



In Their Own Words: Civil War Lesson Plan

Topic:

- The Civil War
- Personal Experiences “in their own words”

Essential Question: How was the Civil War experienced by the American population? How can primary sources illuminate the experiences of individuals including Soldiers, nurses, or civilians who lived through the Civil War?

Grade Level: 9-12

Time: 1-2 class periods

Summary: The Civil War transformed the United States and reshaped the political, social, and economic make-up of 19th century America. The secession of the South divided the country in two, transforming the country in a span of 4 years. Yet, it is hard to grasp the profound impacts the war had on individual Soldiers and civilians. How can we better understand such impacts? Further, how can we use primary documents to illuminate different perspectives?

Learning Objectives:

At the conclusion of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Read, interpret, and analyze primary source documents (particularly letters).
- Summarize the variety of attitudes and opinions from those who experienced the Civil War.
- Gain a better understanding of the Civil War as a national conflict and historical moment.

Historical Context:

From 1861 through 1865, the United States was divided. Eleven southern states seceded from the Union December 20, 1860 due to grievances with the federal government, including the abolition of slavery. While the South fought to establish themselves as independent from the north, the Union Army fought to maintain a “United States.” The impact of the Civil War touched almost every aspect of American life. Millions of Soldiers fought in the war and hundreds of thousands died for both causes, making the Civil War America’s bloodiest war. Thousands of people were displaced from their homes and economic hardships impacted both individuals and businesses. The far reaching cultural and economic impacts of the Civil War influenced how both civilians and Soldiers viewed the conflict.

While many in the south were loyal to the idea of the Confederate states, Union Soldiers and sympathizers were devoted to maintaining the Union. Many people were caught in between both sentiments while others did not have a strong opinion one way or another. The diverse opinions show that there was no “one” viewpoint regarding the Civil War. Instead, like many conflicts today, individuals came to view the Civil War based on a variety of factors such as class, gender, race, and location.



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Today, the attitudes, beliefs, and emotions of individuals who lived and experienced the Civil War can seem hard to imagine, generations after the conflict. Primary sources help fill in the gaps between the realities of what happened in the past and how people felt about those events. Ultimately, they can help us identify and empathize with human experiences.

Procedures:

Introduction:

- Present the brief biographies of the four letter writers living through the Civil War.
 1. Samuel Cabbie
 2. Robert Davidson Graham
 3. John Phillips Turner
 4. Rebecca Usher

Assignment:

- ***First impressions:*** Assign each student a letter and subsequent biography, or let them pick one of them. After giving each student a chance to read the letter, facilitate a brief discussion touching on some (or all) of the following:
 - Who is it written by? Who is it written to?
 - Is there a date? A location?
 - What is the attitude/emotion of the writer?
 - What is the purpose of the letter?
 - What is the letter implying or conveying to the receiver?
 - What does this letter reveal about the Civil War as a whole?
 - Can we better understand people living through the Civil War through this letter?
How?
 - How does the letter help portray a new perspective or new voice?
- ***Evaluation:*** After briefly discussing the attributes and importance of the letter, ask student to write out a response, in one of two ways:
 - Engage with one letter and deeply analyze both the biography and the letter. Write a letter from this same person's perspective, using the information from the biography. Ask yourself the following questions: has time passed? Is the war still ongoing? What sort of opinions does the writer hold? What else could you anticipate the letter writer asking for or expressing? What sort of major events did the individual participate in (according to the biography), and how do they feel about them?
 - Read all of the letters. After reading them all, think about what each letter writer did after the war— did they survive? Did they go home? Did they continue helping the government through reconstruction? What does their biography say that they did? Write a short obituary for each letter writer, looking back on their lives and accomplishments. Feel free to imagine details to fill in the blanks of their biographies, and hypothesize about their lives after the war.



