

## Dig Into Documents: Analyze a Photograph for Elementary Students

### Overview:

This activity will introduce students to the role of archives and build their primary source analysis skills by investigating a photograph from the Archives of American Gardens. Students will compare the past to the present and consider how they interact with their environment today.

### Grades:

K–5

### Topics and Skills:

Photograph Analysis, Comparing Past and Present, Family Activities, Gardening

### Procedure:

#### How do we learn about the past?

*During this lesson, students will analyze a historical photograph to grow their document analysis skills and compare life in the past to life in the present.*

*Begin this activity by introducing the role of an archives. Ask students to raise their hands if any of the following questions apply to them:*

#### Ask:

- Do you keep photos of yourself, your family, or your friends?
- Does your family have a special place where they keep important documents?
- Do you save greeting cards? Report cards? School projects?

If you raised your hand for any of these questions, you have an archive! You keep a collection of documents and photographs that provide information about your life.

Sometimes archives are big collections of documents that are kept in special buildings and are used by researchers and historians to learn more about the past. Today, we are going to examine a photograph from the Archives of American Gardens. This archives is a part of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. It preserves photos and documents that tell the story of the history of gardens in the United States.

We are going to use a set of questions to help us investigate a photograph (*Page 1 of the Document Set*).



*The Photograph Analysis Graphic Organizer can either be completed as a whole class or shared with students to work together in small groups. If completed in small groups, lead a class discussion to compare observations.*

*This photograph includes a caption. Encourage students to examine the photo first, then see if they can identify any words in the cursive caption. Afterwards, share the transcription of the caption.*



**Additional document discussion questions:**

As you discovered, this photograph includes a handwritten caption. It is difficult to read because it is written in cursive handwriting. Let's review what it says and see what else we can learn about this photo from the caption (*Page 2 of the Document Set*).

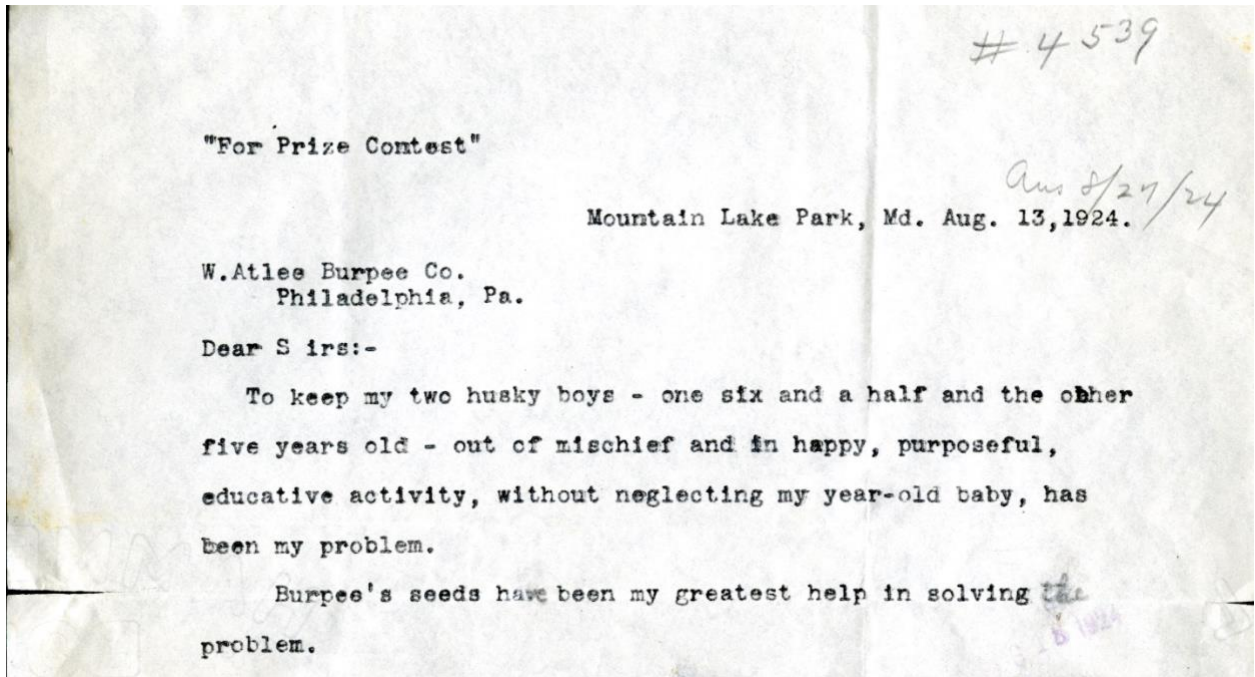
"Beans grown from Burpee's seeds by Horace and Jack O'Donnell with the two "bosses" shown in the picture."

