

**Interview with Jason Fitzgerald  
Eighth Grade History Teacher  
Civil War Letters**

**1. Civil War Letters Lesson: Objectives (1:24)**

I taught this lesson to five classes, three inclusion and two general ed. classes and our main focus was to try to determine what the root cause of the Civil War was from the soldier's perspective. So often, we have our students read textbooks and they take a look at the six causes of the Civil War that historians decided were the accurate portrayals of these, but the students I feel, really need to have a better understanding of what the Civil War was from the soldier's perspective so that they could get a better understanding of why these people would actually risk their lives, put their families in danger and put their nation in danger to fight this war.

Unit 4 in the Montgomery County Curriculum is totally dedicated to the Civil War, the buildup to the Civil War, the Civil War itself and reconstruction. I was a little concerned in trying to take four days to talk mainly about the Emancipation Proclamation. Usually that would be a day lesson in the curriculum. But I really believed that moving things around and really focusing four days on the Emancipation Proclamation gave them a better foundation for talking about Reconstruction.

**2. Civil War Letters Lesson: Day 1 (2:26)**

The first day started off actually taking a look at the textbook and taking a look at what historians believe are the causes of the Civil War. We'd already gotten a little bit into the Civil War. We'd already discussed the first major battles and this whole concept of slavery dividing the nation, Abraham Lincoln's election of 1860 and how that divided the nation itself and the secession of the southern states. So they had an idea—their own idea—of why the Civil War would break out, but they didn't have a full understanding of all the aspects. So we laid it out with a T-chart and I had the students take a look at the textbook and outline the causes of the Civil War.

And then actually had them evaluate and had them list, based on their own prior knowledge, which ones they thought were the most important. And I also had them justify their ranking.

As a class we got together and we used the sticky dots that all students love to use. I had them choose which one they thought was the best. And then I had them actually write on the sticky dot which one they thought was the best, and then walk up and post it. And we posted it as a big group, but that makes sure the students don't change their mind as they see other students putting their dots on a different square. So I got really accurate depiction of what the students thought.

They could see where the rest of the class felt was the most important cause of the Civil War according to historians, and we were able to have a great class discussion about how they were all interrelated, how they were and were not about slavery, and sort of got a feel for what historians thought so that we could then move on and take a look at what soldiers thought in the letters.

I think they were surprised at the clustering and actually at the fact that not all of the boxes were used. All of the students saw these as causes of the Civil War, but when you asked them which is the most important they really; they filtered down into just a couple. The secession of the southern states, the election of 1860, and the number one cause that every single class picked out was slavery and the issue and the failure to compromise from Congress.

### **3. Civil War Letters: Day 2 (3:32)**

From there we were able to move on the second day and actually take a look at the letters. I actually printed out color copies of the letters. So it looked like they had actual letters from these soldiers, the actual things. I used an LCD projector and as a whole class we went through the records of John White and Jasper Barney.

We were able to take a look at who they were, which side they fought on, what was their rank in and out and I was able to clear up a lot of those misconceptions about, “What is a Private?” “Is a Sergeant a good rank to be in the military?” “What would a Sergeant do?” And then in the case of Jasper Barney, “Why did he exit as a Private?” and what might be those causes.

The website that I had the students go to and we looked at as a class was the *Civil War Soldiers and Sailors* website where you are able to look up specific Civil War soldiers and sailors, put in their first and last name, then put in which side they fought for, and what unit they were with. And you are able to pull up just very basic records on these soldiers and sailors. You had their name, you had their rank in and out, you have which side they fought for. You are able to piece together a very rudimentary picture of what these soldiers and sailors were actually like from a military perspective.

The most interesting part specifically with John White is that there were I believe over 200 John Whites that fought for the Confederacy and in fact over 200 John Whites who fought for the Confederacy in Virginia. So you have to have a little bit of background knowledge and understand that before you go to the site—and you can have a great discussion as I did with my students about, [09:00] “What does that mean for an historian?” As I’m looking at John White’s letter I need to know certain things about John White such as he was around at the Battle of Fredericksburg. They actually have a basis for understanding what historians have to go through to identify these people.

Before the class started, I pre-divided the class into people who were going to research Jasper Barney and people who were going to research John White. And I really did that based on ability level and their ability to grasp historical understanding.

### **4. Transcribing The Letters (3:45)**

The transcribing went a lot better than I thought. Their biggest problem was the handwriting and the misspellings. The best reactions that I got from students, especially students who chronically spell incorrectly, was that, “Oh wow, these are real people too.”

I think so much of the history class is already transcribed materials or textbook materials [13:00] that these students forget that these soldiers, these people in these time periods, had the same issues with spelling, grammar, and mechanics that we all do and they didn’t have

spellcheck. And I think that realization was actually one of the funniest parts as a teacher, especially when a student who chronically spells incorrectly started complaining that Jasper Barney or John White were spelling incorrectly.

