

Through Their Eyes Fort Fisher Primary Source Analysis Lesson Plan

Central Historical Questions: What were people's experiences of the Civil War? How can you assess a source's biases and strengths? How does the intended audience shape a source?

Recommended grade level: middle school or high school

Time required: 45 minutes

Setting: classroom

Materials:

- Pamphlet summary of Fort Fisher's history
- Student worksheet

Notes:

- This lesson challenges students to evaluate three primary sources written about the Battle of Fort Fisher. The authors are an African American U.S. soldier (a.k.a. US Colored Troop), a Confederate soldier, and a white Southern woman.
- Ensure that students have a physical or digital copy of the three primary sources. These are available in the student worksheet.
- If students are unfamiliar with Fort Fisher's history, please have them read the pamphlet summary before evaluating the primary sources.

Procedure:

1. Refresh students' memories of Fort Fisher's history. You may utilize the pamphlet for this purpose and have students begin by reading that.
2. Inform the students that they will evaluate primary sources. If necessary, review the definition of a historical primary source. Students will evaluate sources that discuss the Second Battle of Fort Fisher.
3. For each source, spend about 2-3 minutes providing students with background information. Who wrote it? Who was the intended audience? When was it written? Etc.
4. Then allow students about 5 minutes to individually read and assess the source. Ask them to answer the questions pertaining to that document on their worksheet.
5. Finally, spend about 3-5 minutes in a class discussion of the source. (You do not need to ask all of the below questions.)
 - a. *Did [author] support the United States or Confederacy? How do you know?*
 - b. *Does [author] specify where they were in the battle? Where were they? What were they doing during the fighting?*
 - c. *What do you think [author] wanted their readers to know about the Battle of Fort Fisher?*
 - d. *What biases might this author have? What information might they have left out?*
 - e. *What might they have not known about because of their role and position in the battle?*
 - f. *How do you think [author] felt during the battle? Afterwards?*
6. Repeat steps 2-4 for each source, spending 10-15 minutes per source.
7. Closure: Once students read the three accounts of the Battle of Fort Fisher in January 1865 and the class has collectively discussed each source separately, lead the students in a discussion of how the sources relate to each other.
 - a. *Which story did you find the most informative? Why?*

- b. If ___ and ___ sat in a room together and talked about the Battle of Fort Fisher, what might they agree on? Disagree on?
- c. Do these three sources tell us all the information we want to know about the battle? If not, who's perspective might be important to seek out and why?

North Carolina Standard Course of Study: This lesson meets the following standards for eighth grade.

Eighth Grade		
	Standard	Explanation
8.B.1.1	Determine how the relationship between different regional, social, ethnic, and racial groups have contributed to the development of North Carolina and the nation.	Students explore perspectives from various racial, gender, and ethnic groups and their respective contributions to Fort Fisher's history.
8.C&G.1.5	Compare access to democratic rights and freedoms of various indigenous, religious, racial, gender, ability and identity groups in North Carolina and the nation.	In this primary source analysis, students assess the status, privileges, and limitations of an African American soldier and white Southern woman.
8.H.2.3	Explain how the experiences and achievements of women, minorities, indigenous, and marginalized groups have contributed to the development of North Carolina and the nation over time.	Students are exposed to stories of white women as well as African Americans and how these people shaped and were shaped by the events of the Civil War in North Carolina.

Please see the lesson guide on the following page for background information and guiding questions for each primary source.

Through Their Eyes: Fort Fisher Primary Source Analysis

Teacher's Guide

January 13-15, 1865 thousands of white and African American men fight in the Battle of Fort Fisher. The Confederate Civil War fort guards Wilmington, the last major port city available for the rebelling army. For two and a half years, the Confederate Army and Confederate politicians forced free and enslaved African Americans as well as American Indians to build Fort Fisher in preparation for an attack.

United States soldiers, sailors, and marines – including about 3,000 African American U.S. Colored Troops – fight to close that port and stop supplies from coming in and going out of the South. Confederate soldiers hope to keep the South fighting longer for an independent nation founded to preserve the institution of slavery. If the United States troops capture Fort Fisher, the fall of Wilmington and the end of military supplies to the Confederacy is all but guaranteed. For three days, Americans and Confederates fight on the earth works of Fort Fisher. Meanwhile, loved ones and concerned local white men and women gather across the river from the fort and watch the battle.

The following primary sources from a Confederate officer, a United States Colored Troop soldier, and a white Southern woman help us understand just what happened during the Battle of Fort Fisher and how those people who witnessed it thought about the major historical event.

For each primary source, answer the background information questions based on the information provided by your instructor. Then, read the primary source on your own and analyze it using the guiding questions provided below. Be prepared to discuss each source as a class.

Source 1: "Thirty-Sixth Regiment (Second Artillery)" by Colonel William Lamb

Our first source is the regimental history of the 36th North Carolina Regiment. The 36th Regiment was stationed at Fort Fisher for most of the Civil War. These Confederate soldiers fought and lost in the January 1865 battle.

