

Researching Local Civil War Soldiers Lesson Plan

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Grade: 8

Length of Time: Approximately 2-5 weeks

Goals:

The students will use knowledge gained from this research project to connect national issues of the past with their local people, places, and events.

Objectives

1. Given access to important historical documents, the students will be able to identify and describe in written form specific Civil War soldiers from their area.
2. Given a census from their area, students will be able to use the historic document to answer questions on a National Archives document and orally answer questions about what kind of people lived there at the time of the Civil War.
3. Given research on an individual soldier the students will be able to put their findings together in a presentation format and present the material orally to others.
4. Using internet and historical resources, students will be able to write about and discuss their area's history.

Materials Used:

1. Census data from your area (often available from your local town office, historical society, or possibly even online)
2. Beers Atlas Maps (available from local historical societies and online, at sites such as www.old-maps.com)
3. NARA Document Analysis Form with additional town questions
4. Soldier Inventory Worksheet

5. Census Activity Rubric
6. Civil War Project Rubric

Anticipatory Set/Hook:

What does the Civil War have to do with our town? Did anything important happen in this area during the Civil War?

Procedure:

Teacher Preparation Activities:

1. Find a list of soldiers who enlisted from your town and select a group for your students to research. (We discovered a list of Civil War soldiers by reading the town history and going to the town offices to look through their files. Working with a local historian or visiting the local historical society is very helpful and can save you a lot of time.)

- a. When choosing soldiers, identify individuals who might have current local connections, such as names of students in your class or recognizable place names. Also, pick soldiers from different regiments, ranks, and duties to ensure a variety of possible research topics. Finally, select soldiers who can be found in the census, thereby ensuring at least some immediate connection between soldiers and the census activity described below.

- b. At this point, there are three other sources to explore:

- First, it is helpful to do a quick check of the town's vital statistic information. Can you find birth, marriage, and/or death information on any of the soldiers? Such data will be helpful for you and students later on.
- Secondly, does your town have burial information for some or all of the cemeteries? An inventory of where soldiers are buried might help you choose a certain soldier.
- Finally, tell your students about this upcoming project. Do any of them have letters, documents, stories, etc. related to your town and the Civil War? Perhaps a student would be willing to write a letter to the editor of the local newspaper asking for help in finding out more about your town's history.

- c. Explore local resources that can be used to help gather information. For example, with the help of a Teaching American History Grant organization called the Flow of History, a historian was able help with some of the initial information gathering such as finding a local source of soldiers who are credited to Hartford. Through their professional development

opportunities, time was found to do more research with additional help. So, if there are local organizations in your area, ask them to help!

d. Once this preliminary exploration has been completed and soldiers chosen organize students into pairs and then give them a soldier to research.

Classroom Activities:

1. Use the 1860 Census Data for your town. (two or three 45 minute periods). Census data is either available from individual towns, or it may be found online in your area. Search around and see what you can find. Contacting your local Historical Society can be very helpful.

a. Working with a partner, have students look at the census as a whole. Ask: “what do you notice?” share and discuss answers.

b. Have students work together to complete the NARA written document form. While this is very basic, I’ve found that 8th graders have little knowledge of documents like the census. This form makes them look at the census carefully and make some basic assumptions about who and why this is done every ten years.

c. Once this sheet has been completed and gone over together, it is time for some larger questions. Example questions: What do we learn about our town by looking at our census? Who lived there? What different kinds of people, jobs, lifestyles, etc. were there in 1860? Was there a significant African-American or Native American population? How can you tell? What did women do? Who lived together? What impact do you think the war had on this community? Depending on what your students notice and how detailed the census taker was, you can form individualized questions for your town. The census can provide insight to all kinds of social, political, and economic history.

d. At this point, handing out copies of the Beers Atlas map of your town is helpful. Students can then take names from the census and find them on the map. In some cases, you might be able to follow the census taker’s path as he/she went from house to house. For students whose soldier is in the census, they should be able to find where he lived. Remind these students to document this information because it will be helpful later in their research.

e. Make sure to allow time for your students to simply peruse and wonder over the map and census.

