

Historical Letter Analysis

Created by Jacob Hamill, SCDNR Heritage Trust Archivist (2018).

Grade Level

3-8th, High School English and U.S. History

Estimated Time

30-45 minutes

Goal

Students will learn about Fort Lamar and the Battle of Secessionville by reading letters from Alexander Campbell and James Campbell, two Scottish brothers who fought on opposing sides in the battle. These letters can be used to teach students about observations and inferences in the context of historical documents, and to discuss the lives of Civil War soldiers, how the war divided families, and the contributions of immigrants to both sides of the war.

Objectives

After completion of the activity and viewing of the Fort Lamar documentary films, students will be able to:

1. *Observe* historical events featured in the Fort Lamar documentary films.
2. *Summarize* key events of the documentary.
3. *Identify* the location of Fort Lamar and the Battle of Secessionville in South Carolina.
4. *Explain* the significance of the Battle of Secessionville in the context of the Civil War.
5. *Analyze* historical documents and recognize their importance as sources of information on the past.
6. *Differentiate* between observations and inferences in regards to history and historical documents.
7. *Infer* what life was like as a soldier in the Civil War based on observations made from the documents.

Academic Standards

English

Inquiry-Based Literacy Standards (I)

- 3-2 Transact with texts to formulate questions, propose explanations, and consider alternative views and multiple perspectives.
- 3-3 Construct knowledge, applying disciplinary concepts and tools, to build deeper understanding of the world through exploration, collaboration, and analysis.

- 4-2 Transact with texts to formulate questions, propose explanations, and consider alternative views and multiple perspectives.
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- 8-2 Transact with texts to formulate questions, propose explanations, and consider alternative views and multiple perspectives.
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- E1-2 Transact with texts to formulate questions, propose explanations, and consider alternative views and multiple perspectives.
- E1-3 Construct knowledge, applying disciplinary concepts and tools, to build deeper understanding of the world through exploration, collaboration, and analysis.

English

Reading – Informational Text (RI)

- 3-5 Determine meaning and develop logical interpretations by making predictions, inferring, drawing conclusions, analyzing, synthesizing, providing evidence, and investigating multiple interpretations.
- 3-7 Research events, topics, ideas, or concepts through multiple media, formats, and in visual, auditory, and kinesthetic modalities.
- 3-10 Analyze and provide evidence of how the author’s choice of purpose and perspective shapes content, meaning, and style.
- 3-12 Read independently and comprehend a variety of texts for the purpose of reading for enjoyment, acquiring new learning, and building stamina; reflect and respond to increasingly complex text over time.

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- E1-10 Analyze and provide evidence of how the author's choice of purpose or perspective shapes content, meaning, and style.
- E1-12 Read independently and comprehend a variety of texts for the purposes of reading for enjoyment, acquiring new learning and building stamina; reflect and respond to increasingly complex text over time.

English

Writing (W)

- 3-6 Write independently, legibly, and routinely for a variety of tasks, purposes, and audiences over short and extended time frames.
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- E1-6 Write independently, legibly, and routinely for a variety of tasks, purposes, and audiences over short and extended time frames.

Social Studies

- 3-4.4 Summarize the course of the Civil War in South Carolina, including the Secession Convention, the firing on Fort Sumter, the Union blockade of Charleston, the significance of the *Hunley* submarine; the exploits of Robert Smalls; and General William T. Sherman's march through the state.
- 3-4.5 Explain how the destruction caused by the Civil War affected the economy and daily lives of South Carolinians, including the scarcity of food, clothing, and living essentials and the continuing racial tensions.
- 4-6.4 Summarize significant battles, strategies, and turning points of the Civil War, including the battles of Fort Sumter and Gettysburg, the Emancipation Proclamation, the role of African Americans in the war, the surrender at Appomattox, and the assassination of President Lincoln.
- 8-4.5 Compare the military strategies of the North and the South during the Civil War and the fulfillment of these strategies in South Carolina and in the South as a whole, including the attack on Fort Sumter, the Union blockade of Charleston and other ports, the early capture of Port Royal, and the development of the *Hunley* submarine; the exploits of Robert Smalls; and General William T. Sherman's march through the state.
- 8-4.6 Compare the differing impact of the Civil War on South Carolinians in each of the various social classes, including those groups defined by race, gender, and age.
- USHC-3.2 Summarize the course of the Civil War and its impact on democracy, including the major turning points; the impact of the Emancipation Proclamation; the unequal treatment afforded to African American military units; the geographic, economic, and political factors in the defeat of the Confederacy; and the ultimate defeat of the idea of secession.

