African American Troops in the Civil War

"Once let the black man get upon his person the brass letter, U.S., let him get an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder and bullets in his pocket, there is no power on earth that can deny that he has earned the right to citizenship." -Frederick Douglass

Overview

Through the exploration of primary source documents and the review of historical events, students will learn about the numerous contributions of African American soldiers to the Civil War, understanding the important impact they made to the Union. Students will then focus on a particular place, battle, or event where African American soldiers participated in the war effort and will create a historic site to educate the public regarding the “United States Colored Troops,” as well as to honor their contributions.

Grade

11

North Carolina Essential Standards for American History I

• AH1.H.1.2 - Use historical comprehension...
• AH1.H.1.3 - Use historical analysis and Interpretation...
• AH1.H.1.4 - Use historical research...
• AH1.H.2.1 - Analyze key political, economic, and social turning points from colonization through Reconstruction in terms of causes and effects (e.g., conflicts, legislation, elections, innovations, leadership, movements, Supreme Court decisions, etc.)
• AH1.H.2.2 - Evaluate key turning points from colonization through Reconstruction in terms of their lasting impact (e.g., conflicts, legislation, elections, innovations, leadership, movements, Supreme Court decisions, etc.).
• AH1.H.3.4 - Analyze voluntary and involuntary immigration trends through Reconstruction in terms of causes, regions of origin and destination, cultural contributions, and public and governmental response (e.g., Puritans, Pilgrims, American Indians, Quakers, Scotch-Irish, Chinese, Africans, indentured servants, slavery, Middle Passage, farming, ideas of the Enlightenment, etc.)
• AH1.H.4.1 - Analyze the political issues and conflicts that impacted the United States through Reconstruction and the compromises that resulted (e.g., American Revolution, Constitutional Convention, Bill of Rights, development of political parties, nullification, slavery, states’ rights, Civil War)
• AH1.H.4.4 - Analyze the cultural conflicts that impacted the United States through Reconstruction and the compromises that resulted (e.g., displacement of American Indians, manifest destiny, slavery, assimilation, nativism, etc.)
• AH1.H.5.1 - Summarize how the philosophical, ideological and/or religious views on freedom and equality contributed to the development of American political and economic systems through Reconstruction (e.g., natural rights, First Great Awakening, Declaration of Independence, transcendentalism, suffrage, abolition, “slavery as a peculiar institution”, etc.
• AH1.H.7.3 - Explain the impact of wars on American society and culture through Reconstruction (e.g., salutary neglect, slavery, breakup of the plantation system, carpetbaggers, scalawags, KKK, and relocation of American Indians, etc.).
• AH1.H.8.3 - Evaluate the extent to which a variety of groups and individuals have had opportunity to attain their perception of the “American Dream” through Reconstruction (e.g., various ethnic, religious, racial, socio-economic groups of people; plantation society; transcendentalism; 49ers; etc.).

**Essential Questions**
- Why did Lincoln decide to allow African Americans to enlist in the Union military?
- What was Frederick Douglass’s opinion regarding the enlistment of black soldiers?
- What impact did African American troops have on the Civil War?
- Why is important to learn about and acknowledge the role African Americans played in the Civil War?

**Materials**
- Company E image, attached
- What Was Lincoln Thinking, handout attached
- Fighting Rebels with Only One Hand, excerpt and questions, attached
- History of African American Troops in the American Civil War, reading attached
- Design a Historic Site, project assignment attached

**Duration**
- 60 minutes for initial lesson
- Additional class or homework time will be needed for the completion of the historical site project

**Teacher Preparation**
- “Victors, Not Victims - The USCT Role in the American Civil War,” a lecture presented by Hari Jones, is an in-depth history of the origins and importance of the USCT contribution to the American Civil War. Teachers who would like to broaden their background knowledge on this subject before teaching this lesson can go to [http://www.civilwar.org/video/usctharijones.html](http://www.civilwar.org/video/usctharijones.html) to view a recording of the lecture.

**Student Preparation**
- Students should have a basic understanding of the events leading to secession, as well as a basic understanding of the events of the Civil War.
- Students should be prepared for the historical terminology they will encounter throughout this lesson. Let students know that they will encounter worlds such as “colored” and “Negro,” which were terms commonly used and accepted during the Civil War years. Ensure students understand that such terminology is considered inappropriate outside of their historical context.

**Procedure**

**African American Troops and the Civil War**

1. As a warm-up, discuss with students:
   - When you consider the roles and status of African Americans during the Civil War period, what do you first think of? What images come to mind?

   Encourage students to offer descriptions, adjectives, individual people they can think of from this period, etc. Note student thoughts on the board. (It is likely that student thoughts will largely center around slavery. At this time, do not prompt students to think beyond their initial answers.)