2. Research individual soldiers, their role in the community and in the Civil War (at least five 45 minute periods).

a. To find out more about their individual soldier, have students begin with the web site “Civil War Soldiers and Sailors System” (<http://www.itd.nps.gov/cwss/>). Other websites also exist that may help students research your particular area. The provided site has basic information about every soldier. For those students who only find enlistment data, for every regiment there is a chronology of when, where, and how each participated in the war. Thus, if students can’t research the soldier himself, they will be able to focus on the regiment’s activities instead. For example, students could research battles where their soldiers fought. What happened at this location? What is the status of the battlefield? Is it well preserved? Could they one day visit the site or might it disappear? Another possibility would be to focus on daily life of a certain duty, role, or position within the army, such as a surgeon or drummer boy. In this type of situation, students can extrapolate their individual soldier’s experience without specific primary documents.

b. During this research phase would also be a good time to bring students in very small groups to the town offices to look for vital data (of course call and make arrangements ahead of time!). Your preliminary research or the help of a town clerk or historian will save time. While visiting the offices, students can use primary resources such as birth, marriage, and death records, town meeting notes, wills, inventories, tax information, etc. Some or all of this data can really create a picture of a whole person who spent part of their life as a soldier.

c. Of course, much of the students’ research will be done in the school library using what primary and secondary sources are available. Remember, the overall purpose will be for students to link local individuals with the national events they participated in during the Civil War.

3. Visit related places in your town (1-2 hours).

a. After looking at a period map of your town, reading a town history, and finding cemetery listings, you should have enough information to choose a few places to visit. Taking a two-hour bus or walking tour is fun and gives students an opportunity to see places they are already familiar with in a new light. Choose a cemetery. Find the gravestone of a Civil War soldier and have students make a grave rubbing (with permission from your local cemetery association). Stop by a home that you know a certain soldier lived in and discuss his life and participation in the war. Perhaps read a letter written by him, or visit the train depot and discuss who and what departed and arrived from that very spot. Stop at a church or parsonage where a ladies aid society collected bandages or other items to send to the US Sanitary Commission. Make the direct connection for your students. Allow them to touch, see, feel, and listen to the history of their town. Take pictures that you can post in your room.

b. Creating a “tour” or quest of the sites you visit could be another fun activity. Once you have visited the sites, go back to the classroom and ask students to create a tour brochure and/or a quest using riddles that will teach others about their town and the Civil War.

4. Bring it all together and present it to the class and possibly the public (allow at least five days after completing research to create the final product).

a. After all of the research has been done, have the students put their information into a final product. Posters, PowerPoint presentations, websites, scrapbooks, or display boards could show a timeline or a person’s life or time as a soldier, a family tree, the daily life of a surgeon, the places in town that are related to a soldier, a soldier’s participation in a particular battle, etc.

b. In addition, students should show how their research was conducted. In a notebook, students could include a bibliography, their notes, and/or a process paper describing their work over the last few weeks.

c. On the day the project is due, ask students to present their work orally for the rest of the class. For a more public forum, organize an evening Civil War Fair, in which all the work is displayed and parents, teachers, and community members (especially the historical society and town clerk) are invited. If you have also created a tour or quest, have students act as guides and lead the adults on a trip through town.

Closure:

Ask students if they thought using primary documents was difficult. Did they enjoy doing the work of a historian? Did this project make them feel closer to the town? Do they know more about the town now than before the project? Why do you think it is important to learn about individuals in order to understand a large historic event? Does it teach us anything new? What benefits do you receive from this type of research?

Assessment:

Students will successfully complete the presentation containing their data. Use the Census Activity Rubric and Civil War Project Rubric for grading guidelines.

Modification Ideas:

For students with special needs, I chose soldiers who I knew had plenty of primary and secondary sources readily available. In addition, the nature of the research depends on what

the student determines. Students with special needs can certainly be directed to a topic that fits their abilities.