

Supplemental Lesson Plan: The War in Print - Using Primary Sources



THE ARMY OF THE POTOMAC RECEIVING THE NEWS OF THE
CAPTURE OF FORT FISHER

Harper's Weekly
February 4, 1864

During the Civil War, newspapers like *Harper's Weekly* provided information, with varying degrees of accuracy, to people on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line. War correspondents traveled with the armies and reported on what they saw. One of the main sources of information for these correspondents was personal accounts from the participants of battles. The problem with these types of accounts is that they were limited to the viewpoint of the person and reflected any personal bias that the person had. They also suffered from exaggeration, as the person, knowingly or not, often tried to increase the importance of their role.

Competency Goals

This lesson can be used in partial fulfillment of the following:
NCSCOS Social Studies Grade 8: 4.02; 4.03

NCSCOS English/Language Arts Grade 8: 1.02; 2.01
NCSCOS Information Skills: 1.11; 3.03; 4.07

Objectives

After classroom discussion, historical background reading, and examination of Civil War-era newspaper articles, students will:

- Understand the difference between objective and biased reporting.
- Gain experience in the examination and use of primary source material.

Teacher Planning

Provide the following materials either through web access to the Educational Unit or through handouts downloaded via the web site.

North Carolina Civil War Experience: North Carolina as a Civil War Battlefield

Site Narratives - The First Battle
The Second Battle

Access to *Harper's Weekly* original Civil War newspapers at:

<http://www.sonofthesouth.net/leefoundation/civil-war-1865.htm>

The account of the battle by Col. William Lamb, CSA

The account of the battle by seaman William Cobb, USN

Photo analysis worksheet at:

<http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/photo.html>.

Time Requirement

Approximately 45 minutes to one hour if background reading done as homework.

Teacher Input

- A. Set the background for the lesson by either reading aloud or allowing the students to read for themselves the suggested site narratives. This can be done as pre-activity homework to save classroom time.
- B. Introduce the *Harper's Weekly* website and show students how to find the articles on the fall of Fort Fisher.

- C. Explain the difference between “biased” reporting and “objective” reporting.

Classroom Activities: Guided Practice

1. Have the class read the two accounts provided from opposing viewpoints. Compare and contrast these two accounts to determine if there is any exaggeration in the claims made by either Colonel Lamb or Seaman Cobb.
2. Have students read the actual *Harper's Weekly* newspaper account. Have the students compare and contrast the newspaper accounts with the other two accounts. Is the newspaper version an un-biased report? Are there exaggerations in this account? What clues can students find to determine the answers to these questions?
3. Have the students look at the sketch at the top of this lesson from *Harper's Weekly* that depicts soldiers celebrating the capture of Fort Fisher. The sketch can also be found here:
(<http://www.sonofthesouth.net/leefoundation/civil-war/1865/february/soldiers-celebrating.htm>) Have the students conduct a photo analysis of this sketch using the photo analysis worksheet provided by the National Archives found here:
<http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/photo.html>.

Closure

- A. Homework activity: Have the students take the role of a Civil War era reporter and prepare a short article on the capture of Fort Fisher based on the accounts of either Confederate Colonel Lamb, commander of the Fort Fisher garrison, or Union seaman, William Cobb, stationed on board the U.S.S. *Shenandoah*.
- B. Follow up: Have students read their own accounts of the capture of Fort Fisher to the class. Have them explain why they chose the viewpoint that they did.

Assessment

Have the students compare the *Harper's Weekly* article with war reporting today. How is it different? How is it similar?

Southern account from Colonel William Lamb, Confederate commander of Fort Fisher; excerpts from *The Battle of Fort Fisher, North Carolina*

...The night of the 12th of January, from the ramparts of Fort Fisher, I saw the great armada returning...I began at once to put my works in order for action. I had but 800 men, – the 35th North Carolina – at least 100 of whom were not fit for duty. Sunrise the next morning revealed to us the most formidable armada the world has ever known...Suddenly that long line of floating fortresses rained shot and shell, upon the fort and beach...causing the very earth and sea to tremble...

All day and night of the 13th and 14th of January the navy continued its ceaseless torment; it was impossible to repair damages at night on the land face...At least two hundred had been killed and wounded since the fight began. Only three or four of my land guns were of any service. The Federal army had been approaching on the river side during the day; but they were more or less covered by the formation of the land and we could only surmise their number...

...The harvest of wounded and dead was increasing, and at noon I had not 1,200 men¹ to defend the long line or works. The enemy were now preparing to assault...At the same time on the ocean side a column composed of sailors and marines was seen to approach, the advance throwing up slight trenches...

...I rallied there the larger portion of the garrison of the main work, putting 300 men on top of the bastion, and adjoining parapets, and holding some 200 more in the adjoining batteries. About 250 remained for the defense on the left, to which I supposed the 350 South Carolinians would immediately be added and these with the Napoleon and the torpedoes [land mines] I felt sure would successfully defend that portion of the work...

...The sailors and marines reached the berme and some sprang up the slope, but a murderous fire greeted them and swept them down...The bravery of the officers could not restrain their men from panic and retreat, and with small loss to ourselves we witnessed what had never been seen before, a disorderly rout of American sailors and marines.

