

LINCOLN SEMINAR: GILDER-LEHRMAN INSTITUTE OF AMERICAN HISTORY
CIVIL WAR INSTITUTE AT GETTYSBURG COLLEGE
DOCUMENT EXERCISE

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WAR AND MEMORY: JACKSON COUNTY IN THE CIVIL WAR

“But, nevertheless, the generation that carried on the war has been set apart by its experience. Through our great good fortune, in our youth our hearts were touched with fire. It was given to us to learn at the outset that life is a profound and passionate thing.”

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Memorial Day Speech, 1884

To future Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, the Civil War was the defining moment of his life. As a senior in college Holmes enlisted in the 20th Massachusetts Regiment and saw extensive action in several major engagements in the eastern theater. In his oft-quoted and moving speech from 1884 he attempted to articulate the profound experience of war for his audience, particularly the impact of war on soldiers. Twenty years beyond the war, Holmes was clearly still processing both the excitement and tragedy he witnessed as a young man.

Indeed, veterans in any war remind us that there are moments in life when average people become part of the grander sweep of history. Located in central Wisconsin, Jackson County sent 408 men off to fight on distant fields of battle from 1861-1865, 60 who gave their lives in the cause. Company G of the 10th Wisconsin Infantry Regiment, for example, included 95 young men from the village of Black River Falls who saw action in Alabama, Tennessee, and Mississippi. What did these young men believe they were fighting for? Did the war change their views of slavery and the Union? How did the memory of war impact their lives and the lives of their families in the years beyond the war? Finally, how did national leaders frame the memory of the war for succeeding generations?

Historians David Blight and Chandra Manning have produced significant scholarship within the past decade that focuses on such questions. In her book [What This Cruel War Was Over](#) (2007), Manning explores the experience of the Civil War through the eyes of the soldiers who fought it. She asserts that young northerners, such as the members of Company G, were dramatically changed due to their forays into the south. It was there that they witnessed slavery for the first time in their lives and the experience marked them in a variety of ways. Manning’s research suggests that communities like Black River Falls were changed as a result. David Blight in [War and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory](#) (2001), further explores the complex and competing narratives of memory that Americans were absorbing in the post-war years. As Robert Penn Warren once wrote, “The Civil War is our felt history – history lived in the national imagination.” Blight suggests that the three dominant and colliding “visions” of the war were the emancipationist vision, the white supremacist vision, and the reconciliation vision. Emancipationists saw the war as the beginning of a road to justice and shared freedom for African-American people. White Supremacists, on the other hand, highlighted the “lost cause” of the South and the need to restore

the “proper” relationship between whites and non-whites in America. Finally, those seeking reconciliation between North and South were more interested in healing the wounds imposed by the sectional conflict and the restoration of union above all else. Blight convincingly argues that reconciliation ultimately won out at the expense of the vision for emancipation. Further, the victory for reconciliation relegated former slaves and their concerns to the back-burner of national priorities for decades, while ever-lurking white supremacists pursued their agenda through the legal sanctioning of segregation as well as the use of intimidation and violence.

The following exercise is designed to help students explore the complex memory of the war as presented to succeeding generations of citizens through local newspapers in Jackson County. The four news articles appeared in the Badger State Banner, the local paper in Black River Falls, and the major source of news for people living in the post-war period.

DOCUMENT #1: 25TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE BATTLE OF GETTYSBURG

CONTEXT: Anniversaries of Gettysburg occurred at regular intervals, most notably in 1888, 1913, and 1938. Such occasions and the press coverage that accompanied them helped solidify and define the memory of the great battle from July of 1863. The following article appeared on the front page of the local paper in Black River Falls in July of 1888. The location of the ceremonies was significant due to the history surrounding the death of Union General John F. Reynolds on the opening day of the battle during which he was supervising the placement of the 2nd Wisconsin. General Fairchild (then Colonel) of the 2nd Wisconsin lost his left arm during the exchange. (Historian Stephen Sears recounts this moment of the war in Chapter 7 of his book Gettysburg). Also note the role of Confederate General James Longstreet during the ceremonies. Longstreet was General Lee’s principle subordinate during many of the greatest battles of the eastern theater, including Gettysburg.

