

Contraband Camp Lesson Plan

HONORABLE MENTION, BEST LESSON PLAN CONTEST 2011-2012

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Contrabands of the Civil War

Grade level: High School

Approximate Length of Time: One, 90-minute class period

Goals:

Students will analyze the establishment of contraband camps and how they affected the post-Civil War life of former slaves.

Objectives:

1. The students will be able to define and discuss the term "freedom" and apply their personal definition to particular moments in history.
2. The student will identify and interpret primary source documents to increase understanding of events and life in the United States in the 1860s.
3. The student will identify costs and benefits of specific decisions made, including the consequences of the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, and lessons learned by former slaves living in the contraband camps.
4. The student will conduct research on Civil War contraband camps, analyze the reason for contraband camps and their living conditions, and locate contraband camps on a map of the United States.

Materials Used:

Materials can be downloaded with the lesson plan on the right side of this page.

Background information for teachers

Power Point presentation

Primary Document Analysis Handout

United States wall map (not downloadable)

Anticipatory Set/Hook:

Display slide from the Power Point, "Emancipation: What Does Freedom Mean?" Ask students to quickly write their idea of what freedom would mean to a slave hearing the word during the Civil War.

Procedure:

1. Allow students to read aloud some of their responses regarding the meaning of freedom to the slaves during the Civil War.
2. Using the Power Point and provided background information, explain the history of contraband camps.
3. Point out the location of Fort Monroe and Corinth on a map of the United States. Discuss the significance of the camps locations - what is going on in these areas during this time? Might this be a dangerous location? Was this an easy location for a former slave to reach?
4. Ask students to compare the descriptions of life in the contraband camps with their definition of freedom. Discuss - Do you think a contraband camp was "freedom?"
5. Ask the students if the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation had unintended consequences. *(Yes. No one had seriously considered what to do with thousands of escaping slaves.)*
6. Explain to the students that the contraband camps became the foundation for post-Civil War African-American neighborhoods and society. These camps facilitated the process that produced the rapid urbanization of the former slaves, most of whom had lived in rural areas.
7. As the students view the remaining slides of the Power Point, ask students to choose one of the photographs/cartoons and complete the primary document analysis sheet. You might want to divide the class into groups and assign each one of the slides to a group.

Closure:

Ask students to write a letter or diary entry from the point of view of any figure from the pictures. They may also choose to research Fort Monroe and write from the perspective of one of the fugitive

slaves that lived there. They may also choose a statue from the Corinth Contraband Camp for their assignment. The writing should explain the context of their figure within the setting, and include two factual points to support their explanation.

Assessment:

Use the rubric to evaluate primary document analysis and writing assignment.

Enrichment Activity:

Students may research other Civil War contraband camp sites.

Background Information for Teachers:

The Southern economy and military effort depended on slave labor. At the beginning of the war, some Union commanders thought they were supposed to return escaped slaves to their masters. But it seemed unreasonable to protect slavery while blockading Southern commerce and destroying Southern production. As one Congressman put it, the “slaves cannot be neutral. As laborers, if not as soldiers, they will be allies of the rebels, or of the Union.” The same Congressman and his fellow Radical Republicans put pressure on Lincoln to rapidly emancipate the slaves, whereas moderate Republicans came to accept gradual, compensated emancipation and colonization.

Lincoln issued his preliminary Emancipation Proclamation on September 22, 1862, and said that a final proclamation would be issued if his gradual plan based on compensated emancipation and voluntary colonization was rejected. The Proclamation became a symbol of the Union’s growing commitment to add emancipation to the Union’s definition of liberty. However, enslaved African Americans did not wait for Lincoln’s action before escaping and seeking freedom behind Union lines.

In 1861, at Fort Monroe in southeastern Virginia (present-day Hampton, Virginia), Brigadier General Benjamin Butler came into the custody of three slaves who had made their way across Hampton Roads from Confederate-occupied Norfolk County, Virginia, and presented themselves to the Union-held Fort Monroe. General Butler refused to return the escaped slaves to masters supporting the Confederacy, classifying them as “contraband”, although credit for first use of that terminology is sometimes credited elsewhere.

Prior to the War, the owners of the slaves would have been legally entitled to request their return as property and this would have in all likelihood occurred. However Virginia had just declared (by secession) that it no longer considered itself part of the United States. General Butler, who was educated as an attorney, took the position that, if Virginia considered itself a foreign power to the United States, then he was under no obligation to return the three men; he would instead hold them as “contraband of war”. While not truly free men yet, the three black men undoubtedly were satisfied to have their new status as “contraband” rather than slaves.

Secretary of the Navy Gideon Wells issued a directive on September 25, 1861, which gave “persons of color, commonly known as contrabands,” in the employment of the Union Navy, pay at the rate of \$10 a month and a full day’s ration. It was not until three weeks later the Union Army followed suit, paying male contrabands \$8 a month and females \$4 at Fort Monroe.

The word spread quickly among southeastern Virginia’s slave communities. While becoming a “contraband” did not mean full freedom, it was apparently seen by many slaves as at least a step in that direction. The day after Butler’s decision, many more escaped slaves also found their way to Fort Monroe appealing to become contraband. As the number of former slaves grew too large to be housed inside the Fort, the contrabands erected housing outside the crowded base. They called their new

settlement Grand Contraband Camp, which they nicknamed “Slabtown”. By the end of the war in April, 1865, an estimated 10,000 had applied to gain contraband status.

