

LESSON I: WHY FIGHT? SOLDIERS' LETTERS

GRADE 5-8

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Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum

Objectives

- Recognize the important role ordinary people play in great historical events.
- Understand how historians can learn from primary source material generated by average citizens.
- Realize that different sources provide differing viewpoints about the same events.
- List three reasons why people fought in the Civil War.
- Practice letter writing.
- Identify Union and Confederate states on a map.
- Independently research facts about the Civil War.



INTRODUCTION

The letters of ordinary Civil War soldiers reveal a great deal to historians trying to understand why people were willing to risk their lives fighting in a war. These letters oftentimes present vastly different viewpoints than those stated in official speeches made by politicians about why a country goes to war.

PROCEDURE

Part I: Letter Writing

1. Ask students when they last wrote a hand written letter. What prompted them to write their letters? Why might people write letters? Next ask them when they last sent an email? To whom did they send an email and why?

2. Ask students if they had something highly important to tell someone, what means of communication would they use? Why? List these modes of communication on the board. (Telephone, email, letters, visiting in person, telegraph, telegram, etc.)
3. Now ask students which

types of communication methods listed on the board were available to soldiers fighting in the Civil War? From their answers, ask students to discuss the following:

- How important was letter writing in 19th century America?
- Do you think a lot of

Materials

- Audio excerpt of the Sullivan Ballou letter entitled "Honorable Manhood" from Ken Burn's *The Civil War* (optional).
- *Ballou Family Letters transcribed (in this lesson plan)*.
 - Sullivan Ballou to his wife Sarah, July 14, 1861
 - Adin Ballou to his parents, November 6, 1862.
 - William Ballou to his parents, December 24, 1862
- *Images of Civil War Soldiers from the "Civil War Soldier Kit" (and on this CD)*
 - #6 Henry Reed
 - #7 Three Zouaves
 - #8 Father and Son Gregory
 - #9 Lyston Howe
 - #10 J.H. Sidener
 - #11 Six Soldiers
 - #12 Seven Soldiers
 - #13 Joseph Langston
 - #14 Corporal
 - #15 Albert Cashier
 - #16 Black Soldier
 - #17 Orion P. Howe
- *Materials for writing old-fashioned letters if possible (quill and ink, paper) or regular lined paper and pens.*
- *Map of the United States showing Union and Confederate States.*
- *Books and resources from the "Civil War Soldier Kit," the library or online.*
- *"Muster Roll Worksheet" (in this lesson plan)*
- *"Soldier's Friend Worksheets" (in this lesson plan)*



LESSON 1: WHY FIGHT? SOLDIERS' LETTERS

soldiers wrote letters?

- What kinds of information might you find in those letters?
- How important would soldier's letters be to the people receiving them?
- Are those letters important to historians studying the Civil War? Why or why not?

Part II: What would you fight for?

1. Have students stand at one of end of the classroom.
2. Ask students what they would go to war to defend (toys/electronic games, favorite picture or special family treasure, clothing or shoes, pet, best friend, school, home, family, country, freedom, democracy, freedom for another country, to save others from harm, etc.). When a statement is made that they would be willing to fight for, the student is to move to the opposite side of the room.
3. As a class discuss how students arrived at their decision to move across the room. If any students refused to move across the room, ask them to share why they chose not fight. Discuss what the options are for people who did not want to fight in wars. Discuss the difference between an army made up of volunteers and one made up of draftees.
4. As a class come up with a list of why people would be willing to volunteer to

fight in a war.

5. Next ask the class to come up with ways a government could persuade people to enlist in the service.

Part III: Soldiers' Letters

1. Introduce students to Sullivan Ballou by giving them a brief account of his life.
2. If possible, play the audio reading of the Sullivan Ballou letter to the students. (Note the entire letter is not read in the audio).
3. Ask the students how the audio reading made them feel.
4. Next pass out copies of Sullivan Ballou's letter to his wife. Ask students to read the letter out loud. Point out that the letter is longer than the audio clip. Ask students why they think that is. Do the missing sections impact the meaning of the letter?
5. Have students identify difficult vocabulary in the letter.
6. As a class or working in small groups, discuss the following:
 - Why did Sullivan Ballou write this letter?
 - What is happening during the Civil War at the time the letter was written?
 - Sullivan wrote this letter to his wife. Who else might read this letter? Do you think Sullivan knew that other people might read the letter when he wrote it? Why or why not?

