universal account  
could ever put an  
end to this endless  
creative dialogue  
within and  
between the past  
and the present.”*

From the 2011 Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct of the Council of the American Historical Association.

## INTRODUCTION

### ★ *The Debating the Documents Series*

Each *Debating the Documents* booklet includes the same sequence of reproducible worksheets. If students use several booklets over time, they will get regular practice at interpreting and comparing conflicting sources. In this way, they can learn the skills and habits needed to get the most out of primary sources.

#### **Each *Debating the Documents* Booklet Includes**

- **Suggestions for the Student and an Introductory Essay.** The student gets instructions and a one-page essay providing background on the booklet's topic. A time line on the topic is also included.
- **Two Groups of Contrasting Primary Source Documents.** In most of the booklets, students get one pair of visual sources and one pair of written sources. In some cases, more than two are provided for each. Background is provided on each source. *Within each group, the sources clash in a very clear way.* (The sources are not always exact opposites, but they do always differ in some obvious way.)
- **Three Worksheets for Each Document Group.** Students use the first two worksheets to take notes on the sources. The third worksheet asks which source the student thinks would be most useful to a historian.
- **One DBQ.** On page 20, a document-based question (DBQ) asks students to write an effective essay using all of the booklet's primary sources.

### ★ *How to Use This Booklet*

#### **1. Have students read “Suggestions for the Student” and the Introductory Essay.**

Give them copies of pages 5–7. Ask them to read the instructions and then read the introductory essay on the topic. The time line gives them additional information on that topic. This reading could be done in class or as a homework assignment.

#### **2. Have students do the worksheets.**

Make copies of the worksheets and the pages with the sources. Ask students to study the background information on each source and the source itself. Then have them take notes on the sources using the worksheets. If students have access to a computer, have them review the primary sources digitally.

### 3. “Debate the documents” as a class.

Have students use their worksheet notes to debate the primary source documents as a class. Urge students to follow these ground rules:

- Use your worksheets as a guide for the discussion or debate.
- Try to reach agreement about the main ideas and the significance of each primary source document.
- Look for points of agreement as well as disagreement between the primary sources.
- Listen closely to all points of view about each primary source.
- Focus on the usefulness of each source to the historian, not merely on whether you agree or disagree with that source’s point of view.

### 4. Have students do the final DBQ.

A DBQ is an essay question about a set of primary source documents. To answer the DBQ, students write essays using evidence from the sources and their own background knowledge of the historical era. (See the next page for a DBQ scoring guide to use in evaluating these essays.)

The DBQ assignment on page 20 includes guidelines for writing a DBQ essay. Here are some additional points to make with students about preparing to write this kind of essay.

#### **The DBQ for this Booklet (see page 20):**

“It was a great tragedy that Clay’s ‘American System’ of tariffs, a national bank, and internal improvements was never fully put in place.”  
Do you agree or disagree? Why?

- Analyze the question carefully.
- Use your background knowledge to set sources in their historical context.
- Question and interpret sources actively. Do not accept them at face value.
- Use sources meaningfully to support your essay’s thesis.
- Pay attention to the overall organization of your essay.

## INTRODUCTION

### ★ *Complete DBQ Scoring Guide*

Use this guide in evaluating the DBQ for this booklet. Use this scoring guide with students who are already familiar with using primary sources and writing DBQ essays.

#### **Excellent Essay**

- Offers a clear answer or thesis explicitly addressing all aspects of the essay question.
- Does a careful job of interpreting many or most of the documents and relating them clearly to the thesis and the DBQ. Deals with conflicting documents effectively.
- Uses details and examples effectively to support the thesis and other main ideas. Explains the significance of those details and examples well.
- Uses background knowledge and the documents in a balanced way.
- Is well written; clear transitions make the essay easy to follow from point to point. Only a few minor writing errors or errors of fact.

#### **Good Essay**

- Offers a reasonable thesis addressing the essential points of the essay question.
- Adequately interprets at least some of the documents and relates them to the thesis and the DBQ.
- Usually relates details and examples meaningfully to the thesis or other main ideas.
- Includes some relevant background knowledge.
- May have some writing errors or errors of fact, as long as these do not invalidate the essay's overall argument or point of view.

