

# Civil War Letters: Text-Based Documents as a Primary Source

By Nori Lustig  
Honorable Mention, 2012-2013 Civil War Trust Best Lesson Plan Contest

**Grade Level:** Middle School

**Approximate Length of Time:** Approximately two 45 minute class periods.

**Goal:** Students will utilize text based primary source documents to respond to the guiding question “Did soldiers on both sides of the war experience the same level of hardships during the American Civil War?”

## **Objectives:**

Using the Text-based Documents (Civil War Letters) students will be able to:

1. Complete a graphic organizer using evidence from the letters to identify the experiences of Confederate and Union soldiers.
2. Create two summary statements for each letter that include a claim and evidence from the source.
3. Write a paragraph that answers the guiding question.

## **Materials:**

1. Test Based Primary Source Investigation Tool (graphic organizer).
2. Letters written by Confederate and Union Soldiers to their families.

Excerpts of letters- see attachments

Two Confederate Letters

- Thomas Jefferson
- Joseph Milton

Two Union Letters

- Robert W. Christie
- John Miller

3. Sources for letters: <http://civilwararchive.com/LETTERS/letters.htm>

## **Vocabulary:**

Primary Source - a document, account, or artifact created during a historic event, which is then used to study that event or time period.

Secede- the leave or withdraw.

Union-the states that remained loyal to the United States and Abraham Lincoln in 1861.

Confederate-The Confederacy was the states that seceded from the United States in 1861. A Confederate soldier was a member of the Confederacy.

### **Anticipatory Set/Hook:**

Bring in a collection of primary source documents that include birth certificates, dairy entries, a driver license, and passport. Give each table a few samples to look at. Ask your students "What do these all have in common?" Give students some time to discuss the question in their groups. Discuss student responses with the whole class.

Teacher explains: Primary sources take many forms. In our last lesson we evaluated the importance of photographs during the Civil War as a lens to the past.

Over the next few days we will be using letters written by both Confederate and Union soldiers to their families to compare their experiences during the American Civil War.

### **Procedure:**

1. The teacher will model how to use the letters to complete the graphic organizer. The teacher will start with a small portion of the letter to model the procedure.
2. Together with the class the teacher will read a section of a Confederate or Union letter.
3. The teacher will ask, "What does this letter tell you about the experiences of a soldier?" (Teacher will remind students to record positive experiences of the soldiers as well as the hardships.)
4. Students record their ideas on the graphic organizer.
5. The answer to the question is the claim.
6. Students will create a summary sentence beginning with the claim and adding the stated reason for the claim, connecting the two ideas with the word "because." This forces students to use the evidence from the letters to support the claim.
7. Students will work in groups to follow the model to complete the graphic organizer and create summary sentences. There will be a total of two summary sentences for each letter for a total of eight sentences.

### **Closure:**

Students will share the summary statements they created. Using the summary statements students will draw conclusions that address the guiding question: Did soldiers on both sides of the war experience the same level of hardships during the American Civil War?

### **Assessment:**

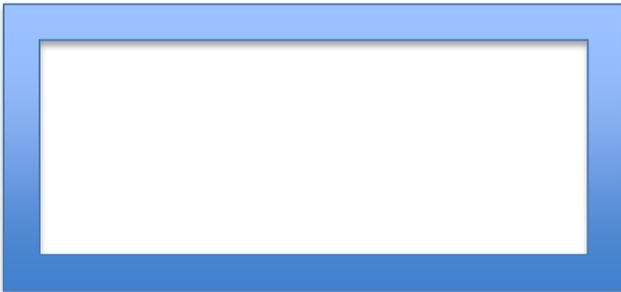
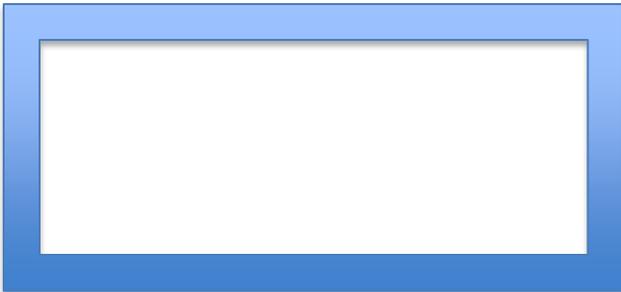
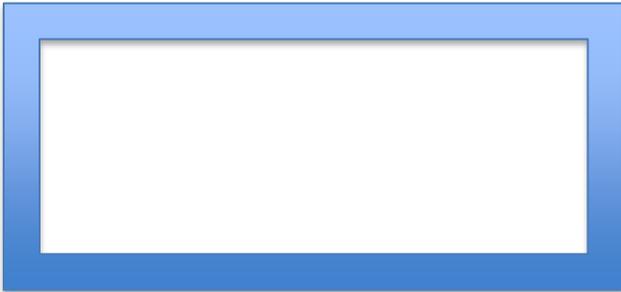
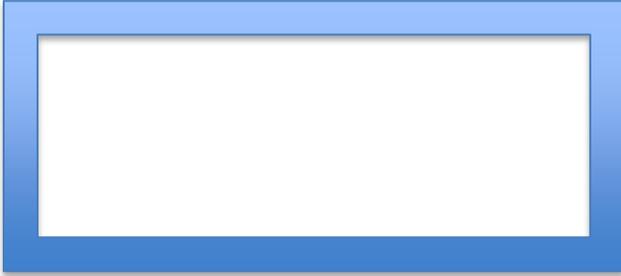
Students will write a three-paragraph essay that answers the guiding question using their summary sentences.