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Further work:

- Visit the National Army Museum’s “Preserving the Nation” gallery. Find a compelling artifact owned by a Soldier. In an essay assignment or in a group discussion, consider the following questions:
 - What does this object reveal about the history of the Civil War? How does that information compare to what you might find in a book? What does the artifact convey about this Soldier’s individual experience? Think about the following in your response:
 - Does the artifact show use (is there wear and tear)?
 - Does the object inform what position or duty the Soldier might have had in the war?
 - When would the Soldier use the artifact?
 - Does the artifact have sentimental value? Practical value? Defensive value? What does its intended use say about the user?



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Civil War Letters

Letter 1: Samuel Cabble

Dear wife i have enlisted in the army i am now in the state of Massachussetts but before this letter reaches you i will be in North Carlinia and though great is the present national dificulties yet i look forward to a brighter day when i shall have the opertunity of seeing you in the full enjoyment of freedom i would like to no if you are still in slavery if you are it will not be long before we shall have crushed the system that now opreses you for in the course of three months you shall have your liberty. great is the outpouring of the colored people that is now rallying with the hearts of lions against that very curse that has seperated you an me yet we shall meet again and oh what a happy time that will be when this ungodly rebellion shall be put down and the curses of our land is trampled under our feet i am a soldier now and i shall use my utmost endeavor to strike at the rebellion and the heart of this system that so long has kept us in chains. write to me just as soon as you git this letter tell me... remain your own afectionate husband until death

Samuel Cabble

Source: Cabel, Samuel. Compiled Military Service Record of Samuel Cabble, 55th Massachusetts Infantry(Colored) Regiment, 1861-1865, War Department, Record and Pension Office, National Archives and Records Administration. ARC Identifier: 5757351



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Letter 2: Robert D. Graham

Petersburg Va
April 25th 1865

Dear Mother

Hearing of a chance opportunity to send a letter to N.C. I drop you a line I hope Jimmie ... had reached home before this and informed up that John and myself are also doing well. I have about recovered the entire use of my leg and havent thrown away my crutch yet as I do not wish to suffer any further from my wound, if possible. John is improving much more rapidly than either had expected ... The trip to Appomattox Court House injured me considerably, but as I before said I have almost entirely recovered. Shall start home by the first opportunity should like to get a horse and come through the country- it is so hard to find out when the rail roads will be in order Dave is still with me and anxious like myself to get home... Much love to Father sisters and brothers.

Your affectute son
R D Graham

Source: "Letter from Robert D. Graham to his mother, Susannah Sarah Washington." Folder 213, in the [William A. Graham Papers](#), #285, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel

Hill. <https://web.lib.unc.edu/civilwar/index.php/2015/04/25/25-april-1865/>



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Letter 3: John Philips Turner Jr.

Coals Mouth Kanawha State

September 2nd 1861

My Dear Ella

...I left Catlettsburg [Kentucky] a day or two after I wrote to you and got home without much difficulty except having to walk some thirty odd miles of the way. I found things greatly changed here, I can tell you, since I left. Three miles below here—at Coal Mountain—I came upon one of the famous “Masked Batteries,” but as Uncle Ben had charge of the men stationed here, they did not open fire on me, although I was from despised “Yankee Land.” ...After eating dinner with the men, I proceeded homeward. When I got to Valcoulon—the House Charley Tompkins lived in when you were here—I found the yard full of tents, which as well as the House, were occupied by Soldiers, ... Here were brothers Charley & Theodore, Thorny & Com. Thompson, Charley Tompkins and in fact nearly every one of my companions & acquaintances in the county—all Soldiers. It was the day after the battle at Scary – 2 ½ miles below here—and they were all in high spirits as they had been completely victorious in their first fight notwithstanding the enemy greatly outnumbered them... When I got home I found no one but Pa & Jimmie. Ma and my sisters, Cousin Dee and all Uncle Frank’s family, Aunt Lizzie & Willia and in fact all the ladies in the neighborhood had run off up the turnpike from fear of the Federal Soldiers, all being thoroughly convinced that their lives would hardly be safe when they came. ... You have no idea of the bitterness of feeling that exists here against the Yankees as all northerners are termed, and I believe they even hate the Unionists here more than the northerners. Cousin Dee and all my relations are astonished when I tell them I would have voted for the Union if I had been here at the election, but I suppose they think there is some slight excuse for me, as I have been living among the “barbarous” Yankees so long, and that I will come around all right after a while...

