



## THE RESONANCE OF AUTHENTICITY

By **BRIAN W. MARTIN**

Every day my colleagues and I have the privilege of engaging the past as we sift through documents, catalog artifacts, arrange and describe photographs, interview people about their past experiences, or walk the grounds of a historic site. It is this direct connection with the vestiges of history that ignites the passion at the core of our professional practice. Indeed, I believe the value of our work to a range of audiences is enhanced by the degree to which it allows them to

interact with authentic materials from the past.

It is this quality of authenticity—being real and reliable—that gives history its broad appeal and is a common thread woven through the various services and products offered by History Associates. As one museum patron put it, historical exhibits make us “acknowledge that history is real, that it was alive.”<sup>1</sup> The patron’s awkward use of verb tenses highlights the dimension of time that prevents us from reliving the past as it

was and leaves us to view it through the lens of the present.

Sometimes our present perspective even affects our perception of authenticity, as was the case for research historian Carly Swaim, who was particularly struck by the color and clarity of World War II photographs at the Library of Congress that she reviewed for the National Museum of Americans in Wartime. The sharp color images seemed more real, that is, more like photographs she sees today than the typical black and white and grainy ones she was used to seeing in the archives. They reminded her that the actual events of World War II played out in vivid color.

For archivist Joe Neumann, context was the key to experiencing the authenticity of some early twentieth-century log books of scientific expeditions in Arctic regions. These stained, torn, and battered records of meteorological, geophysical, and atmospheric observations now held by the Carnegie Institution of Washington become more than just a source of data when examined in the context of other evidence that documents the hardships endured by the scientists. Seen in this light, the shaky and awkward handwriting gave Joe a taste of the often brutal conditions under which the scientists made these observations. Additional context such as information regarding the scientific instruments used to gather the data also helps to validate the reliability of these records for current



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

*A May 1943 photograph of a U.S. Navy sailor and girl at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Washington, D.C.*

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## THE REAL HISTORY DETECTIVES

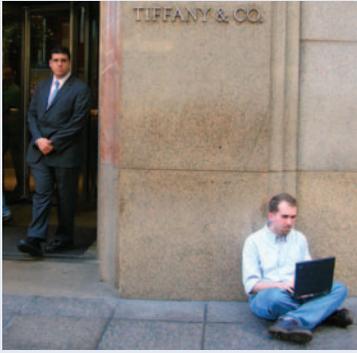
By **MICHAEL C. REIS**

When lawyers ask questions, our historians sometimes employ complex research strategies and delve into obscure sources to come up with answers.

What follows next is often another question: “How did you find that?” While reflecting genuine curiosity and perhaps a bit of admiration, this question is not an idle one for attorneys. A

well-documented research process and chain of custody for particular documents are crucial to establishing the authenticity of such historical evidence.

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## STAFF HIGHLIGHTS: STEVE SWISDAK

Senior historian and Litigation Research Division deputy director Steve Swisdak has recently written two articles: “The Value of Historical Research to In-House Counsel,” which appeared in the June 2009 issue of the American Bar Association’s *In-House Counsel Committee Newsletter*, and “Researching Past Uses of New York Industrial Sites,” which appeared in the May 2009 issue of *Environmental Law in New York*. As his colleagues know, Steve has a fondness for New York City that comes from researching numerous litigation-related projects in that city. Clients appreciate Steve’s knowledge of New York’s unheralded and out-of-the-way records repositories, and his willingness to communicate his findings promptly—even if it means responding to e-mails in front of Tiffany’s flagship store at the corner of Fifth Avenue and 57th Street.

## HISTORY DETECTIVES

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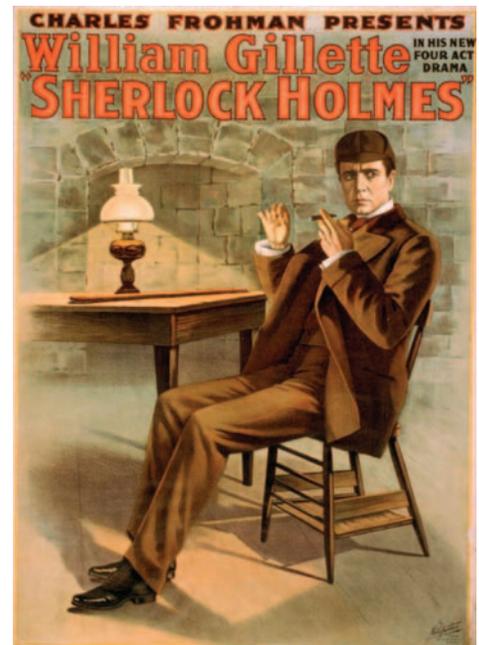
In this and other respects, our research is truly historical detective work. But it is not to be confused with the popular view of fictional detectives from Sherlock Holmes to Adrian Monk or those non-fiction PBS History Detectives whose seemingly effortless investigations always turn up the “smoking gun” that resolves the case in a tidy and dramatic fashion. Despite the complexity of and the inherent gaps in the historical record, we—like our Hollywood counterparts—often find decisive evidence. However, it is rarely an easy exercise. The advent of the Internet as an immense storehouse of information certainly offers advantages to experienced and careful researchers, but it has far from replaced the increasingly arcane world of libraries, archives, and historical societies as sources for essential historical evidence.

Moreover, a broad understanding of historical context, experience with historical record-keeping practices, and the ability to piece together possible and plausible leads and interpretations from scattered sources characterize the work of our historians. While we can rarely divulge the complete details of research supporting legal matters due to appropriate privilege and confidentiality restrictions, here are two examples drawn from our project files that illustrate how we find useful historical evidence.

