Topic: British Surrender at Yorktown

**Historical Thinking Skill Assessed:** Sourcing

**Grade Level:** Upper Elementary/Middle

**National History Standards**
Era 3: Revolution and the New Nation (1754-1820s)
Standard 1: The causes of the American Revolution, the ideas and interests involved in forging the revolutionary movement, and the reasons for the American victory

**Using the Item:** The question assesses students’ ability to source historical evidence in order to determine reliability.

**Background:** There are two sources for this question, both depicting the same event, the surrender of General Charles Cornwallis and the British forces at Yorktown, Virginia on October 19, 1781, marking the end of fighting in the American Revolutionary War. The first is a painting by John Trumbull that was based on a first-hand account, although Trumbull himself did not witness the surrender. The second is a recounting of the surrender by Dr. James Thacher, who was present.

**Source 1**

At about twelve o’clock, the combined army was arranged and drawn up in two lines extending more than a mile in length. The Americans were drawn up in a line on the right side of the road and the French occupied the left. At the head of the former, the great American commander [George Washington] . . . At the head of the latter was posted the excellent Count Rochambeau and his suite...

It was about two o’clock when the captive army advanced through the line formed for their reception. Every eye was prepared to gaze upon Lord Cornwallis, the object of peculiar interest and solicitude [concern]; but he disappointed our anxious expectations; pretending indisposition [illness] he made General O’Hara his substitute as the leader of his army.

http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/online_books/source/sb1/sb1n.htm

Based on sourcing, which of these two pieces of historical evidence would be considered the most reliable?

A. Source 1, because it was produced closest to the date of the event
B. Source 1, because it is located at the U.S. Capitol
C. **Source 2, because this appears to be an eyewitness account** (answer cue)
D. Source 2, because the author served with the army

Explanation

While “A” might be interpreted as correct, there is no evidence that the painting was produced by an eyewitness, making it impossible to determine whether this is a primary or secondary source. “B” is not a valid response because the current location of a source has no bearing on its reliability as historical evidence. Although it is significant that the author served with the army, that fact alone does not indicate whether the author was present at the scene and had first-hand knowledge of the events, which invalidates “D” as the best answer. “C” is the best response because the fact that the title of the source begins “A Military Journal” suggests that the events described were witnessed by the author personally, making it a primary source. **[Sourcing]**
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