- What are some of the main points Sullivan makes in his letter?
 - Why does Sullivan say he is fighting in this war?
 - Is he afraid to go into this battle? Why or why not? What is he afraid of losing?
 - What choices did Sullivan make in choosing to go to war?
 - What does he mean when he writes about the "great debt we owe to those who went before us through the blood and suffering of the Revolution" in the first paragraph?
 - Sullivan writes that "God, my country and thee" make claims upon him. What are those claims and what is his relationship toward each?
 - Is Sullivan's love of country stronger than his love of family?
 - How did Sullivan try to comfort his wife and family in this letter? How do you think his family reacted to this letter?
 - Based upon Sullivan's letter, would you have enlisted to serve in the Civil War? Would you have wanted your brothers, husbands and fathers to sign up?
7. Pass out the letter from Adin Ballou and read it together. As a class discuss the following:
 - What can we infer about Adin Ballou, his family members, rank in the army, level of education, etc. from this letter? Use



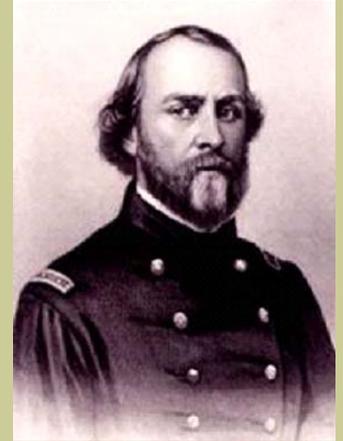
- the letter to support your statements.
- What is happening during the Civil War at the time the letter was written?
 - Does this letter reveal why Adin enlisted?
 - What does Adin believe they are fighting for?
 - How does Adin's letter compare to Sullivan's? Look at writing style as well as content.
 - What does Adin's letter reveal about the life of Civil War soldier?
8. Pass out the letter from William Ballou and read it together. As a class discuss the following.
 - What can we infer about William Ballou, his family members, rank in the army, level of education, etc. from this letter? Use the letter to support your statements.
 - What is happening during the Civil War at the time the letter was written?
 - Does this letter reveal why William enlisted?
 - What does William believe they are fighting for?
 - How does Williams letter compare to Sullivan's or Adin's? Look at writing style as well as content.
 - What does Adin's letter reveal about the life of Civil War soldier?
2. If their image is not identified, have students choose an imaginary identity for their soldier; one student will take will pretend to be the soldier. Have students reate a second identity for a family member at home to whom the soldier will write.
 3. Assign each pair to as either supporters of the Confederacy or the Union and give students different years between 1861 and 1865.
 4. Tell them to look at the map of the U.S. in 1861, and then to decide the following about themselves:
 - What are your names? •
 - How do you know one another, or how are you related?
 - How old are you?
 - Where do you live?
 5. Pass out the "Muster Roll Worksheet" and "Soldier's Friend Worksheet" and have students complete the worksheets using their imagination to develop their character more fully.
 6. Have students research the dates assigned to them to find out what events were going on at that time. They should reference some of these events in their letter.
 7. Have each soldier write a letter to his friend or family member. The friend will then respond. Letters should be handwritten. Use quill and ink if possible.
 8. Create a scrap book or bulletin board that includes the images of the soldier and their muster roll and the letters between them and their friend or family member for the entire class to see.

Part IV: Become a letter-writing soldier

1. With students working in pairs, pass out images of Civil War Soldiers to one student in each pair.

SULLIVAN BALLOU

Sullivan Ballou was born at Smithfield, Rhode Island, on March 28, 1829, and entered National Law School in Ballston, New York, after two years at Brown University. He practiced law in his hometown following his admission to the bar in 1853. Four years later he was elected to the state legislature, where he served as Speaker of the House. In 1855 he married Sarah Hart Shumway, with whom he had two sons.



Ballou, in 1861, joined the second regiment Rhode Island raised for the Union Cause. He accepted the rank of major, and in April, his was among the regiments sent to defend the nation's capital at the outset of the war. On July 14, 1861, he was headquartered at Washington, D.C., anticipating a move into the field. That Sunday evening as "two thousand men" slept nearby, he wrote a letter to his wife, "lest I should not be able to write you again." Keenly aware of the peril ahead, he wrote with great emotion of his love for family and country.

It was quite likely Ballou's last communication

with his family. Ballou was one of nearly seventy thousand Union and Confederate soldiers--many of them untested in battle--who converged near Manassas, Virginia, on July 21, 1861. Major Ballou was struck by a cannon ball early in the battle at Bull Run and died in a makeshift hospital. More than eight hundred Union and Confederate soldiers died at Bull Run, an indecisive contest that presaged the grim battles of the following four years.

The Sullivan Ballou letter is among the vast Civil War collections of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum in Springfield, Illinois.

LESSON 1: WHY FIGHT? SOLDIERS' LETTERS

SULLIVAN BALLOU LETTER

Copy of a letter from Sullivan Ballou to his wife before the battle of Bull Run

Headquarters

Camp Clark

July 14th 1861 Washington, D.C.