This account was written in 1901 – thirty-six years after the battle – by William Lamb. Lamb was a Colonel in the Confederate Army and the commanding officer of Fort Fisher. He was also the chief engineer at the fort, so he designed the defenses and oversaw construction.

Lamb wrote his account to commemorate and celebrate the Confederate North Carolina soldiers. He wrote for a white, primarily Southern audience.

Background information

1. This document was written by Colonel William Lamb, who was: **CO, chief engineer**
2. The intended audience for this source is: **white Southerners**
3. The document was published in _____. **1901**

Transcript of Document

"All day and night on the 13th and 14th the [U.S. Navy] fleet kept up a ceaseless and terrific bombardment. Reinforcements were sent from the adjacent forts. It was impossible to repair

damages at night. No meals could be prepared for the exhausted garrison, the dead could not be buried without fresh casualties. Fully 200 had been killed during these two days, and only three or four of the land guns remained serviceable.

“[On January 15th] The enemy were unable to enter by the river road, and some of the most desperate fighting done in the work was in the space between the left bastion and the river shore.

“Notwithstanding the capture of a portion of the work and several hundred of the garrison, the Confederates were still undaunted and seemed determined to recover the captured salient and gun chambers.

“We had taken one of these in the charge led by [Major General] Whiting, and since we had opened on their flank we had shot down their standard bearers and the Federal battle flags had disappeared from our ramparts; we had become assailants and the enemy were on the defensive, and I felt confident we would soon drive them out of the fort. Just as the tide of the battle seemed to have turned in our favor, the remorseless fleet came to the rescue of the faltering Federals. Suddenly the bombardment which had been confined to the sea face during the assaults, turned again in our land front and with deadly precision...

“Nor was this all. We had now to content with a column advancing around the rear of the left bastion by the river into the interior plane of the fort. It moved slowly and cautiously...

“...If there was ever a longer or more desperate hand to hand fight during the war, I have never heard of it...”

Self-guided questions for students included on their worksheet:

1. What do you think Colonel Lamb hoped to convey in this regimental history? **The bravery of Confederates at Fort Fisher**
2. What biases or limitations may affect Colonel Lamb’s experience and memory of the battle? In other words, what might Colonel Lamb not have known because of his limited role in the battle? **Colonel Lamb’s account focuses exclusively on the Confederate viewpoint. He does not consider or give much credit to the actions of the American forces.**
3. How do you think Colonel Lamb felt during the battle? **Lamb tried hard to defend the fort and thought there was a chance for victory. In his words, the Confederates were outnumbered and forced to surrender, but they fought incredibly hard.**

In addition to going over the answers to the above, here are some guiding group discussion questions:

1. What would Colonel Lamb not have known about during the battle of Fort Fisher?
2. Do you think Lamb was proud of his service in the Confederate Army?

Source 2: Chaplain Henry Turner’s Letters to the *Christian Recorder*

Henry Turner served as the chaplain for the First Regiment of the U.S. Colored Troops. The USCTs comprised of African American soldiers, sergeants, and chaplains and white officers.

USCT regiments were the first major organization of African American soldiers in the U.S. Army, though African Americans have fought in every war in our nation's history.

About one-third of the U.S. Army soldiers that captured Fort Fisher in January 1865 were U.S. Colored Troops. During the battle, most African American regiments were held in reserve, meaning they protected the rear line of the Union against any Confederate counter-attack coming from further away. While the USCTs did not fight at Fort Fisher, they fought off hundreds of hardened Confederate veterans who attempted to storm up the U.S. Army's rear and reinforce Fort Fisher. Without the USCTs, the white U.S. soldiers at Fort Fisher would have been surrounded; the battle may have ended differently.

While Turner's regiment fought off a counter-attack, he was called to the front lines to help with the wounded and dying soldiers. Turner was then able to witness most of the fighting between the white U.S. and Confederate soldiers at the fort.

Once Turner and the U.S. Army pushed into and captured Wilmington, Turner was able to pause and write about the campaign. He wrote to the editor of the *Christian Recorder*, a newspaper for the African Methodist Episcopal Christian church based in Philadelphia. The letters were published in the paper as part of their coverage of the war with emphasis on the contributions of African Americans.

Background information

1. This document was written by Henry Turner, who was: **USCT chaplain**
2. The intended audience for this source is: **African American Christian newspaper readers**
3. Turner's letters were published by the *Recorder* in _____. **1865.**

Transcript of Document

"[The white U.S. soldiers] had approached near enough to commence the attack, and with an awful yell and dauntless courage, they could be seen running over an open space, in all apparent fearlessness, intent upon capturing the strong works which then lay in full view to every soldier. But the rebels replied to the charge and yells of our boys with the most awful volley of musketry, grape and canister [cannon shots], which mowed down our troops in fearful numbers. Yet our boys cut them down in heavy proportions.