SOURCE: BADGER STATE BANNER. 5 July 1888.

“ON HISTORIC GROUND” (excerpts)

Gettysburg, Pa. July 2 – Wisconsin dedicated her seven monuments Saturday on the Gettysburg battlefield. The exercises were held at Reynolds Grove and within a few feet of where that General was killed during the first day’s engagement. Governor Rusk was not present, and the State Treasurer, Colonel H. B. Harshaw, accepted the monuments on behalf of the State. United States Senator Spooner then delivered an eloquent oration. The monuments were then formally presented to the Gettysburg Battlefield Memorial Association by General Lucius Fairchild. General Fairchild spoke with great feeling, and many of the veterans were moved to tears. Governor Beaver, as ex-office President of the Memorial Association, received the memorials in the name of the association, promising to guard and protect them. This closed the formal dedicatory exercises, but a number of speeches were afterward made by prominent Wisconsin men. The seven Wisconsin monuments are splendid structures, and are those of Third, Fifth, Second, Seventh, Sixth, Twenty-sixth, and Company G, First Regiment Sharpshooters.

At 2 o'clock p.m. the road from town to Reynolds Grove was crowded with carriages and pedestrians on their way to witness the exercises of the First Corps . . . General Longstreet was given a rousing reception. He said:

"I was not in time to witness any part of the engagement of the first day of Gettysburg, but am pleased to be here in time to witness these ceremonies and to express sympathy which should go out from all hearts to those who know how to appreciate the conduct of soldiers who offer their lives on the altar of their country. The gauge of battle was pitched and here the great army of the South, the pride and glory of that section, found itself overmatched, arrested in its march of triumph, and forced to stand and recoil, but not for want of gallantry, fortitude or faith. The battle of the second day by McLane's and Hood's Divisions and part of Anderson's was as spirited as some of the dashing efforts of the first Napoleon, but before the end it was found to be work to up heave the mountain. That of the third day by Pickett's Division and Trumble's marching 1200 yards under the fire of 100 cannon and 10,000 of musketry has no parallel nor is not likely to have in the annals of war. This battle scene recurs in my mind with vivid force. But times have changed. Twenty-five years have softened the usages of war. Those frowning heights have given over their savage tone, and our meetings for the exchange of blows and broken bones are left for more congenial days and for friendly greetings."

The band played "Dixie" before Longstreet's speech and "Yankee Doodle" after which General Fairchild was introduced. He said twenty-five years had made it possible to sandwich a Yankee and a Confederate between "Yankee Doodle" and "Dixie." The men of the North did not love the men of the South less, but they loved the old flag more; and the men of the South did not the old flag less, but they loved States' sovereignty more. The old flag still remained, and all said amen, from the gulf to the lakes.

DOCUMENT #2: 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE BATTLE OF GETTYSBURG

CONTEXT: The following article appeared alongside other state, national, and international news in the Badger State Banner as one of two stories in the edition concerning the semi-centennial anniversary of Gettysburg. This incident is cited in chapter 7 of Gabor Boritt's landmark book, The Gettysburg Gospel as evidence of the lingering animosities that existed amidst the general air of reconciliation that surrounded the anniversaries of the battle.

SOURCE: BADGER STATE BANNER. 10 JULY 1913.

"FIGHT OVER LINCOLN"

"Veteran Resents Slur on Martyred President's Name at Gettysburg"

Gettysburg, Pa., July 5 – Seven men were stabbed in a fight in a dining room of the Gettysburg hotel as a result of a fight started when several men aroused the anger of an old veteran in blue by abusing Lincoln Wednesday. . . The fight started shortly before seven o'clock, when the dining

room was full, and caused a panic among the scores of guests. The veteran, who was unhurt and disappeared in the melee, was sitting near Farbor and Carroll (two victims) when he heard the slighting remarks about Lincoln. He jumped to his feet and began to defend the martyred President and berated his detractors. The men who were stabbed, according to the information the surgeons gathered, jumped to the defense of the veteran when the others closed in. Knives were drawn in a second and the room was thrown into an uproar. Women fled for the door and crowded to the windows ready to jump to the street below. It was all over before the other men in the room could act and the men responsible for it got out and away. The fight spurred the medical men again to an effort to have the Gettysburg saloons closed during the remainder of the celebration.