My Very dear wife:

The indications are very strong that we shall move in a few days perhaps tomorrow. And lest I should not be able to write you again I feel impelled to write a few lines that may fall under your eye when I shall be no more. Our movement may be one of a few days duration and full of pleasure. And it may be one of severe conflict and death to me. "Not my will but thine O God, be done" if it is necessary that I should fall on the battlefield for my Country I am ready. I have no misgivings about or lack of confidence in the Cause in which I am engaged, and my courage does not halt or falter. I know how American Civilization now leans upon the triumph of the Government and how great a debt we owe to those who went before us through the blood and suffering of the Revolution; and I am willing perfectly willing to lay down all my joys in this life to help maintain this Government and to pay that debt.

But my dear wife, when I know that with my own joys I lay down nearly all of yours,- and replace them in this life with care and sorrow when after having eaten for long years the bitter fruit of orphanage myself, I must offer it as their only sustenance to my dear little children. is it weak or dishonorable that while the banner of purpose floats calmly and proudly in the breeze, underneath my unbounded love for you my dear wife and children should struggle in fierce though useless contest with my love of Country

I cannot describe to you my feelings on this calm summer night when two thousand men are sleeping around me, many of them enjoying the last perhaps before that of Death. And I suspicious that Death is creeping behind me with his fatal dart am communing with God my country and thee. I have sought most closely and diligently and often in my breast [sic] for a wrong motive in thus hazarding the happiness of all that I love and I could not find one. A pure love of my Country and of the principles I have advocated before the people and the name of honor that I love more than I fear death have called upon me and I have obeyed.

Sarah my love for you is deathless it seems to bind me to you with mighty cables that nothing but Omnipotence can break. And yet my love of Country comes over me like a strong wind and bears me irresistibly with all those chains to the battle field the memories of the blissful moments I have enjoyed with you come crowding over me, and I feel most deeply grateful to God and you that I have enjoyed them so long. And how hard it is for me to give them up! And burn to ashes the the [sic] hopes of future years when God willing we might still have lived and loved together and see our boys grow up to honourable manhood around us. I know I have but few claims upon Divine Providence but something whispers to me perhaps it is the wafted prayer of my little Edgar that I shall return to my loved ones unharmed. If I do not my dear Sarah never forget how much I loved you nor that when my last breath escapes me on the battlefield it will whisper your name.

Forgive my many faults and the many pains I have caused you. How thoughtless how foolish I have sometimes been! How gladly would I wash out with my tears every little spot upon your happiness and struggle with all the misfortunes of this world to shield you and my children from harm but I cannot. I must watch you from the spirit world and hover near you while you buffet the storms with your precious little freight, and wait with sad patience till we meet to part no more.

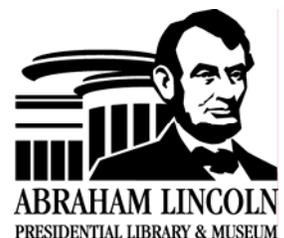
But Oh Sarah! If the dead can come back to this earth and flit unseen around those they love I shall always be with you in the brightest day and the darkest night amidst your happiest sceans [sic] and gloomiest hours always always and when the soft breeze fans your cheek it shall be my breath or the cool air your throbbing temple it shall be my spirit passing by.

Sarah, do not mourn me dead think I am gone and wait for me for we shall meet again.

As for my little boys they will grow up as I have done and never know a fathers love and care.

Little Willie is to [sic] young to remember me long and my blue eyed Edgar will keep my frolics with him among the dimmest memories of his childhood. Sarah I have unlimited confidence in your maternal care and your development of their characters. Tell my two Mothers I call Gods blessing upon them. Oh! Sarah I wait for you then come to me and lead thither my children

Sullivan



ADIN BALLOU LETTER

Camp Berlin No. 6th 1862

Dear Parents,

Today I am off duty because I am a little sick, and it is for that reason only for if I was well I should have all I could attend too either as guard in town, sentry in camp, or detailed for Police & fatigue duty—but this morning I have to report myself sick—a thing I have not done before since I joined the Regt. Though I have done many days duty when I ought rather to have been in bed had we such a luxury in this Godforsaken army.

My complaint is that so prevalent among all the troops in the field namely: The Diarroeah cause by our poor food & exposure to the night air.

...If Wms. Regt has been ordered away please let me know how to direct to him. Is his a nine months Regt or is he enlisted for three years. I hope it is the former for his benefit—both morally & physically. I fear he cannot stand the hardships at all. He undoubtedly thinks it hard where he now is—but he will find that his eyes are not yet opening to what is in the field before him.