John Phillips Turner

Source: “John Philips Turner.” Describes Wartime West Virginia Service, September 2, 1861.” UVA Unionists, John L. Nau III Center for Civil War History, University of Virginia, June 17, 2021. <http://community.village.virginia.edu/unionist/node/798>



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Letter 4: Rebecca Usher

U. S. A. Gen. Hospital,
Chester . Penn.
Friday Dec 5th, 1862
Dear Ellen,

I have not time this morning to answer your letter but will only give you a few commissions for Mat's barrel. We need flannel shirts more than anything. Tobacco is very much needed & Louise thinks you might beg a box of Mr Charles Rogers. I do not know but a box is too much to ask from one person. We do not want to beg on too large a scale. but it is pitiful to see men who left independent homes, humiliated to the necessity of begging a pipe full of tobacco. Every day they came down by dozens to Mrs Tyler kitchen asking for a little tobacco, until her small store was entirely exhausted, & I do not know what the poor fellows do now. There are many among them who have received no pay from Government for eleven months, & nearly all of them are four or five months without pay. Smoking tobacco seems to be most in demand. We want too some old novels, histories or biographies for the men. Louise thinks perhaps you might get some of Alice Prebble & I did not know but Bob Bradley might have some that he did not value himself which would serve to amuse the Soldiers. Was delighted to get yours & Ellie's Letter & will answer them as soon as possible. Have not yet had any ward assigned so have not given out your presents yet.

Love to all,
Bep .
Louise & Miss Newhall are
perfectly well & send love to you.

Source: Usher, Rebecca. Rebecca Usher on trip to begin nursing work, 1862. Rebecca Usher papers (Coll. 9, Box ¼). Collections of the Maine Historical Society, Portland, Maine. Caution-
<https://www.mainememory.net/artifact/5481>



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Biographies

Samuel Cabble

Samuel Cabble was born enslaved in approximately 1841 in Brunswick, Missouri on a plantation owned by Robert Cabble.

In 1862, Samuel Cabble escaped enslavement on June 5, 1863, he enlisted in Company G, 55th Massachusetts Infantry of the United States Colored Troops (USCT). At the time of his enlistment, he was 21 years old and stood 5 foot 8 inches tall with brown hair and grey eyes and listed his occupation as a waiter.

A few months later, he wrote a letter home to his wife and mother, who were still enslaved in Missouri, informing them of his whereabouts and future plans. Cabble wrote that his regiment would deploy to North Carolina to “strike at the rebellion and the heart of this system that so long has kept us in chains.” The letter never reached its intended recipient. Robert Cabble confiscated the letter before it reached its final destination. Robert used the letter to apply for federal compensation that gave up to \$300 to border state slave holders who freed slaves for service in the U.S. Army. While there is no evidence that Robert ever received compensation, the letter survived in his application package.

The 55th Infantry Regiment trained at Camp Meigs in Readville, Massachusetts before deploying to the Carolinas. The regiments saw action in South Carolina, serving as advance scouts who were sent ahead of the main fighting force to provide reconnaissance and dig trenches. They participated in the Battle of James Island and Honey Hill in South Carolina. While fighting in the Carolinas, a cannon discharged injured Samuel Cabble’s leg. He continued to serve despite his injury. On August 29, 1865, Cabble was honorably discharged from the Army in Charleston, South Carolina. In his discharge paperwork, under remarks, it states “Free.”

Following the war, Cabble returned to Missouri to reunite with his wife. The Emancipation Proclamation, enacted on January 1, 1863, abolished slavery in states that had seceded from the Union. The ratification of the 13th amendment in December 1865 abolished slavery in the United States and the 14th amendment, passed a few months later, guaranteed full citizenship rights for all persons. In Missouri, Cabble and his wife legally married as United States citizens. Between 1865 and 1891, the Cabble family moved to Denver, Colorado and had one son, Samuel Jr. In 1891, Cabble applied for and received a military pension. By this time he was likely living in Leavenworth, Kansas in the Western Branch of the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers (now the Dwight D. Eisenhower VA Medical Center). Cabble died in 1905 and is buried in Leavenworth National Cemetery.