2. After compiling their thoughts, project the attached image of “Company E” and ask students to silently examine the photo. Ask for volunteers to comment on what they see, who they think is pictured, and what time period they think the photo is from. Let students know that the image is of Company E, also known as the “4th US Colored Infantry” during the Civil War. Refer back to the list students made and if no students thought of African Americans as soldiers during the Civil War, ask students to discuss why they
think this is. Did they know that some black people served as soldiers and greatly contributed to the Union Army during the Civil War? If the list students created focused predominantly on slavery, ask them why they think this is the case. If students did note that the image of a black soldier came to mind when considering the Civil War earlier, discuss this as well, and ask students to share what they already know regarding black soldiers during the Civil War.

3. Let students know there were approximately 200,000 African American soldiers and sailors serving in the Union Army and Navy and that often times, we overlook this important contribution when studying the Civil War, focusing instead on the unjust institution of slavery and the ways in which blacks were mistreated. Yet, it is also important to acknowledge the ways African Americans empowered themselves and contributed to the United States during this period, despite the unjust circumstances they were in.

**What Was Lincoln Thinking?**

4. Remind students that after Abraham Lincoln’s election in November 1860, the southern states began to secede, with North Carolina being the last southern state to secede on May 20, 1861. This, along with the events at Fort Sumter in April of 1861, set the Civil War in motion. As news spread, many free black men raced to enlist in the U.S. military, willing to offer their services and risk their lives to ensure the North was successful in the pending war. They were turned away, however, because a federal law dating from 1792 barred black people from bearing arms for the U.S. army, although they had bravely served in the American Revolution and in the War of 1812. (For detailed information, see the video link noted under “Teacher Preparation.”) The Lincoln administration thus had to wrestle with whether or not to authorize the enlistment of black troops during the Civil War.

5. Tell students you want them to consider the predicament of this country in the 1860s and the decision before Lincoln regarding whether or not African Americans should be allowed to serve in the Civil War troops. Remind students that as the southern states seceded from the Union, they formed the Confederate States of America, with Jefferson Davis as their recognized president. Further remind students that there were five “border states,” the slave states of Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri, and West Virginia, which bordered a free state and were aligned with the Union for the time being.

6. Pass out the attached handout “What was Lincoln thinking” and instruct students to partner up for approximately 5-7 minutes to discuss the pros and cons of Lincoln repealing the 1792 law and allowing black people to enlist in the war effort. What would he have to gain or lose politically? How might this decision benefit or hurt the Union? What impact might this decision have on the black population at the time? Urge students to review and consider the situation of the United States at the time, as well the mentalities present during this time.

7. Once students have discussed with their partners and filled out the worksheet, have them report their thoughts back to the remainder of class. Create a two-columned pro and con chart in front of the room, summarizing student thoughts in the appropriate column as they share. Discuss with students why, given the time period, this was such a weighted decision.

**“Fighting Rebels With Only One Hand”**

8. Next, to offer additional perspective, provide the attached excerpt of Frederick Douglass’s “Fighting Rebels with Only One Hand” and instruct students to again work with their partners to read and discuss the questions provided. (Alternatively, teachers may want to do or arrange a dramatic reading of the excerpt for the class then have students discuss the questions with their partners.) After approximately 8 minutes, bring the class back together and have students share their thoughts regarding the piece and what message they feel Douglass was trying to convey. Further discuss:

- Did Frederick Douglass pose any additional reasons for why Lincoln should admit black troops that you do not see on the list we created before?
• What is Douglass’s strongest argument in your opinion?
• How do you think Lincoln would respond to this?

**The Enlistment of “Colored Troops”**

9. Let students know that the Lincoln administration wrestled with the idea of authorizing the recruitment of black troops, with one of their big concerns being that such a move may prompt the border-states to secede. Ultimately however, the decision was made (whether moral or political intentions were at play) to create “colored troops.” Explain:

- “When Gen. John C. Frémont in Missouri and Gen. David Hunter in South Carolina issued proclamations that freed slaves in their military regions and permitted them to enlist, their superiors sternly revoked their orders. By mid-1862, however, the escalating number of former slaves (contrabands), the declining number of white volunteers, and the increasingly pressing personnel needs of the Union Army pushed the Government into reconsidering the ban. On July 17, 1862, Congress passed the Second Confiscation and Militia Act, freeing slaves who had masters in the Confederate Army. Two days later, slavery was abolished in the territories of the United States, and on July 22 President Lincoln presented the preliminary draft of the Emancipation Proclamation to his Cabinet members. These acts legalized the enlistment of African Americans, and black volunteers from South Carolina, Tennessee, and Massachusetts filled the first authorized black regiments. In May 1863, to handle the growing number of black enlistees, the U.S. Government established the Bureau of Colored Troops.” *(Source: [http://dburgin.tripod.com/blackman.html](http://dburgin.tripod.com/blackman.html))*

Discuss;
- Why do you think the government made the decision to allow the enlistment of black troops?

