

“OH, COULD THEY BUT SPEAK...”

The history and importance of Michigan's Civil War Battle Flags

Teachers' Civil War Battle Flags (CWBF) Unit Overview and Lesson Plan Introduction

CWBF Resources Needed:

Quotations

Purpose:

Our purpose is not to bring into the classroom abstract facts and distant figures of the war between the North and the South, but rather to bring to life stories of Michigan's citizens who served and fought, triumphed and died, waited at home--all those who believed in and honored their country and their state. This unit is about Michigan stories, Michigan heroes, and Michigan history.

Our goal is to help this portion of Michigan's fascinating history to come alive in a new and relevant way for your students. The regimental battle flags are an excellent way to connect today's students with Michigan's past because they still exist. The originals are housed at the Michigan Historical Center, and replicas adorn the capitol building as a continuous reminder of the heavy price paid by Michigan in support of the Union's cause: bringing freedom to an entire class of Americans who had not known it before.

“Oh, Could They But Speak” helps frame several “big” questions, such as:

- What was Michigan's role in the Civil War?
- What was the war really like for the soldiers and citizens?
- What made the battle flags so important?
- How did the flags affect Michigan after the war?
- How have the flags lived through history, and what is their symbolic meaning today?

The lesson plans, classroom resources, and extension activities will enable you to broaden these discussions in innumerable ways.

One wouldn't need to open a history book if the battle flags of Michigan's regiments could talk. Unlike today, the soldiers who fought in the Civil War tended to fight in groups called ‘regiments,’ most of which were composed of men from the same towns. Each regiment had its own flag, proudly made and presented to the regiment as it started off to war. These flags became the symbol of all that the men were fighting for: country, state, home and family. They were carried into every battle, where they inspired every man on the field and literally held the armed forces together. The flags embodied the American spirit and the personal pride that it took to fight the Civil War. It is the stories of these flags that we wish to tell. We wish to let the evidence of the blood and smoke stained battle flags speak.

Our purpose is to hear the people's voices - to walk through Michigan in the 1860's and discover for ourselves what life was like and how the Civil War changed everything.

Note:

We are assuming some prior knowledge of the Civil War era on the part of your students. For this reason, we have not included review material or information regarding the general issues of the Civil War. We believe these things will naturally appear throughout discussion and lecture. We intentionally designed this unit to build upon itself so that it will be flexible for your needs. If you only have time for a short unit on the Battle Flags themselves, you may use Lessons One, Four, and Eight, and have a solid presentation. You could also add general Civil War material to the material presented in this packet and have a complete curriculum for this era. This unit could easily be incorporated into the Language Arts curriculum.

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The Benchmarks targeted for each lesson are taken from the Michigan Department of Education's Social Studies Standards and Working Draft Benchmarks.

Activities, Assignments and Lesson Overview

Possible Activities:

- Create a personal flag.
- Collaboratively create a "news reporter" style presentation.
- Create journals, letters, and poems.
- Conduct an historical letter investigation.
- Research an area of interest in the Civil War.
- Participate in the reading of a young adult novel.
- Discuss opinions and ideas.
- Participate in a review game called "The Battle of Knowledge Gap"
- Research facts and ideas, and publish papers on the MGTV web site.

Lesson Overview:

- Lesson One: Introduce the concept of regimental battle flags.
- Lesson Two: Create a timeline and discover facts about Michigan during the Civil War.
Assignment: Create a running fact sheet about Michigan in the Civil War.
- Lesson Three: Investigate history through a poem.
Assignment: Write a letter or a poem stanza in the voice of a minority
- Lesson Four: Watch first half of the MGTV video and hold a class discussion.
Assignment: Research reports.
- Lesson Five: Investigate facts from historical letters.
- Lesson Six: Read and respond to a tragic, true story of a Civil War battle.
- Lesson Seven: Understand the effects of the Civil War.
Assignment: Complete a higher-level thinking activity sheet.
- Lesson Eight: Watch the second half of the MGTV video, and discuss it as a class.
- Lesson Nine: Capture the Flag in “The Battle of Knowledge Gap”

Resources:

Fact sheets, stories, letters, and other CWBF resources support several of the lesson plans. Each lesson plan lists the specific resources recommended, but as you will see, the resources themselves can be used in many ways to support a variety of activities.