# Text Based Primary Source Investigation Tool

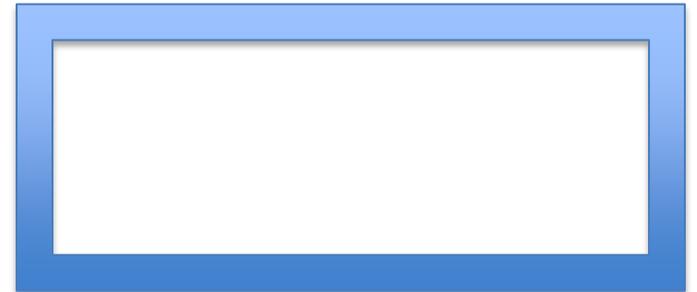
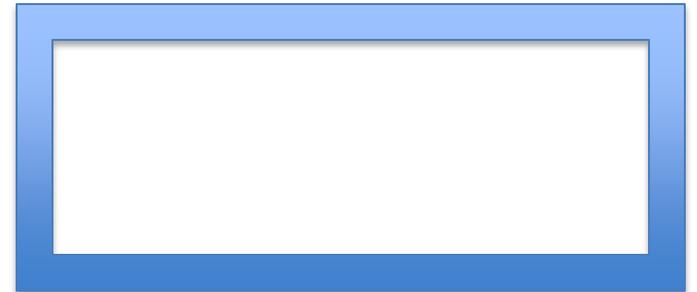
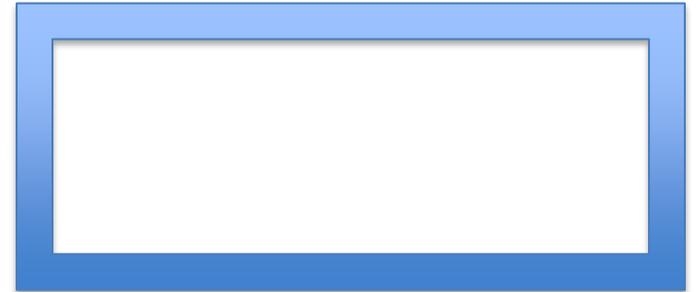
Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Confederate Evidence



## Union Evidence



## REASONS

Did soldiers on both sides of the war experience the same level of hardship during the American Civil War?

# John Miller:

## A Union Letter

Near Marietta, Georgia

June 26<sup>th</sup>, 1864

Dear Father,

I received your letter of the 12<sup>th</sup> inst. This morning, you may be sure I was glad to get it, as I had not received a letter from home since I was at Chattanooga last April. You have no idea how much good it does a soldier to get a letter from home and how eagerly he looks for the mail.

We have a poor chance to write. Besides, writing material is very scarce and hard to obtain at any price. I paid 10 cents for the sheet I'm writing in. I wish you would send me a package of paper and envelopes, and a few stamps for often when I have a chance to write I have nothing to write with.

My health is excellent, we have had some very hard times. Now it is awful hot, hard marching. The rainy weather and short rations have made a great many sick men. I have frequently had nothing for 36 hours but a cup of coffee and a few green apples.

We have had some fighting to do lately. Last Friday week the 17<sup>th</sup> we attacked the rebel lines and drove them about 3 miles. On the evening of the twenty 2<sup>nd</sup> the rebels charged our lines but they went back faster than they came up. The next day eight hundred rebels were buried just in front of our lines. In two charges the rebs have made lately, on the 20<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup>, the rebs lost about 5 or 6 thousand men.

The boys are all well. Capt. Cowgill is hated by the whole company, he is a scoundrel. Joe Donohue is the favorite not only of the company but of the regt. Well I must close, give my love to all. Write often.

John Miller

# Joseph Milton Elkins:

## A Confederate Letter

Joseph Milton Elkins was a private in Company E, 49th Virginia Infantry Regiment, C.S.A. After standing guard duty at a field hospital following the First Battle of Manassas, Joseph, along with the remainder of the Confederate Army, bivouacked at Centreville and Manassas during the fall and winter of 1861. Joseph was stationed at Fort Pickens. The following letters cover that period of time from July to December 1861 and describe camp life in the Confederate Army. Joseph frequently wrote home to his wife for supplies including buckwheat, whiskey and blankets. Joseph was shot in the leg in action around the famous Dunkard (Dunker) Church. He was evacuated to Virginia where he died November 10, 1862, of gangrene.