Works Cited

Cabel, Samuel. Compiled Military Service Record of Samuel Cabble, 55th Massachusetts Infantry (Colored) Regiment, 1861-1865, War Department, Record and Pension Office, National Archives and Records Administration. ARC Identifier: 5757351



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Robert Graham

Robert Graham was one of ten children born to William Graham and Susannah Sarah Washington in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina. Graham grew up in a wealthy and influential family. His father was the former governor of North Carolina and U.S. secretary of the Navy. At one time, the family owned the Vesuvius Plantation in Catawba Springs, North Carolina. The family accumulated their wealth through the iron produced on the plantation. Graham attended one year at the University of North Carolina in 1859-60 but withdrew from the university at the end of the term. In anticipation of the coming war, Graham was among the 80 students who withdrew at the end of the semester.

Following North Carolina's secession from the Union, Graham enlisted in the Company D, 56th North Carolina Regiment which was comprised of men from the towns surrounding Raleigh. The unit was first assigned to reconnaissance in North Carolina towns between Goldsboro, Wilmington, and Tarboro.

Graham wrote to his father about his military experience in November 1862

"We left that place last Saturday crossing Roanoke River that evening at Hills Ferry... Next day we marched within a mile of Murfreesboro... Next morning crossed the Ferry and marched 6 miles to this place. We slept in our tents last night for the first time in 18 days. We are now in seven or eight miles of a camp of the enemy some 18 or 20,000 strong. We hope to hold them in check with our present force..."

Between 1862 and 1865, Graham rose to rank of major and injured his leg at the Battle of Fort Stedman during the Siege of Petersburg. In April 1865, he wrote to his mother about the end of the war and his health up to that point. Graham wrote,

"I have about recovered the entire use of my leg and havent [sic] thrown away my crutch yet as I do not wish to suffer any further from my wound, if possible... Shall start home by the first opportunity should like to get a horse and come through the country- it is so hard to find out when the rail roads will be in order..."

Graham returned to North Carolina and resumed farming in Mecklenburg County. He graduated in 1868 from the University of North Carolina where he studied law and was admitted to the bar. In 1884 he was named secretary of the U.S. Civil Service Commission. From 1888 to 1898 he was the principal examiner of titles and contracts at the U.S. General Land Office (now the Bureau of Land Management). Graham died in 1905 and was buried in the Hillsborough Old Town Cemetery in North Carolina.

Works Cited

"Letter, 21 November 1862 from Robert D. Graham to his father William A. Graham." [William A. Graham Papers, #285, Southern Historical Collection](#), Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. <https://web.lib.unc.edu/civilwar/index.php/2012/11/21/21-november-1862/>



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“Letter from Robert D. Graham to his mother, Susannah Sarah Washington.” Folder 213, in the [William A. Graham Papers](https://web.lib.unc.edu/civilwar/index.php/2015/04/25/25-april-1865/), #285, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. <https://web.lib.unc.edu/civilwar/index.php/2015/04/25/25-april-1865/>



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John Philips Turner Jr.

John Philips Turner Jr. was born in Coalsmouth, Virginia in what is now St. Albans, West Virginia in 1838. His father, John Philips Turner, was born into a wealthy shipbuilding family in Pembroke, Massachusetts. In Virginia, Turner's father was a farmer enslaved nine people. Turner spent much of his childhood living between Virginia and Massachusetts.

In 1857, he enrolled in the University of Virginia where he studied Latin, math, and modern languages. However, he withdraw two years later in 1859.

Prior to September 1861, little is known about Turner's life. At the time, he wrote a letter to his future wife Martha about the changes taking place in Coalsmouth since the start of the war. He wrote,

"I left Catlettsburg [Kentucky] a day or two after I wrote to you and got home without much difficulty excepting having to walk some thirty odd miles of the way. I found things greatly changed here..."