Activity Type: In Class

This is to be done as an in-class activity. The teacher will provide the required materials.

Materials

- Civil War Letter Analysis Worksheet

Fort Lamar History

- By the spring of 1862, Union forces under the leadership of Brigadier General David Hunter, commander of the Union's Department of the South, were poised to launch an assault on Charleston by way of land. A Union victory at the Battle of Port Royal in November of 1861 provided the Federals an excellent staging area for organizing an attack on the city. Logistical information provided by Robert Smalls, a runaway slave who had commandeered a Confederate steamer, the C.S.S. Planter, opened the way for Union troops to advance on James Island.

- Capturing Charleston early into 1862 would have dramatically turned the tide of war in the Union’s favor. The North could have utilized Charleston’s large harbor and railroad connections to launch large-scale campaigns into the South’s interior, potentially forcing the Confederacy to divert its eastern forces away from Virginia.
- To protect Charleston’s southern flank, the Confederates, under the command of Major General John C. Pemberton, constructed a string of fortifications on James Island, extending from Fort Pemberton on the Stono River to a small fort built on the neck of the Secessionville peninsula. General Pemberton placed South Carolinian Brigadier General Nathan George “Shanks” Evans in charge of the island’s defenses.
- The Secessionville fort, then known as the Tower Battery for the watchtower constructed at the site, was flanked by marsh on both sides and was built on the narrowest portion of the peninsula, which measured only 125 yards wide. Colonel Thomas G. Lamar was placed in command of the fort and tasked with overseeing its construction.
- On June 2, 1862, Union forces under the command of Brigadier General Henry W. Benham, who was placed in charge of the operation by General David Hunter, landed on the southwestern tip of James Island at the Grimball Plantation.
- A few minor skirmishes followed as Union forces began to unload supplies and organize troops, in turn prompting the Confederates to reinforce their fortifications.
- Worried that they did not have enough men to capture Charleston, General Hunter ordered General Benham to not advance on Charleston or Fort Johnson until he received reinforcements or direct orders to attack.
- Despite these instructions, in the early morning of June 16th General Benham launched a surprise attack on the Secessionville fort. This force, totaling around 6,500 men organized into two columns, was expected to easily overwhelm the Confederate garrison of 500.
- As the Union force approached the fort, they had to navigate through overgrown hedge rows and open cotton fields, slowing their advance. As the land approaching the fort narrowed, the left side of the Union column was pushed into the marsh, breaking the line and compressing the center, causing the second wave to run into the first.
- At this point, around 5:00 am, the fort’s defenders were alerted to the Union’s presence. As the Confederates rushed to their stations, Colonel Lamar took personal command of the 8-inch Columbiad cannon. When the Union lines were within two hundred yards of the fort, they were met with the mighty Columbiad’s blast.
- Despite sustaining heavy fire from the fort’s cannons, the Union forces managed to climb onto the fort’s parapets where they fought hand to hand with the Confederate defenders.
- The fort’s garrison was quickly reinforced by surrounding Confederate battalions, who were able to repel the Union’s foothold.
- The marshes inhibited the Union army from launching a successful flanking maneuver to assist the main assault, as the water and pluff mud proved to be impassable.

- Confederate artillery fire to the Union's flank, in addition to Confederate reinforcements, forced General Benham to order a retreat. Despite the battle only lasting around two and a half hours, losses were heavy.
- The Union sustained nearly 700 casualties, with 107 killed, while the Confederates experienced around 200 casualties, with 52 killed. Most of the battle's casualties occurred either on the narrow peninsula immediately in front of the fort or on the fort itself.
- After the battle, the Secessionville fort, which was referred to as the "Tower Battery" at the time of the battle, was renamed to Fort Lamar in honor of its commander. Colonel Lamar, who was wounded during the battle, died a year later from fever contracted while serving on the island.
- By July 8th, the Union army vacated James Island and returned to Port Royal.
- For disobeying orders and losing the battle, General Benham was court martialed and demoted.
- Fort Lamar was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1979.

