

Example: Comparison, Synthesis, & Interpretation of a Primary Source

Question: Has anyone ever lived on the National Mall?

Primary source item: [David Burnes' Cottage](#)

Related Primary Sources:

- From George Washington to William Deakins, Jr., and Benjamin Stoddert, 28 February 1791," Founders Online, National Archives, accessed April 11, 2019, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-07-02-0262>. [Original source: The Papers of George Washington, Presidential Series, vol. 7, 1 December 1790–21 March 1791, ed. Jack D. Warren, Jr. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998, pp. 466–467.]

Related secondary sources:

- Klaus, Susan L. 1991. "'Some of the Smartest Folks Here': The Van Nesses and Community Building in Early Washington." *Washington History* 3 (2): 22–45
- McNeil, Priscilla W. 1991. "Rock Creek Hundred: Land Conveyed for the Federal City." *Washington History* 3 (1): 34–51.
- Scisco, Louis Dow. 1957. "A Site for the 'Federal City': The Original Proprietors and Their Negotiations with Washington." *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington, D.C.* 57/59 (January): 123–47.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40067190>.

Compare	Bring together your primary and secondary sources Look for gaps in evidence and identify contradictions or similarities.	Burnes was one of the original proprietors of land in the area which became the National Mall. (McNeil, Scisco) The house was probably built in the 18th century, but was photographed around 1894 (data from Library of Congress) so it stayed there a long time, even with changes in the city. Scisco says that Burnes was resistant to the proposal for the city and early on refused to participate. This is confirmed by the primary source letter from Washington to his commissioners. Burnes' daughter married a congressman. They built a house near this cottage and were key members of the Washington social scene in the early 19th century. (Klaus) The photograph
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		doesn't show the house, so it's hard to get a sense of just how close together they were.
Synthesize	What conclusions can you draw from the evidence?	David Burnes lived on the land which became the National Mall during the eighteenth century and into the early nineteenth. He was one of the landowners who sold property to the government to create Washington, DC, but he was reluctant to do so at first. The area where his house was remained in his family's possession through his daughter's inheritance. His house remained standing until the late nineteenth century, which may have been because the land was still in private hands even though all around it there were federal offices and buildings, including the White House. It was not removed to suit any plan of the National Mall during the nineteenth century.
Interpret	What does the evidence suggest is the answer to your question? How does this contribute to the narrative?	Not only have people lived on the National Mall, but some of those who did were determined to stay after the Federal City was established. David Burnes' cottage was a physical reminder of the history of the area before 1790, and a manifestation of the occupant's reported stubbornness. That it remained on the Mall as long as it did is partly because the Mall in the nineteenth century was not as organized and orderly as it is today. However, the area around the Mall did change, and by the late 1800s, David Burnes' cottage was one of the last remnants of what had been an agricultural area, standing among buildings in a growing urban city.