A contraband camp was also established at Corinth, Mississippi, and was considered a model camp by all who saw it. Corinth was a strategic rail center to both the Union and Confederate armies. Situated at the junction of the Memphis and Charleston and the Mobile and Ohio Railroads, Corinth first fell into Union hands in May, 1862, when General P.G.T. Beauregard withdrew to the south. In early October, 1862, the northerners repulsed a two-day Confederate attack and assured the continued Union control of western Tennessee and northern Mississippi. The Battle of Corinth was bloody and claimed hundreds of lives. But Corinth was not only a burial ground but also a birthplace—a birthplace of freedom for thousands of blacks.

For more than a year, from late 1862 to early 1864, the Contraband Camp at Corinth provided the first taste of non-slave life for many who had fled the plantations. John Eaton, the young chaplain whom General Grant chose to take charge of the blacks seeking refuge within Union lines, recorded that the camp was organized in November, 1862. Other sources indicate that General Grenville M. Dodge, commander of the Corinth district, actually authorized the camp several weeks earlier. In September, 1862, Dodge complained that Lincoln’s preliminary emancipation proclamation encouraged the Negroes to desert the plantations, and he established a separate camp for them even though the War Department had not yet sanctioned such a solution.

Corinth was superior to most other camps in organization, personnel and facilities. Initially the contrabands lived in old army tents, but they soon cut trees and erected log cabins. Later, they numbered all the houses and laid out streets. The freedmen also constructed several public buildings—a school, commissary, hospital, office and church. By 1863, it had become a well-organized village. The freedmen cultivated and sold cotton and vegetables in a progressive cooperative farm program. By May, 1863, the camp was making a clear profit of \$4,000 to \$5,000 from its enterprises. Between 2,500 and 6,000 slaves had made their way to the camp. By August, over 1,000 African American children and adults gained the ability to read through the efforts of various missionary organizations.

In January, 1864, General William T. Sherman ordered the Contraband Camp to be evacuated and its occupants be transported to Memphis, Tennessee.

Note regarding the slides for analysis:

Fort Monroe Doctrine political cartoon:

This highlights the movement of enslaved African Americans from lives in bondage to the hope of freedom as Union “contraband”. The poignancy of this cartoon comes from juxtaposing Butler’s decision with the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, when President James Monroe forbade European countries from colonization in the western hemisphere. This foreign policy decision established the United States

as the protector of the hemisphere. Similarly, Butler's decree and Congress's Confiscation Acts clearly established the Union forces as a protector of the runaway slaves.

The photograph, *Fugitive African Americans Fording the Rappahannock* depicts a group of African Americans actively engaged in seeking freedom for themselves by following the Union Army.

Waud drawing:

Alfred Waud photographed the contrabands and then prepared the drawing for the January 31, 1863 *Harper's Weekly*. He wrote the following to accompany the drawing: "There is something very touching in seeing these poor people coming into camp—giving up all the little ties that cluster about home, such as it is in slavery, and trustfully throwing themselves on the mercy of the Yankees, in the hope of getting permission to own themselves and keep their children from the auction block. This party evidently comprises a whole family from a farm."

PRIMARY DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

Title: _____

Author or Creator: _____ Date of Document: _____

Type of Document:

____ Newspaper/Magazine ____ Letter ____ Memo ____ Map
____ Government Document ____ Cartoon ____ Photograph ____ Drawing
____ Advertisement ____ Other (specify) _____

Unique characteristics on the document:

____ Handwritten ____ Typed ____ Notations ____ Seals
____ Stamped "Received" ____ Interesting letterhead/captions
____ Other (specify) _____

For what audience do you believe this was written or created? _____

What does this document tell you about life in the United States during this time period?

What is the most important historical information this source provides? Cite specific evidence from the source. _____

What question do you have that was left unanswered by the document? _____

Other comments:

References

Research from Milton Sandy, Corinth, Mississippi resident. 3/27/1996. Documented on the Corinth, Mississippi website.

Internet sites used for research:

http://www.civilwaralbum.com/misc16/corinth_contraband1.htm

http://www.mississippihills.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=366%3Acorinth-contraband-camp&Itemid=95

<http://www.nps.gov/shil/planyourvisit/contrabandcamp.htm>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grand_Contraband_Camp

<http://myancestorsname.blogspot.com/2011/04/visiting-freedoms-fortress-first.html>

<http://contrabandhistoricalsociety.org/history.asp>

EVALUATION RUBRIC

Name: _____

Date: _____

Criteria	Level 1 50% to 65%	Level 2 66% to 75%	Level 3 76/% to 90%	Level 4 91% to 100%
Accuracy of Information	Poor Glaring mistakes	Satisfactory Minimal mistakes or omissions	Good Almost no errors or omissions	Superior No errors or omissions
Quality of Work	Poor	Satisfactory	Good	Superior
Presentation Skills	Poor Limited Skills	Satisfactory Clearly presented	Good High level of presentation skill	Superior Exceptional level of presentation
Group Participation	Poor Limited or nonexistent	Satisfactory Some active participation	Good Actively engaged in every activity	Superior Actively engaged: Offers thoughtful comments
Ability to relate this activity to the unit of study	Poor	Satisfactory	Good	Superior

Comments: _____