Sometimes an archives can tell us more about a document or photograph. This photograph is from the Burpee seed company records in the Archives of American Gardens. The Burpee company donated some of its historical business records to the Smithsonian. Let's look at some other documents that can help us learn more about this photograph.



This photograph was mailed to the Burpee company along with this letter.

Project or share the [letter](#) excerpt with your students (page 3 of the Document Set).



What other clues can you identify that tell us more about this photo?

*Students may notice the location, the date, and that this letter relates to a "prize contest." There are also handwritten notes added in pencil that indicate when the letter was received and the contest entry number assigned to it.*

This letter was mailed to the Burpee company in response to a competition it announced. The second page of the letter tells us it was sent by Frances Frisbie O'Donnell.

*Optional: Share the [contest flyer](#) (Page 4 of the Document Set) with your students to learn more about the Burpee contest.*

While Frances O'Donnell did not win the Burpee competition, her letter and photograph were saved by the Burpee company and are now available in the Archives of American Gardens for all to learn from today as primary sources.

#### Wrap-up:

- What does this photograph tell us about the past?
- How does it compare to life today? What is similar? What is different?

## Keep Growing:

Keep the conversation going with more activity ideas from Smithsonian Gardens.

**Create:** Today you examined a photograph that is over 100 years old! While many things have changed since then, one thing that has stayed the same is how people interact with their environment by spending time outside, whether that's in a garden, a park, playing sports or games, or other ways.

Draw a picture of something you like to do with your family or friends outside. How could this picture help future historians learn about your life?

**Explore:** How do people garden today? Frances O'Donnell expressed how important gardening was to her and her sons by sharing a photo and letter with the Burpee seed company. Take a class trip to a school garden or community garden and think about how people garden today. As a class, notice and discuss: What plants are growing? How do people take care of the space? Why do people garden today?

## Materials:

**Photograph Analysis Graphic Organizer**

**Dig Into Documents Elementary School Document Set**

## Background Information:

### *The Burpee seed company*

W. Atlee Burpee & Co. is a seed company that started in 1876 and is still around today. It once sold seeds by mail only to people all over the United States and even the world. The company owned several farms where workers grew new types of fruits, vegetables, and flowers. Before the Internet was invented, the Burpee seed company mailed out catalogs to customers each year with the descriptions and prices of all the different seeds it sold.

### *Contest*

The Burpee seed company held a contest in 1924. To enter, you had to mail in a letter that answered the question, "What have Burpee's seeds done for me?" The letter had to be 200 words or less – no longer. The winner would get \$250.



Thousands of letters arrived from people all over the United States. In their letters, people gave many different reasons for why they appreciated Burpee's seeds. Some said the seeds helped them grow vegetables to feed their families or sell for money. Some said that growing beautiful flowers made them happy. Others said they just enjoyed working outside growing seeds in their gardens.

The letter in this activity is from that contest. It is now over one hundred years old.

**Vocabulary:**

archives – collections of documents kept in secure buildings or spaces that are used by researchers and historians to learn more about the past.

primary source – A firsthand, original account, record, or evidence about a person, place, object, or event.

*The [Archives of American Gardens](#), managed by Smithsonian Gardens, offers the public access to a collection of tens of thousands of photographic images of historic and contemporary gardens as well as records that document the work of landscape architects, garden designers, garden photographers and a handful of seed companies, including the W. Atlee Burpee & Co. Records in this archives help trace the history of a wide variety of topics ranging from gardening, art and design, and foodways, to business, advertising, photography, and daily life.*