10. Further share with students a bit of information about North Carolina’s black regiments in particular:

- “In April 1863, President Abraham Lincoln authorized Brigadier General Edward A. Wild to organize four black regiments in North Carolina--three infantry and one heavy artillery. Wild began recruiting on Roanoke Island* in June. Descriptive books for the three infantry regiments indicate at least 139 freedmen on the island were recruited for the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd North Carolina Colored Infantry Volunteers, which were later renamed the 35th, 36th, and 37th U.S. Colored Troops. Since many of the soldiers whose families settled on the island were recruited elsewhere, and some of the freedmen from the island enlisted elsewhere, it is hard to know how many of the soldiers in Wild’s regiments had ties to the freedmen’s colony. Missionaries in the Roanoke Island freedmen’s colony noted that all the able-bodied men were away from the island serving in the Union army. Freedmen from Roanoke Island fought in battles throughout the South, including Olustee, Petersburg, and New Market Heights. Many died or sustained life-shattering disabilities.” *(Source: [http://www.roanokefreedmenscolony.com](http://www.roanokefreedmenscolony.com))*

➢ **Teacher note:** For additional information on the Roanoke Island Freedmen’s Colony, go to [www.roanokefreedmenscolony.com](http://www.roanokefreedmenscolony.com) or see the Consortium’s lesson plan, “North Carolina’s Settlements of Freedmen During the Civil War,” available in the Database of Civic Resources or by e-mailing a request to CarolinaK12@unc.edu

11. Next, provide each pair of students with the attached “To Colored Men” primary source document. (Teachers may want to make a class set that they reuse throughout the day.) Instruct students to review the document with their partner. (Let students know that some of the words are small and blurry, so they should just do their best to make them out.) Write or project the following questions at the front of the room for students to discuss with their partners:

- What first catches your eye about this document?
- What are the important messages being conveyed? (Note at least three.)
- Who do you think the intended audience is for this document and what does the government want them to do?
• What can this document teach us regarding discrimination during the 1860s?

12. After students have discussed for 5-7 minutes, allow students to share their thoughts with the class and further discuss:
• Why might a person of African descent choose to enlist in the military in the 1860s? Why might a person of African descent not want to enlist?
• How does this document differ from recruitment advertisements today?
• What impact do you predict the addition of black soldiers to the war made?

**Exploring the History of African American Troops: Design a Historic Site**

13. Next, provide students with the attached reading, “History of African American Troops in the Civil War.” Tell students that they will be reading the handout, which will provide additional information regarding African American troops and their role in the Civil War. As they read, tell students they will learn a little about several key battles where African American troops make a significant impact.

14. Also go ahead and pass out the attached “Design a Historic Site” project assignment. Explain to students it is also very important that they read carefully, since once they are finished with the article, they will choose a particular location (i.e. the location of one of the battles mentioned) and designing a historic site specifically honoring African American troops related to their chosen location.

15. Before moving further, discuss historic sites with the class:
• What is a historic site? (Encourage students to note examples, purposes, etc.)
• What is the purpose of a historic site in general? Why is such preservation important?
• Describe some historic sites you have visited or learned about.
• What types of things determine whether a place may become a historic site?
• What types of things do visitors usually do or learn at a historic site? What can historic sites teach us?
• Why is it important to ensure our Civil War historic sites include the contributions of African Americans to the war and 1860s society?

16. Project the attached image of the African American Civil War Memorial and ask students to comment on what they see. After students have discussed, give them some background information on the Memorial:

“The African American Civil War Memorial, at the corner of Vermont Avenue and U Street NW in Washington, D.C., commemorates the service of 209,145 African-American soldiers and sailors who fought for the Union in the American Civil War. The sculpture was completed in 1997 and includes panels with the names of those who served in the war.

The associated museum, located two blocks west of the memorial in the historic and traditionally African-American U Street neighborhood, opened to the public in January 1999. Its mission is to enable visitors, researchers, and descendants of the United States Colored Troops to better understand the story of these troops. To this end, it displays photographs, newspaper articles, and replicas of period clothing, and uniforms and weaponry of the Civil War. The African American Civil War Memorial Freedom Foundation Registry documents the family trees of more than 2,000 descendants of those who have served with USCT and invites descendants to register. Visitors can search for relatives who have registered in the Descendants Registry.” (Source: www.discoverblackheritage.com)

Discuss:
• What is the difference in a historic site, a memorial, and a museum? (Make sure to note that memorials, monuments, and museums are often included as part of a historic site. Students can choose to add these to their own designs.)
• What is the purpose of such a monument or memorial?
17. Go over the “Design a Historic Site” project with students, accepting any questions and ensuring students understand that the ultimate goal of their site is to educate the public regarding the role of African American soldiers in the Civil War and the importance of their impact. Let students know when the project is due and how much class and homework time will be allotted for project completion. Teachers should also determine whether to assign groups or allow students to choose who they work with. When the historical site projects are turned in, allowing students to share their work can provide an opportunity to review the material.