"Never had I seen grape and canister used so effectually as the rebels used it on our troops on this occasion. At one time I thought they could never stand it; neither do I believe they would have stood, but for the fact that they knew the black troops were in the rear, and if they (the white troops) failed, the colored troops would take the fort and claim the honor...But it was a noble sight, to see our troops hanging on to the sides fort like so many leeches sticking to an afflicted man...after our troops gained a foothold on the fort, each party would stick to those mounds, and fight around them. You would constantly see them, by two's and three's, fall off and roll to the bottom [injured and dead].

"Several free [African American] men, who are now employed by us, were captured with the rebels in Fort Fisher, and have informed us, that during our bombardment of the fort, they were

not allowed to enter the bomb-proof for shelter, and yet not a man was struck. And while the rebels had free access to all the bomb-proofs, yet they were slaughtered without mercy..."

Self-guided questions for students on their worksheets:

1. Does Turner specify where he was during the battle? If so, where was he? What was Turner doing during the fighting?

Turner witnessed the battle while attending to the wounded.

2. What do you think Chaplain Turner hoped to convey in his account?

Turner wanted people to know the intensity of the fighting at Fort Fisher and about the role of African Americans at the fort.

3. What biases or limitations may affect Turner's experience and memory of the battle? In other words, what might Turner not have known because of his limited role in the battle?

Turner's distance from the battle provided him with a great overall view, but he does not experience the combat firsthand. Further, when Turner discusses the free African Americans who were captured in the battle, he is amazed they were not injured while Confederates were. Confederates injured and killed during the bombardment were the ones attempting to return fire upon the U.S. Navy. Turner does not consider the different roles of the free African Americans and the Confederate soldiers as key to their survival rates.

Additional group discussion questions may include:

1. How does Turner feel about the battle?
2. Why might Turner have been so graphic in his depiction of the battle?

Source 3: Mrs. Susan Davis's Account

During the Civil War, women sometimes accompanied their husbands in the military. Susan Davis travelled down to Fort Caswell, which was near Fort Fisher, to be close to her husband Thaddeus Davis. Thaddeus was a sergeant in the Confederate Army.

When the United States forces attacked Fort Fisher in January 1865, Thaddeus was transferred to Fort Fisher to help protect it. Meanwhile, Susan and several other women gathered on the riverbank opposite of Fort Fisher. They watched as the U.S. Navy hurled shell after shell into the fort and witnessed the U.S. Army fight their way inside.

In 1911, Susan published her memory of the battle in the *Confederate Veteran*, a publication devoted to covering "pro-Confederate" accounts of the Civil War. Its readership at the time was primarily white people across the nation, though white Southerners were the most likely to read it.

Background information

1. This document was written by Susan Davis, who was: a wife of a Confederate soldier
2. The intended audience for this source is: *Confederate Veteran* – a magazine focused on a pro-South interpretation of history and written for a white audience.
3. Davis's recollection of the battle was published in _____. 1911.

Transcript of Document

"At times my imagination would tell me that my anxious eyes were resting upon him in the little group of heroic defenders that we could see distinctly; the next instant a monster shell would explode in their midst, enveloping everything in smoke and dust. At such moments I would feel as if my heart would burst; but when the wind lift the shroud of battle and I could see our flag still there, and the thin, gray line still in action, I would feel that exultant joy...

"We could count our heart beats as, with silent prayers and eyes too dry for tears, we watched the storm gather in great masses of dark columns of men moving on the helpless, but still defiant Confederates. Praying that my husband was yet alive, seeing the overwhelming odds against him, and realizing that victory was utterly hopeless, can I be blamed that courage failed me and that a white flag over the wrecked fort would have been a grateful to my sight?... I could not, if I would describe the fearful scenes that followed, for even at this late day it makes my heart sick to think of it; of how foot by foot our men were forced back from one traverse to another, often fighting with clubbed muskets, and marking every foot of the way with the dead bodies of their foes.

"... The fighting continued until about ten o'clock that night, when the fort surrendered. I could learn nothing of the fate of my husband, whether living or dead, and it was a month afterwards that I received a letter from him, saying he was a prisoner at Elmira, N.Y. He was released after the close of the war, and returned home on the 1st of June, 1865; but the 15th of January always brings back to me a remembrance of that, to me, awful Sunday evening forty years ago."

Self-guided questions for students on their worksheets:

1. How did Susan Davis feel during the battle? Scared, worried, terrified, etc. Maybe proud?
2. What do you think Susan hoped her readers would learn? She hoped her readers would appreciate the bravery of Confederate soldiers like her husband and how the battle was lost through no real fault of their own.
 - a. Teacher tip: This may provide an avenue to discuss the Lost Cause narrative of the Civil War. (The Lost Cause interpretation reframes the causes for the Civil War away from slavery and claims the Confederacy fought for a noble cause but ultimately was defeated because of their lack of supplies and personnel.) Fort Fisher has provided links to Lost Cause lesson plans for middle schoolers on the Google Drive.
3. What biases or limitations might Susan have that influenced her account? Susan likely loved her husband. She was worried about him during the battle. She was not concerned about the welfare of the U.S. forces. Further, Susan likely bought into the Lost Cause narrative as evident by her references to the Confederates at Fort Fisher fighting honorably but overwhelmed by the manpower of the U.S. Army.