There & at home and mine was the only hand needed to consummate the wishes of our damnable politicians I should withhold it though I looked into the muzzle of a cannon to be discharged at me or not as I gave my answer.

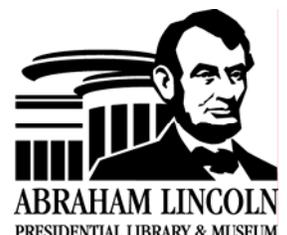
Patriotism is played out among the troops. The flaming promises of public speakers have lost their charms to the soldiers & he who would one year ago faced the foe with ardent love of country & justice with unlimited confidence in his officeres to now march to the battlefield with slow & doubtful steps. He knows not for what he fights—he has no confidence in his leaders—and he who a year ago could meet the enemy as a soldier should now form plans to avoid the encounter—he once anticipated with throbbing heart and body blood.

Our politicians see no country but the extension surface of the almighty \$. It is the only object—their wise & sagacious minds can comprehend—& the soldier poor as his opportunities are for learning the present & real condition of the country fails not to see it. Where then will he look for leaders on which he can depent?

Filially Yours

Adin

Source: *Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library*



LESSON 1: WHY FIGHT? SOLDIERS' LETTERS

WILLIAM A. BALLOU LETTER

PS Direct as before

Camp Cordman Dec 24

Morehead City NC

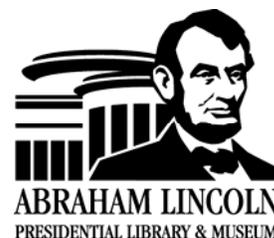
Dear Parents

I received your letter day before yesterday & was much pleased to hear from home as it is the first letter I have received since I arrived hear. You have properly seen by the pappers that our Reg has been on an expedition, but you will see by the heading of this that we are not with them. They have just returned pretty well rised up with fatigue & hardship they wer in 3 engagements the lost in killed & wounded is about 70 the Flag carrier had his head & arms blown off my a shell & one of the guard was killed at the same time Col. Codman who was near by at the time took the flag and marched forward 5 or 6 paces in front of the line & stuck it in the ground sat down beside it, at the time the men wer all laying down & our batterys playing over them & the Rebs wer doing ther best in front with artiltery the boy say the shot & shell made a terrible whistling.

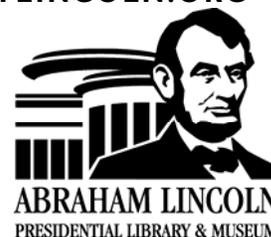
I think we wer luckey not to be with the Reg. we are doing picket duty hear it is a place abot as large as city Factory & the end of the US Military RR ther is a very large depot hear & a grate meny stoars her all the time so we have to look out that the Rebs do not git to near, I have been quite sick for 8 or 9 days but am getting beter now, our co. is all alone hear in the plae of 4 others that wer hear so it makes the duty most to hard for the men, but I think I shall git along the officers have done all they could to make me comfortable perhaps they do more for me than they would for most privates for on my arrival hear I was abouted to act as an Ofercer of the Guard in which capacity I have acted ever since & given grate satisfying to the ofer-cers & men, The land arounde hear & Newbern is very low & sandy I have no seen a piece of grass ground since I have been hear it make me think of seech planes nothing but sand but they raise good cotton on it. The wither is warm but the nights as cold there is Robings sining & we have flowers until within a faew weeks but the frost has kill them now but the trees are all green & it is not very bad for decemer we have good quarters & most of the men are well. Lew Whitiker sends his best etc. to you send me 5 or 6 postage stamps in you next for we cant git them hear.

W A Ballou

Source: *Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library*



MUSTER ROLE WORKSHEET



PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS

Name _____

Rank _____ Company _____ Unit _____

Address _____

Age _____ Height _____ Hair _____

Eye Color _____ Gender _____ Marital Status _____

Occupation _____

Country of Birth _____ Education Level _____

SERVICE RECORD

Union or Confederate? _____

Joined When _____ Joined Where _____

Battles Fought _____

Prisoner ? _____

Why did you enlist? _____

NEXT OF KIN

Name _____ Relationship _____

Name _____ Relationship _____

Name _____ Relationship _____

Name _____ Relationship _____

SOLDIER'S FRIEND WORKSHEET

PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS

Name _____

Relationship to Soldier _____

Address _____

Age _____ Height _____ Hair _____

Eye Color _____ Gender _____ Marital Status _____

Occupation _____

Country of Birth _____ Education Level _____

Union or Confederate? _____

NEXT OF KIN

Name _____ Relationship _____

Name _____ Relationship _____

Name _____ Relationship _____

Name _____ Relationship _____