Television shows like the *X-Files* and movies such as the *National Treasure* franchise portray the government as a vast conspiracy bent on hiding the truth. In reality, the government will often share what it knows if researchers will only explain what the relevant records are and where they are located. A utilities firm wanted to know why the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) designated certain substances “toxic” during the 1970s. The firm provided a single lead to History Associates from a former EPA official who recalled that a task force had created specific files. We used this lead, along with our knowledge of federal records management practices and a proprietary database designed to capture disposition data about inactive federal records, to locate the task force records, which proved to be held in a long-forgotten Maryland warehouse. This information in turn became the basis for a renewed Freedom of Information Act request, which secured the release of the records, much to the client’s satisfaction.

Another client, accused of systematically dumping waste on a piece of property that had once been a New England tidal mill pond, asked History Associates to document how that pond came to be filled. Based on our understanding of historic regulation of tidelands, we found maps and permits in state records showing that the landowner filled part of the pond to expand a coal wharf in the nineteenth century. Learning that a state highway covered another portion of the pond, we found more correspondence and maps regarding that filling activity in state roads and tidelands records from the 1930s. Finally, we found the last piece of the puzzle in the local historical society newsletter—an article based on oral histories described how the remaining marshy remnant of the pond disappeared gradually as the neighborhood used it to discard household refuse. We found no evidence of our client’s participation in filling any portion of the pond.

These examples are representative of many more from our case files. They aptly illustrate that while hopefully brilliant deductions will always characterize our work, reconstructing the legally usable past is usually anything but “elementary.”



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

*A consulting detective, but not a consulting historian. Actor William Gillette as Sherlock Holmes in an early theatrical adaptation of Arthur Conan Doyle’s famous detective.*



## SUMMER READING SUGGESTIONS FROM HISTORY ASSOCIATES

**Anita Weber:** *A Suitable Boy* by Vikram Seth (1993). A sweeping historical saga that looks at post-colonial India through the lens of a family looking to find “a suitable boy” for a daughter to marry. An excellent example of the way that fiction can illuminate the impact of broad social change upon individuals.

**Joseph Neumann:** *The Hermit of Peking* by Hugh Trevor-Roper (1976). Trevor-Roper pens a delightful piece of historical sleuthing in which he reveals Sir Edmund Backhouse, a previously renowned Sinologist and authority on the declining years of the Chinese ancien regime, to be a forger of Imperial documents on a massive scale.

**Allison Eaton:** *The Lost Painting* by Jonathan Harr (2006). An enjoyable tale about a student on the trail of a lost Caravaggio painting, *The Taking of Christ*. It will really strike a chord with those of us who have searched for a long-neglected document to find one vital nugget of information—that last piece of the puzzle that leads us to a significant discovery in the end.

**Jamie Rife:** *Yankees in the Land of the Gods* by Peter Booth Wiley (1990). An engaging and authoritative examination of Commodore Matthew Perry’s 1853 naval expedition to Japan. Wiley pens a sharp analysis of the episode that makes clear how Perry’s visit led to Japan’s modernization under the Meiji and, ultimately, to a desperate war for Pacific hegemony almost a century later.

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uses, such as the study of climate change.

Interpretation, or the use of historical materials to find meaning in the past, is most effective when it relies on—rather than obscures—the authentic quality of the underlying evidence. Often it is the perspective of the interpreter that clouds our understanding of the past, as senior historian Jamie Rife was keenly aware as co-author of *Caring & Curing: A History of the Indian Health Service*. He found that his field work on Native American reservations allowed him to see events and evidence in appropriate cultural contexts when piecing together a story that he hopes will ring true to his Native American audience.

It is this resonance of authenticity, the simple power of being somehow connected to the past, that enlivens both the practitioners and patrons of history. This summer as you visit a historic site or museum, or read a history book, judge for yourselves how effective the historians have been in illuminating what is authentic.

<sup>1</sup> “Spark,” a video short directed by Glenn Holsten, produced by the Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance in Association with the American Association of Museums, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OgrH6NwhrFk&eurl=http%3A%2F%2F09aamblog.wordpress.com%2F&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OgrH6NwhrFk&eurl=http%3A%2F%2F09aamblog.wordpress.com%2F&feature=player_embedded), accessed July 1, 2009.

## HAI AROUND THE WORLD

### CIVIL WAR PRESERVATION TRUST:

continued to conduct research and prepare interpretive options for a portion of Virginia’s Mine Run Battlefield.

### NATIONAL INSTITUTE ON AGING AND NATIONAL INSTITUTE ON DRUG ABUSE, NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH:

conducting records inventories and implementing records schedule dispositions.

### NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN JEWISH HISTORY

developing content, locating historical photographs, writing exhibit text, and securing high-resolution images for the museum.

### HOWARD COMMUNITY COLLEGE:

arranging, rehousing, and describing collection of personal papers of former Maryland State Senator James A. Clark, Jr.

### CARNEGIE INSTITUTION OF WASHINGTON:

providing arrangement and description services for the archives program.

### LITIGATION RESEARCH DIVISION:

continued to research and analyze documents in federal, state, and local records repositories in California, Florida, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Washington, DC.



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Congratulations to Mr. Gerry Caron of the Cabot Corporation. He was the winner of the Winter 2009 Test Your Knowledge quiz. He correctly answered the following: (A) Franklin Roosevelt, (B) Warren Harding, and (C) Harry Truman.

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