



LESSON PLAN: PRIMARY SOURCE PERSPECTIVES ON THE CIVIL WAR

High School (9-12)

OVERVIEW

Arlington National Cemetery is the final resting place of thousands of service members and military family members, each with a unique perspective on American history and the military. In this lesson, students will use primary sources written by individuals connected to Arlington National Cemetery to examine different perspectives on the Civil War. Students will use short biographical sketches to figure out who wrote each primary source, and then participate in a class discussion.

Terminology Note: During the Civil War, the U.S. Army was often referred to as the Union Army or the Northern Army. In this lesson, the term U.S. Army is used because the “Union Army” was the U.S. Army – the same army that Congress established in 1789 and that still exists today.

Estimated time: 2 class periods or 1 class period + homework

STANDARDS

National Council for the Social Studies

- NCSS.D2.His.4.9-12: Analyze complex and interacting factors that influenced the perspectives of people during different historical eras.
- NCSS.D2.His.5.9-12: Analyze how historical contexts shaped and continue to shape people’s perspectives.
- NCSS.D2.His.8.9-12: Analyze how current interpretations of the past are limited by the extent to which available historical sources represent perspectives of people at the time.
- NCSS.D2.His.10.9-12: Detect possible limitations in various kinds of historical evidence and differing secondary interpretations.
- NCSS.D2.His.14.9-12: Analyze multiple and complex causes and effects of events in the past.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Students will match primary sources to their writers by using context clues.
- Students will draw conclusions about different peoples’ experiences during the Civil War using the content of primary sources.
- Students will reflect on the strengths and limitations of learning about historical events from primary sources.



RESOURCES NEEDED

- Primary Source Perspectives packet

LESSON ACTIVITIES

Introduction: 5 minutes

- Introduce the lesson by explaining that the Civil War affected Americans from every walk of life, not just the service members who fought. However, different groups were affected in different ways, each with their own concerns and perspectives.
- To study history through these different perspectives, historians use primary sources: documents, images, and other artifacts from the past that offer firsthand information on events and experiences as they were happening at the time.
- In this lesson, students will read a collection of primary sources from individuals connected to the Civil War and Arlington National Cemetery. Arlington National Cemetery has a special connection to the Civil War, as it was established in 1864 to accommodate the ever-growing number of soldiers dying in the Washington, D.C. area.

Primary Sources Matching: 60 minutes or homework

- Provide students the Primary Source Perspectives packet, containing primary sources and short biographic sketches of the following people:
 - William Henry Christman
 - Cornelia Hancock
 - Milton Holland
 - John Rodgers Meigs
 - Montgomery Cunningham Meigs
 - Wesley Norris
 - William Henry Singleton
 - Sarah Thompson
- Instruct students to match each primary source to its writer. They should look for clues about the writer like:
 - Man or woman?
 - White or African American?
 - Educated or not educated?
 - Soldier or not a soldier?
 - What events does the writer mention?
- Note that as they read, they may notice misspellings, poor grammar, or question marks where the transcriber could not understand what had been originally written. Consider how these



mistakes reflect the time these sources were written. What it would have been like to write before the days of spell-check or even public schooling?

- Answers:
 - Primary Source 1: Cornelia Hancock
 - Primary Source 2: Milton Holland
 - Primary Source 3: William Christman
 - Primary Source 4: John Rodgers Meigs
 - Primary Source 5: Montgomery Meigs
 - Primary Source 6: Wesley Norris
 - Primary Source 7: Sarah Thompson
 - Primary Source 8: William Henry Singleton

Class Discussion: 45 minutes

- Lead a class discussion about the primary sources using the following questions:
 - How was learning about the Civil War from primary source perspectives different than learning about it from your textbook?
 - Wesley Norris' account is the only surviving record of his words, and they were written down by someone else. By comparison, the Library of Congress has 11,000 items in its collection of Montgomery Meigs' papers. How do you think differences like this affect our understanding of history? Whose perspectives do we learn about more often?
 - Milton Holland and Sarah Thompson both mentioned problems with receiving pay. How do you think those issues reflected their standing in society at that time?
 - John Rodgers Meigs writes about wishing some people would take more interest in the war. Which of these primary sources do you think would have inspired more people to care, and why?
 - The people who participated in the Civil War had different motivations for doing so. Based on these primary sources, what do you think some of those motivations were?
 - Which primary sources were most difficult for you to understand? Why? Was it the spelling and grammar, or were you missing context to understand who or what the writer was discussing? How do you think historians face these challenges?
 - What additional sources or perspectives would you have liked to have? What do you think you could have learned from those?

LESSON EXTENSIONS

- Explore additional letters from individuals in this lesson here:
 - Cornelia Hancock: Books *South after Gettysburg* and its reprint *Letters of a Civil War Nurse* contain Cornelia Hancock's wartime letters
 - Milton Holland: A short biography and additional letter from Milton Holland are available at <https://www.nps.gov/rich/learn/historyculture/holland.htm>



- John Rodgers Meigs: *A Civil War Soldier of Christ and Country: The Selected Correspondence of John Rodgers Meigs, 1859-64*, by Mary A. Giunta
- Montgomery Cunningham Meigs: The Library of Congress has a collection of Montgomery C. Meigs' papers - <https://www.loc.gov/collections/montgomery-c-meigs-papers/about-this-collection>
- William Henry Singleton: The rest of William Singleton's memoir *Recollections of My Slavery Days* is available online at <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/singleton/singleton.html>
- Sarah Thompson: Duke University has a collection of Sarah E. Thompson's papers - <https://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/scriptorium/thompson/>

PLANNING A VISIT TO ARLINGTON NATIONAL CEMETERY?

Most of the primary sources in this lesson were written by individuals who are buried at Arlington National Cemetery. You can use the ANC Explorer app to visit their graves, or complete the Civil War Walking Tour to learn about even more perspectives on the war.

Gravesites:

- William Christman: Section 27, Grave 19
- Milton Holland: Section 23, Grave 21713
- John Rodgers Meigs: Section 1, Grave 1-SH
- Montgomery Cunningham Meigs: Section 1, Grave 1-EH
- Sarah Thompson: Section 1, Grave 1261-WH

PRIMARY SOURCES

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