He ended his letter saying,

"You have no idea of the bitterness of feeling that exists here against the Yankees as all northerners are termed, and I believe they even hate the Unionists here more than the northerners. Cousin Dee and all my relations are astonished when I tell them I would have voted for the Union if I had been here at the election, but I suppose they think ... that I will come around all right after a while.."

Turner did come around, but probably not in the manner that his cousin expected. Less than a year later Turner enlisted in the Union Army on April 19, 1862. He was assigned to Company B, 80th West Virginia Militia Regiment as a private. Family tradition stated that he served as a quartermaster. The regiment was comprised of men from Coalsmouth. They took part in the 1862 Kanawha Valley Campaign and saw action in the Battle of Charleston, West Virginia. On March 1, 1864, Turner married Martha Eldridge "Ellie" Taylor in Kentucky. After the war, the family returned to Coalsmouth before settling in Hamilton, Ohio where he was elected mayor. Turner died in 1928 in Seattle, Washington.

Works Cited

"John Philips Turner." UVA Unionists, John L. Nau III Center for Civil War History, University of Virginia, June 17, 2021. <http://community.village.virginia.edu/unionist/node/619>

"John Philips Turner." Describes Wartime West Virginia Service, September 2, 1861." UVA Unionists, John L. Nau III Center for Civil War History, University of Virginia, June 17, 2021. <http://community.village.virginia.edu/unionist/node/798>



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Rebecca Usher

Rebecca Usher was born in 1821 in Hollis, Maine. Usher grew up in an upper middle class and influential family. Her father owned a successful sawmill. He also served as a delegate in Maine's state constitutional covenant and state senator for his district.

Usher received a basic education as a child most likely at a local girls' seminary. In 1836, she was sent to the Ursuline Covenant at Three Rivers in Quebec, Canada where she spent four years studying and teaching French.

Usher obtained a nursing position in 1862 at the U.S. Army General Hospital in Chester, Pennsylvania. The hospital cared for over 900 patients in wards of 60-70 patients. Within months of arrival, she was assigned to manage her own ward. In a letter to her sister, Usher wrote, *"I am delighted with hospital life... feel like a bird in the air or a fish in the sea, as if I had found my native element."*

Usher had no medical training. Her duties were mainly as caretaker and companion to wounded Soldiers. She supervised meals, allocated clothing, and distributed supplies. In 1863, Usher took leave to visit Washington, D.C. She visited the White House and wrote to her brother-in-law *"to our great disappointment the father of his country and brother of all mankind was not present... We were however introduced to Mrs. Lincoln."*

A year later in the winter of 1864, Usher signed on with the Maine Camp Hospital Association as a nurse in City Point Hospital, Virginia. The organization's mission was to serve the needs of the "Maine Boys." Based in Maine, the Association collected supplies and contributions from smaller aid societies throughout the state. They sent their supplies to Soldiers in the field as well as individuals to ensure the supplies reached the intended recipients.

In City Point, Usher stayed at the Maine Agency. A three-room dwelling with a reading room for Soldiers, a combination sleeping room and storage space for the nurses, and a kitchen pantry. Usher lived and worked in this building with two other nurses. She spent her days visiting and caring for Maine Soldiers.

It is unknown when Rebecca left City Point. She was back home in Hollis by 1865 because she wrote in a letter to a friend about a visit to meet General Grant. *"We all went into Portland to see Gen. Grant. & shook hands with him at City Hall..."*

Usher spent the remainder of her life in Maine until her death in 1912.

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Usher, Rebecca. *Rebecca Usher on trip to begin nursing work, 1862*. Rebecca Usher papers (Coll. 9, Box 1/4). Maine Historical Society, Portland, Maine.

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Usher, Rebecca. *Rebecca Usher diary, 1865*. Rebecca Usher papers (Coll. 9, Box 1/1). Maine Historical Society, Portland, Maine.

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Usher, Rebecca. *Rebecca Usher on Grant and Chamberlain, Bar Mills, 1865*. Rebecca Usher papers (Coll. 9 Box 1/7). Maine Historical Society, Portland, Maine.

<https://www.mainememory.net/artifact/89917>