As our shouts of triumph went I turned to look at the western salient and saw to my astonishment, three Federal battle-flags upon our ramparts...I passed through the sally-port and outside the work witnessed a savage hand-to-hand conflict for the possession of the fourth gun-chamber from the left bastion...Major Reilly had failed to lead the men to the top of the parapet on the right of the

¹ Some reinforcements did make it into Fort Fisher before the start of the land attacks.

western salient, firing instead from the two gun-chambers on the assailants who were not within range until they reached the parapet...his mistake was fatal.

...We had retaken one gun-chamber in the charge on the parapet...I was encouraged to believe that before sundown we would recover all the gun-chambers to the east of the western salient...Suddenly the bombardment, which had been confined to the sea-face, turned again to our land-front, and with deadly precision...swept the gun-chamber occupied by Confederates...

If there has ever been a longer or more stubborn hand-to-hand encounter I have failed to meet with it in history. About 8 o'clock at night my aide came to me and said the ammunition was giving out...In less than an hour a fourth brigade (three were already in the fort) entered the sally-port and swept the defenders from the remainder of the land face...The garrison then fell back in an orderly retreat along the sea-face, the rear guard keeping the enemy engaged as they advanced slowly and cautiously in the darkness as far as the Mound Battery, where they halted.

The enemy threw out a heavy skirmish line and sent their fourth brigade to Battery Buchanan, where it arrived about 10 P.M and received the surrender of the garrison from Major James H. Reilly and Lieutenant George. D. Parker...

**Northern Account: William T. Cobb, United States Navy, Letter to his Father
two days after the capture of Fort Fisher**

On board the USS *Shenandoah*
Under Fort Fisher, NC January 17, 1865

Dear Father,

As I have not written to you for some time, I take the present opportunity in writing you a few lines to notify you that Fort Fisher, the Key to the So Called Confederacy, is ours. We took it, this you may rely upon for I was an Eye witness to the same. When you read the papers you are not certain of the fact but I know it to be so, when you read the papers you may read an account of the Sailors and how they showed their Bravery when charging on the Fort. I was in the Charge. Now to the Details of the affair. We left Beaufort on the 12th and come down here. We arrived here that night and come to off the Fort until morning when we began the Engagement. We bombarded the Fort all that day (the 13th) and all day on the 14th and on the Morning of the 15th. At 9 O'clock we was ordered to man all boats, Armed and Equipped, (previous to this all the men that was to go on Shore was picked out). We were called the Storming party. At 10 O'clock we landed and started up the Beach towards the fort and from this time (out) We was under fire. Our ships kept up the Bombardment from where we landed to the Fort was a bout 2 ½ miles. We crawled on our hands and knees until We got within a half a mile of the Fort, when the Signal was given to Charge and then We Started on a full Run, We Run until We come up to a Stockade that they had a long the Beach when We lay flat upon the Beach (the instant We Started in the Charge, the Rebs let fly Grape, Canister and Shots from Small arms), and We had to face it with nothing in our hands but a Saber and Revolver, but We did not Stop. We kept on until we reached the Stockade, but that did not afford any protection to us for the beach was so level and the fort so high that they could Shoot down upon us whilst we had to lay and take it as fast as they could Shoot.

Father, I have bin in a great number of Battles But for the Space of time I never saw men fall so fast in my life. I cannot describe it with pen and paper but I will do the best I can. For Example, there was a Shower of Canister come through the ranks where I was running up the beach and of about twenty that Stood with in 8 paces of me, there was but four of us that came out of that Shower. I had not gone twenty feet farther when another shower come and done the same as the first and so on until another we got Clear of there fire way down the beach. After we got to the Stockade, we lay there some time. When we began to Charge and tried to get to the Fort but there was a ditch about forty feet wide and the side of the Fort was about fifty feet high so we saw that there was little use of us

trying to get into the Fort in that way, So we lay Still for a few minutes longer when the Signal was given for us to fall back, which we did. In our falling back is when we lost the most men for the Rebs let loose Grape and Canister faster then ever. Whilst we lay under the Fort we could see a Rebel General on the Fort, A waving his sword and see could hear him telling his men to give it to them (meaning us) and well they did give it to us. We fired several shots at him but our revolvers would not reach him. He was bout forty yards from us, but one Sailor got a dead marines musket and fired at him the first shot [missed] him but the next time he fired he hit him and wounded him. Whilst We was making the attacked on the Fort in front there was two thousand Soldier come up in the rear and got into the Fort. Before the Rebs know it they had gained the mounds. When the Rebs that had been Drawn over to the side where We was found out that they was out witted, I understand since We come back that it was only intended for us to go up on the Sea Side of the Fort and Charge So as to draw the Rebs to where We was So that the Soldiers could have a chance to get in to the rear of it.

The reason why the Rebs did not miss trust the trick was on account of, on the side where the Soldiers were they only presented a Small Skirmish line in front. The main body lying behind some rifle pits and as soon as we got the Signal to Charge, the Soldiers had done the same. So the Rebs was all on our side and none where the soldiers was (but We Blue Jackets had to Suffer the Penalty), the Rebs Say that they Never Saw a braver piece of work done in their lives. By this time it was Sundown; we reformed and went to help the Soldiers which we did with a will. We fought until a few minutes before 10 O'clock at night when the fort was surrendered to US....

From your most obedient Son

William T. Cobb
USN