#### **Fair Essay**

- Offers at least a partly developed thesis addressing the essay question.
- Adequately interprets at least a few of the documents.
- Relates only a few of the details and examples to the thesis or other main ideas.
- Includes some background knowledge.
- Has several writing errors or errors of fact that make it harder to understand the essay's overall argument or point of view.

#### **Poor Essay**

- Offers no clear thesis or answer addressing the DBQ.
- Uses few documents effectively other than referring to them in "laundry list" style, with no meaningful relationship to a thesis or any main point.
- Uses details and examples unrelated to the thesis or other main ideas. Does not explain the significance of these details and examples.
- Is not clearly written, with some major writing errors or errors of fact.

# Suggestions to the Student

## ★ *Using Primary Sources*

A primary source is any record of evidence from the past. Many things are primary sources: letters, diary entries, official documents, photos, cartoons, wills, maps, charts, etc. They are called “primary” because they are first-hand records of a past event or time period. This *Debating the Documents* lesson is based on two groups of primary source documents. Within each group, the sources conflict with one another. That is, they express different or even opposed points of view. You need to decide which source is more reliable, more useful, or more typical of the time period. This is what historians do all the time. Usually, you will be able to learn something about the past from each source, even when the sources clash with one another in dramatic ways.

## ★ *How to Use This Booklet*

### 1. **Read the one-page introductory essay.**

This gives you background information that will help you analyze the primary source documents and do the exercises for this *Debating the Documents* lesson. The time line gives you additional information you will find helpful.



### 2. **Study the primary source documents for this lesson.**

For this lesson, you get two groups of sources. The sources within each group conflict with one another. Some of these sources are visuals, others are written sources. With visual sources, pay attention not only to the image’s “content” (its subject matter) but also to its artistic style, shading, composition, camera angle, symbols, and other features that add to the image’s meaning. With written sources, notice the writing style, bias, even what the source leaves out or does not talk about. Think about each source’s author, that author’s reasons for writing, and the likely audience for the source. These considerations give you clues as to the source’s historical value.

### 3. **Use the worksheets to analyze each group of primary source documents.**

For each group of sources, you get three worksheets. Use the “Study the Document” worksheets to take notes on each source. Use the “Comparing the Documents” worksheet to decide which of the sources would be most useful to a historian.

### 4. **As a class, debate the documents.**

Use your worksheet notes to help you take part in this debate.

### 5. **Do the final DBQ.**

“DBQ” means “document-based question.” A DBQ is a question along with several primary source documents. To answer the DBQ, write an essay using evidence from the documents and your own background history knowledge.

## *Henry Clay's American System*

From 1776 to 1789, Americans won their revolution and ratified the U.S. Constitution. That time period is often seen as a “heroic” age. Its leaders—Adams, Franklin, Hamilton, Washington, Jefferson—are still recalled and celebrated to this day.

The generation that followed is less well known. Nevertheless, it faced its own huge challenges. The biggest one was to make the new republic work at a time of rapid social and economic change and expansion. The American Revolution had been fought by a small society of farmers, planters, merchants, and sailors. In the early 1800s, industry began to develop, immigrants poured in, the population grew, and huge western territories were opened to settlement. How would America's leaders guide this growth? Could they do it in a way that would keep the nation united? Could they preserve and even expand the liberty won by the revolution?

One figure who had definite ideas about all this was Henry Clay. Between 1810 and 1850, Clay was a member of the House, a senator, and a Secretary of State. He was a candidate for president several times, though he never won. He was known as the “Great Compromiser,” because of his major role in achieving compromises over the explosive issue of slavery and related matters.

He was also famous as the advocate of what he called the “American System.”

Clay began to propose his American System just after the War of 1812. That war fostered a strong sense of national pride. Yet as the nation grew in the years after that war, it began to divide into hostile regions: an agricultural Northwest (today's Midwest); an older, manufacturing, commercial Northeast; and a plantation and slave-based South.