James and Alexander Campbell: Two Brothers at Secessionville

- The story of James and Alexander Campbell at the Battle of Secessionville shows how the Civil War both divided families and impacted immigrants.
- James and Alexander Campbell were brothers from Scotland that immigrated to the United States in the 1850s.
- Alexander, with his wife and two sons, settled in New York City and earned a living as a stonemason, while James settled in Charleston as a drayman and clerk.
- After war broke out between the North and the South in 1861, the two brothers found themselves on opposite sides. Alexander enlisted as part of the 79th New York Volunteer Infantry Regiment "Highlanders", while James, committed to the Confederacy, joined the First South Carolina Battalion.
- As fate would have it, Alexander's regiment was dispatched to Port Royal and later, James Island, participating in the Battle of Secessionville on June 16, 1862.
- The Campbell brothers fought within 100 yards of each other, on opposing sides, but were unaware of this until after the battle.
- Learning that his brother was among the Federal forces that assaulted Fort Lamar, James wrote Alexander a letter, which was delivered by a flag of truce.
- The two brothers survived the course of the war. Alexander Campbell settled in Connecticut where he opened his own stonecutting business in 1870. James Campbell remained in Charleston where he became a successful planter.
- The Campbells' experiences and letters illustrate how friends and families were divided by the Civil War, as well as the contributions of immigrants and the experiences of soldiers.

Lesson

1. Give a brief overview of Fort Lamar and the Battle of Secessionville.
2. Show the Fort Lamar documentary films.
3. Discuss with students the early years of the Civil War, the Charleston naval blockade, and the Union occupation of South Carolina's sea islands.
4. Introduce James and Alexander Campbell and discuss their participation at the Battle of Secessionville.
5. Distribute the Civil War Letter Analysis Worksheet.
6. Optional. Divide the class into three groups and assign each group a single letter to read and analyze as a team.
7. Have the students read the letters individually, and then, as a group or as a class, have the students discuss their impressions and observations. Ask the students what they can infer from reading these documents.
8. Optional. To help students visualize what these documents look like, you can display images of the original letters at:
<https://digital.sctv.org/teachingAmerhistory/lessons/Campbellpapers.htm>
9. Use the letters to explore and discuss the lives of soldiers in the Civil War. Also use the brothers' backgrounds as Scottish immigrants to discuss the contributions of immigrants to the war on both sides.
10. Finish the lesson by having the students complete the worksheet, and emphasize the importance and utility of primary documents, such as letters, when researching and learning about history.

Civil War Letter Analysis Worksheet

Below are transcriptions of the letters written by James Campbell and Alexander Campbell, two brothers who fought on opposing sides during the war, shortly after the Battle of Secessionville on James Island, SC. Closely read the following documents and consider what they can tell us about life as a soldier in the Civil War. Make note of any observations, as well as inferences. The letters' original grammar and spelling have been kept. Document description, letter transcriptions, and printable PDF versions of the original Campbell letters available at: <https://digital.sctv.org/teachingAmerhistory/lessons/Campbellpapers.htm>

Campbell Letter One: From James Campbell to Alexander Campbell

James Island

June 1862

Dear Brother

I was astonished to hear from the prisoners that you was colour Bearer of the Regmt that assalted the Battrey at this point the other day. When I first heard it I looked over the field for you where I met one of the wounded of your Regt and he told me that he believed you was safe. I was in the Brest work during the whole engagement doing my Best to Beat you but I hope that you and I will never again meet face to face Bitter enemies in the Battle field. But if such should be the case You have but to discharge your deauty to Your caus for I can assure you I will strive to discharge my deauty to my country & my cause.

In the late Battle the killed on your side was verry heavy in proportion to the wounded and for the forses engaged the slaughter terrable. Most of your wounded is doing well. Col Morison I know nothing of. He must be killed.