DOCUMENT #3: WOODROW WILSON SPEECH EXCERPTS

CONTEXT: The 50th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg, called the “Peace Jubilee” by its organizers, was an amazing ritual “designed to be a festival of sectional reconciliation” (Blight, p. 8). Over 53,000 veterans, most in their 70s and 80s, attended. Woodrow Wilson, the first southerner elected President since the Civil War, initially declined the invitation to travel to Gettysburg, but later changed his mind due to the momentous nature of the occasion. The following article appeared with other reports about the reunion in the Black River Falls paper. The article included the full text of Wilson’s speech, parts of which are excerpted here.

SOURCE: BADGER STATE BANNER. 10 JULY 1913.

“SPEECH BY WILSON”

“President Addresses Great Throng on the Gettysburg Battlefield”

Gettysburg, Pa. July 4 – President Wilson’s address today was the chief feature of the National day in the celebration of the semi-centennial of the Battle of Gettysburg. It was heard by a vast crowd of old soldiers and others and was warmly applauded. The President’s address follows:

“Friends and Fellow Citizens:

I need not tell you what the Battle of Gettysburg meant. These gallant men in blue and gray sit all about us here. Many of them met upon this ground in grim and deadly struggle. Upon these famous fields and hillsides their comrades died about them. In their presence it were an impertinence to discourse upon how the battle went, how it ended, what it signified! But fifty years have gone by since then, and I crave the privilege of speaking to you for a few minutes of what those fifty years have meant.

What have they meant? They have meant peace and union and vigor, and the maturity and might of a great nation. How wholesome and healing the peace has been! We have found one

another again as brothers and comrades in arms, enemies no longer, generous friends rather, our battles long past, the quarrel forgotten—except that we shall not forget the splendid valor, the manly devotion of the men then arrayed against one another, now grasping hands and smiling into each other's eyes. How complete the union has become and how dear to all of us, how unquestioned, how benign and majestic, as State after State has been added to this our great family of free men! How handsome the vigor, the maturity, the might of the great Nation we love with undivided hearts; how full of large and confident promise that a life will be wrought out that will crown its strength with gracious justice and with a happy welfare that will touch all alike with deep contentment! We are debtors to those fifty crowded years; they have made us heirs to a mighty heritage.

But do we deem the Nation complete and finished? These venerable men crowding here to this famous field have set us a great example of devotion and utter sacrifice. They were willing to die that the people might live. But their task is done. Their day is turned into evening. They look to us to perfect what they established. Their work is handed on to us, to be done in another way, but not in another spirit. Our day is not over; it is upon us in full tide.

DOCUMENT #4: SCHOOL VISIT BY VETERANS COMMEMORATING LEE'S SURRENDER

CONTEXT: Patriotic programs were common in the public schools in the early years of the 20th century. The children attending the program noted here were born in the years 1897-1909 and may have grown up hearing stories of the war from the grandfathers. George M. Perry and Henry J. Ormsby were veterans of the Civil War, representatives of the GAR organization, and highly respected civic leaders in Black River Falls during this period. It is worth noting that among those listening to the veterans were 30 seniors from the class of 1915. At least two members of that class, Lawrence Jones and Edwin Olson, enlisted in the Army in 1917 and were involved in combat in the Great War.

SOURCE: BADGER STATE BANNER. 15 APRIL 1915.

“AN INTERESTING REPORT”

“Of the High School Celebration of the Fiftieth Anniversary of Lee’s Surrender. Reminiscences by Old Soldiers.”

Last Friday afternoon the students in both the grade and High school buildings, assembled in the high school auditorium to have the pleasure of hearing a number of short addresses given by prominent citizens of this city in commemoration of the semi-centennial anniversary of the surrender of Gen. Lee to Gen. Grant at Appomattox Court House, which was the terminus of the Civil War. G.M. Perry and H.J. Ormsby represented the G.A.R. and gave incidents of the war. At the close of their talks, Mr. Hull gave a short address.