Clay's American System was designed to hold these sections together. It consisted of three key parts:

- A high tariff, or tax on imports, to protect American industry from foreign competitors
- A national bank to make funds available for investment, to regulate state banks, and to keep the money supply dependable
- Federal spending (from funds raised by the tariff and the sale of public lands) on roads and canals and other “internal improvements” to foster trade among all three sections

Clay hoped the American System would unify the nation politically, help its economy grow, and lead it to depend less on British goods and more on American-made products.

At first, several parts of Clay's program were put in place. After 1828, however, his plans ran into strong opposition from President Andrew Jackson, who favored state interests and a limited role for the federal government in the economy. Jackson saw the Second Bank of the United States as a source of privilege and monopoly power. His bitter battle against it put an end to that part of Clay's system. Meanwhile, many internal improvements were already being funded by state government and private business. Clay led the opposition to Jackson in the newly emerging Whig Party. But during his lifetime, his system was never fully adopted.

The American System was meant to deal with many economic problems. Aside from these, perhaps its main political aim was to keep slavery from splitting the nation apart. In a way, Clay as author of the American System and Clay as the Great Compromiser are one and the same. Would the nation have been better off under a full version of the American System? It is hard to say. Perhaps the primary source documents in this booklet will help you decide.

# Henry Clay Time Line

**1777**

• • • On April 12, Henry Clay is born in Virginia.

**1810–1811**

• • • Clay is elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. When the House convenes in 1811, he becomes Speaker of the House. He will turn this position into a very powerful one, second only to that of the president.

**1812**

• • • Clay is one of several so-called “War Hawks” who convince Congress to declare war on Great Britain. He is one of the commissioners who negotiates the treaty of peace with Great Britain in 1814.

**1816**

• • • Clay backs the chartering of the Second Bank of the United States, which President Madison signs into law. He also supports the tariff of 1816 as part of his American System, a plan to protect U.S. industries and develop internal improvements.

**1820**

• • • Clay helps settle an early dispute over slavery by supporting the Missouri Compromise.

**1824**

• • • The Tariff Act of 1824 passes. Clay promotes it. He fails in his run for the presidency that year. No candidate has a majority of electoral votes. The election is decided in the House, where Clay supports John Quincy Adams, who is elected over Andrew Jackson, who had the most popular votes. In 1825, Clay is appointed Secretary of State by Adams, which further angers Jackson and his supporters. As Jackson begins to form the Democratic Party, Clay creates a network called the National-Republicans who will be the nucleus of the new Whig Party, formed by 1832.

**1828**

• • • Andrew Jackson is elected president.

**1831–1832**

• • • Clay is elected to the Senate in 1831. Then in 1832, he loses to Jackson in the presidential election. The big issue is rechartering the Second Bank of the United States. Clay supports rechartering, but Jackson vetoes it.

**1833**

• • • Clay helps resolve the “Nullification Crisis,” in which South Carolina threatens to ignore the tariffs of 1828 and 1832. Clay wins key reductions in the tariff he supported, adding to his fame as “The Great Compromiser.”

**1840**

• • • Clay fails to win the Whig nomination for president. Instead General William Henry Harrison is nominated and elected, but he dies one month after taking office. He is succeeded by Vice President John Tyler, a Southerner who opposes Clay.

**1841**

• • • Clay unsuccessfully battles Tyler in the Senate. He seeks to recharter a national bank, but Tyler vetoes it.

**1842–1844**

• • • Clay retires from the Senate to begin his 1844 campaign as the Whig candidate for president, but he is barely defeated by James K. Polk.

**1848**

• • • Clay is denied the Whig nomination for president.