When you write north you will please Let Sister ann know that I am Still alive and in good health. I am verry anxious to hear from her but surcimstances does not afford a chance. I will send this (open) by a flag of truce. Give Leut Walker My compliments.

I Am Your Brother

James Campbell

Brother John Left here about Two years ago. I have not hard from him since.

Campbell Letter Two: From Alexander Campbell to his wife

James Island S.C.

June 16th, 1862

Dear Wife

We have had a fight. I am all right. James & Matthew is all safe. It was a verry severe fight and we have Lost a good many. We had to fall back to our former position. We charged there fort and would have held it if we had been properly supported. Theres only two wounded in the sixth company. One was Left on the field and its thought hes dead and the other is Daniel Larrance him that served his time with Mcmister. You have seen him in our house in 33rd st. He has got Badly wounded in the right arm. The ball went

through the bone. He acted bravely. He was in the fort when the order was given to retreat and it was then he got wounded. I can't see how Jammie Matthew & me got off without a scratch. Some of the 79th pulled two or three of the rebels out of the fort by the hair of the head. Our regiment behaved well. The enemy is strongly fortified on this island.

Brother James was in the fort. I asked one of the rebels that was wounded and taken prisoner and he told me so. Perhaps he is Killed for our guns shelled them terribly.

Jane I only write to Let you Know that I am all safe and James & mat is all safe. James is writing beside me. We are verry tired. We Left camp about one oclock this morning and we commenced the fight at day brake and now we are back in camp and its getting Late so I will come to a close hopping to hear from you soon. Good night.

And I remain your afficonate Husband
Alexander Campbell

Campbell Letter Three: From Alexander Campbell to his wife

James Island S.C.

June 25th, 1862

Dear Wife

I received your Letter of the 15th in dew time and I was happy to hear that you all was well. You say you have not got a Letter from me in four weeks. I am surprised at that for I have wrote four since we Left Beaufort but I hope you have received them by this time. We got payed the other day and I will send my money to you the first opportunity. I know you must be in want of money. If we would get payed regular it would not be so bad. In a few days there will be other two months dew us but we will not get it. I wish this war was over for I am sick of it. The weather here is getting verry warm but we are all verry healthy so farr. Our wounded has been all sent to Hilton Head. From there they will be sent home as soon as possible. It was an unfortunate affair and I beleive General Benham is under arrearst for it. I hope he will be sent home. General Steavens the night after the battle cryed Like a child about the Loss of so many brave men.

Jane you will be surprised to hear about me getting a Letter from Brother James. It came by a flag of truce. There has been a flag of truce sent for to see about our wounded and get there names and it took tow or three days before they could get all our mens names and James had got word about me being in the 79th from our men that was taken prisoners and he wrote me a Letter. I will send you a copy of it and you will see better what he says. I cant send him one for there wont be any more flaggs of truce going over at present. Its rather too bad to think that we should be fighting him on the one side and me on the other for he says he was in the fort during the whole engagement. I hope to god that he and I will get safe through it all and he will have his story to tell about his side and I will have my story to tell about my side.

Dear Jane I have not got much news this time only that James & mat is well and I am in verry good helth myself hopping this will find you all the same. Little Jonney & Alexander I hope will soon have their pappa home to take them out with mamma to walk. Theres something striks me that this war will be over verry soon and I am shure it can't be too soon for me. Theres a report that our regiment is going away from here coming farther north but theres so many Lies going all the time one cant beleive anything. I will come to a close this time hopping to hear from you soon. So good day and I am Your ever Afficonate Husband.

Alexander Campbell

References

- Brennan, P. *Secessionville: Assault on Charleston*. Campbell, CA: De Capo Press, 1996.
- Burton, E. M. *The Siege of Charleston: 1861-1865*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1970.
- Johnston, T. Fraternal fight at Secessionville: The story of Alexander and James Campbell. *Blue & Gray: For Those Who Still Hear the Guns, The Battle of Secessionville*, 51-53, February 1999.
- Teaching American History in South Carolina. (2009). *Letters between James and Alexander Campbell after the Battle of Secessionville (brothers on opposing sides of the war), June 1862*. <https://digital.sctv.org/teachingAmerhistory/lessons/Campbellpapers.htm>