Mr. Perry, the first speaker, gave some of his experiences at that time. He was then scarcely more than a boy, but like many other boys of sixteen or eighteen who had enlisted in their nation's defense, he had seen considerable of the hardships of war, and had suffered in consequence. On April 9th, 1865, in the siege of Richmond, Mr. Perry's company was waiting for the command to advance and continue the fighting which had been going on for several days. The expectancy of the soldiers was heightened as they waited by the firing of a few shots some distance away. While in this expectant frame of mind, a horseman was seen coming wildly toward them on the well known horse of one of the Majors. As he rushed onward it was seen that pandemonium seemed to break loose behind him, among the soldiers as he passed, "Lee has surrendered," came the cry as he neared Mr. Perry's regiment, and then the eminent Jackson County lawyer to be joined in the great shout of rejoicing, at the gladness that the war was over, and that they were going home. Mr. Perry stated that it was the most happy day of their lives, and that he has never seen such an enthusiastic throng of men since.

Mr. Ormsby's address was forcefully given and he traced the positions of the opposing troops on the black board, as he proceeded, giving the students a clear idea of the difficulties to be encountered on both sides, and just why, by strategic moves on the part of the Union army, Gen. Lee was compelled to surrender. The opposing troops where he was stationed were facing sharpened poles placed by the enemy in such positions that it was a great set back to any force of men who might try to rush the entrenchments. Petersburg, and its relative position to Richmond was diagrammed, as was also Appomattox Court House, about a hundred miles west of Richmond.

Mr. Hull's address dealt chiefly with the veneration in which the younger generation of Americans should hold the passing remnant of the old soldiers who fought so valiantly for the perpetuation of the Union a half century ago. Mr. Hull said that the present personal association with these old soldiers will be something to look back to with pleasure and pride in the years to come. In his talk the students were appealed to to stand firm for the nation in civil matters, even though they be never called upon to take up arms for our nation.

The opportunity to hear the patriotic discussions about and by the old soldiers, in which so many personal reminiscence of those troublous times abounded, was greatly appreciated by the students of the schools, and the incidents elated will doubtless be remembered for many years."

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

FROM DOCUMENT 1

1. How old (roughly) would Civil War veterans be at the time of the 25th Anniversary of Gettysburg?
2. What is the significance of the attendance by Longstreet at this event? What is the tone of his address?
3. Select two or three passages from the document that illustrate the theme of reconciliation of north and south.

FROM DOCUMENT 2

In spite of the fact that this account is sketchy as to motives, what does the reaction by the “old veteran in blue” indicate about the memory of the Civil War, and particularly Lincoln 50 years beyond the events of Gettysburg?

FROM DOCUMENT 3

1. What is the tone of Wilson’s speech? Focus on paragraph 2 in particular and identify three underlying assumptions that he is making concerning the war and its aftermath.
2. Do you believe that Wilson’s background as a Virginian was significant? Why or why not?

FROM DOCUMENT 4

1. How is “war” presented to the school-children by the two veterans? If you had been a student sitting in the audience that day, how would you feel about what you were hearing from the old veterans? Recall that you were born in 1897, 32 years after the war ended.
2. What is the essence of Ormsby’s message to the students? Why is it important that students hear from the aging veterans?

THE INTERACTION OF THE FOUR DOCUMENTS

1. Point out two similarities between Document 1 and Document 3. Why was reconciliation important at anniversary events as depicted here?
2. Pretend that you are 17 years old and it is 1913. What message about the Civil War will you take away from the article excerpted in document 3?
3. How does document 2 illustrate the conflict between personal memory and “official memory” as depicted in documents 1 and 3? Is the behavior of the old veteran surprising?
4. Though the account is limited, the theme of reconciliation seems to be missing from document 4. Why do you think that is the case?

SOURCES

The secondary sources cited in this exercise provide further context for students (Blight, Manning, Boritt, and Sears). In addition to those readings, I used the following sources, both of which are located at the Jackson County History Room in Black River Falls, Wisconsin.

Newton, Charles A. Jackson County’s Role in the Civil War, 1961. (Master’s Thesis).

THE BADGER STATE BANNER (microfiche collection). 5 July 1888, 13 July 1913, and 15 April, 1915.