July 21, 1861

Camp Pickens

Dear Wife,

I take this opportunity of writing you these few lines to inform you that I am well at this present time and when these few lines come to hand they may find you enjoying the same health. We had another great battle Sunday, it commenced at 6 o'clock and ended at 6 o'clock, it was the hardest battle that was ever fought in America. They had 10 to our one--we conquered them, we lost about 800 in killed and wounded. The Yankees lost about 5,000 and we took 1,300 prisoners and 125 horses, baggage wagons and 64 pieces of cannon besides a great many things. I was not in the battle but could hear the report of the cannons which was in very plain view and we was in site of the battlefield, it was a sad and dreary day. I never had spent such a sabbath in my life before I have seen the horror of war.

I had to stand sentinel [duty] at the hospital door were I could see all the wounded soldiers. I stood from Sunday 12 o'clock till Monday night. -- I had to be up all night to guard the wounded--it was the saddest thing I ever saw to hear the moans of the wounded and dying. I saw the surgeons operating on them, it made me shed tears to see how they suffered, some had to have both of their arms cut off and some their legs. I saw all the surgeons operations, it was a distressing sight to see them how they suffered--we like to got old Scott, [General Winfield Scott] they got his coat. We have completely routed them.

Joseph M. Elkins

# Robert W. Christie:

## A Union Letter

A two part letter written by Private Robert W. Christie just a month after enlisting in Company E of the [29th Indiana Infantry](#) on September 26, 1861. Private Christie would die in Nashville on May 15, 1862.

1 Mile from Camp Nevin on Picket guard 12 M.

Dear Parents

I take this opportunity to let you know that I am well at present and hope you are the same today. The days are warm but the nights are cool but we have plenty of cover & blankets and straw to lay on the health of the camp is good by taking in consideration the number that is in camp 50,000 men. We get plenty of apples from those that are takeing them to camp to sell when we stop them for their passes they give us apples by the wholesale. He also says that we will be at home by New Years but perhaps he does not know I am very well satisfied not home sick some of the boys are.

Write soon and do not put it off Direct the same and if we leave it will follow.

I remain your fond and affectionate Son

Robert

Camp Nevin Oct. 30th/61

Since writing the above letter I have received your letter and was glad to hear that you was well. The man that was shot belonged to the 30<sup>th</sup> Reg and was on picket when he was ordered to another place. The night was dark and he did not see the guard nor him speak. Our regiment leaves tomorrow with the rest of the camp for Green river the rebel camp do not expect to have to fight but may our scouts say there is near 30,000 at that camp between there and Bowling Green. But we go prepared to fight if necessary. Do not expect to stay long at one place as the Gen says he wants to winter in Nashville.

No more at present. There was stamps in the letter and was glad to get them.

I remain your fond and loving son

Robt Christie

# Thomas Jefferson Wright:

## A Confederate Letter

The following letter was written to James Spence Wright from his brother Thomas Jefferson Wright on 10/28/1861. There are some words that are not able to be determined from the letter, therefore, you will see lines representing the number of words in the sentence I could not make out. James was wounded at Cross Keys, Virginia on August 27, 1862. He died from those wounds on August 30, 1862 at Grotons, Virginia. Thomas Jefferson Wright died of Smallpox at General Hospital in Richmond on November 25, 1862.

Price George County, VA October 28, 1861

Mr. J. S. Wright

Dear Brother

It is with pleasure that I seat myself this evening to write a letter and answer to your kind letter which came here a few days ago and was a great pleasure to me to hear from you. This leaves me in good health hoping it may find you enjoying the same blessing. We never saw nor heard tell of a yankee while we were out. Our men had a big fight last Monday at Leesburg a little town about twenty miles from here. We whipped them again and that badly the \_\_\_\_ of killed, wounded and taken prisoners on the Yankee side is said to be at least 1200 about 600 of the North wer [were] taken prisoners. 100 killed and 300 wounded besides several hundred drowned while crosfing [crossing]the Potomac River.

Our loss is estimated at about 150. There was twelve thousand more of the enemy on the opposite side of the river but wer [were] beat back from crossing by the heavy fire from our men. There has not been any fighting here about us yet and I dont know when there will be. It is getting very cold here and it is make a camp life and thin cover of a night rather uncomfortable we suffer with cold nights. Our clothes have not come yet but I suppose they are on the road.

Will has had the Yellow Jaundice and now he has got the Mumps. There is several more of the company got them. I am getting along very well if I was well of the sore eyes. I have to (force?) open every new and them but you know that is a small matter. Well Spence you wrote that you was going to send us some chestnuts and a bottle of Brandy. I will me much better pleased to see the chestnuts. You must write to me when you get this. I remain your brother. T. J. Wright. Next time you write back to me if you can.