**1850**

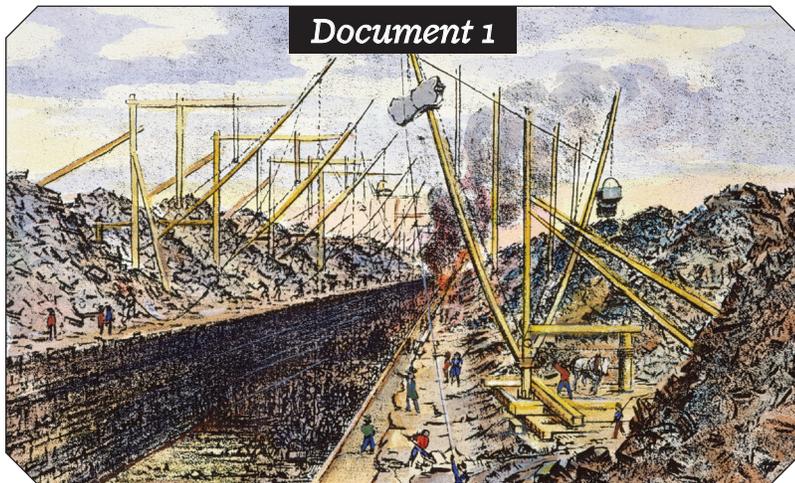
• • • The Great Compromiser helps bring about the Compromise of 1850. The compromise holds off the Civil War for 10 more years.

**1852**

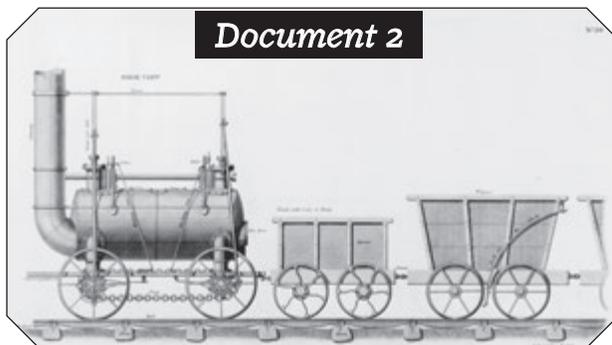
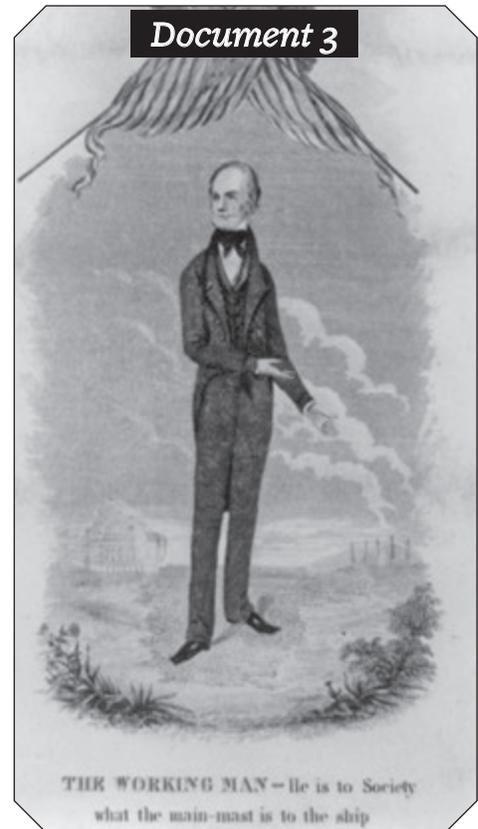
• • • On June 29, Clay dies in Washington, D.C.

## DOCUMENTS 1–3

## Visual Primary Source Documents 1–3



The Granger Collection, New York

Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division,  
LC-USZ62-110386Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division,  
LC-USZ62-90711

### Information on Documents 1–3

**Document 1.** Men operate pulley cranes to dig a lock on the Erie Canal. Finished in 1825, the Erie Canal linked the Hudson River to Lake Erie and the other Great Lakes. This opened the entire Old Northwest (today's Midwest) to trade with the Northeast through the port of New York City. The Erie Canal was the sort of “internal improvement” Henry Clay hoped would unite and strengthen the republic. Yet the canal was financed by New York’s state government, not the federal government.

**Document 2.** In 1825, George Stephenson’s locomotive’s were the first to haul both goods and passengers on regular schedules on the Stockton and Darlington Railway in England.

His steam locomotive and railway cars are shown here. In America, states and localities rushed to help private companies build railroads—not always in an efficient way.

**Document 3.** A campaign portrait of Henry Clay, Whig presidential candidate in 1844. Clay gestures to a factory very lightly drawn to the right. On the left is the U. S. Capitol. The motto reads “The Working Man—He is to society what the main mast is to the ship.” This appeal to the working man may have been meant to counteract the view of the Whigs as the party of business interests.