When you take a look at these letters in their first, in their handwritten form, not all of the words are spelled correctly and not all of the words are written out. Regiment for example, “Rgt” was one that a lot of students had difficulty with. But I think the absolute best case of having this—and the best case for having the students transcribe, is that they get to piece together the history themselves.

For example, in both Jasper Barney’s letter and John White’s letter, they don’t write out the date 1862, they just write ’62. I actually overheard a conversation of a student say, “Oh well this letter was written in 1962” and without a beat just started moving on. And the other student says, “Wait a minute, what, what, this—that can’t be 1962, it’s 1862, remember this is the Civil War.” And it was that realization that I think really makes this a real experience for the students and they really had to start putting their knowledge, their prior knowledge to use, in using these primary sources.

John White has a tendency to, in a very fast manner, not cross his “T”s, but actually put the line above the “T,” the actual stem of the “t” and to the right. Once you figure that out it’s easier to read, but if you haven’t figured that out, the students have a really hard time trying to figure out what’s a “T” and what’s not, and trying to piece those words together.

Transcribing also gives them a really good opportunity to work with the teacher and talk about, “How do we break down these words?” This is a perfect example of where context clues come in. If you don’t understand a word, well what do you do? You look on either side of the word. You look at a couple of letters, try to see if there’s a prefix or a suffix that you can use, and having the students pull that English knowledge into a historical text, I can’t help but think is going to help them later on in life in anything that they do.

I only had them transcribe the first page if they could even get that because it wasn’t about the transcription itself. I didn’t want them to fully transcribe the letter that—at a certain point that’s just an exercise in futility. What I was more interested in was getting them to really connect on day two with their person, with their handwriting, with their life experience as they fought in the Battle of Fredericksburg or as they were—they found themselves in a hospital writing home. And seeing the handwriting and making that connection with the historical figure I think helped them throughout the next two lessons to really understand their soldier and understand where the soldier was coming from when they’d make certain comments about slavery, emancipation, and why they were fighting the war.

### **5. Civil War Letters Lesson: Day 3 (4:57)**

Day three, I think, was the messiest day. It was also the most fun as a teacher because that’s the day when everything gets blown out of the water. We’ve already taken a look at what historians have distilled down into the main causes of the Civil War. We’ve already taken a look and tried to transcribe these letters.

Day three is when I actually give them the transcripts and I have them figure out what the letter itself means, and what these Civil War soldiers' views are on slavery, the Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation, and why they're fighting. Why they're risking their lives and their family's welfare to fight in this war.

I think one of the most interesting things that students come up with is when they take a look at Jasper Barney's letter. Jasper Barney is fighting the Civil War for a regiment in Illinois, a Union regiment, and he is all about the Emancipation Proclamation. He's actually writing a letter to his brother and says to his brother: *you don't believe in freeing these slaves. In fact, I didn't either, but you know, six months into the war I guarantee you that you will, that once you're in this war, you're going to want to free the slaves.* And that makes sense to a lot of students until they then read that Jasper Barney is not against slavery. And there's this cognitive dissonance there.

So often we talk about the Civil War and the Union, we talk about Abolitionists, and students make the connection that all northerners were Abolitionists, and that's just not true. When Jasper Barney is talking about this and talking about how he doesn't mind slavery, but he likes the Emancipation Proclamation, the students in their groups, in those heterogeneous groups, are able to sit down and try to figure out, "Well, what does that mean? Why?"

And when they start beating around ideas, it takes a good 15-20 minutes for them to realize that it's not that he likes the Emancipation Proclamation because it frees the slaves, but he likes the Emancipation Proclamation because he's hoping it's going to end the war quickly. And that's a very pragmatic view that Jasper Barney takes, but one that the students wouldn't get from a history textbook at all. That's never discussed.

John White on the other hand gives a really interesting picture as a Confederate soldier because I think a lot of my students when they walked in and through discussions afterward this was confirmed, that they had this opinion that Confederate soldiers were evil. But when you read John White's letter he's not, he's very concerned about the Emancipation Proclamation, not because it frees the slaves, but because he's really worried about his family. And that brings a really human sense to what the Confederates were thinking. This was a way of life. But also, he was more worried about his family itself and his wife.

After the students had about 10 to 20 minutes to actually read through this letter and try to understand their soldier's letter, we came back together as a class and we did a Venn diagram on what both soldiers thought about the Emancipation Proclamation and what they thought about slavery.

We had Jasper Barney who was for slavery, but also for the Emancipation Proclamation, and John White who was for slavery and absolutely against the Emancipation Proclamation.

And allowing students from other groups to see what the other soldier thought really spawned a great discussion about why both would have that reaction and what their soldier was actually saying in the letter. Students actually became the teachers through this Venn diagram because they had to explain it to the other students in the class who hadn't read that letter what exactly

that meant. Why did Jasper Barney like the Emancipation Proclamation, but was also for slavery? And how he could be that way? And how as a northerner he wasn't an abolitionist? And so the students actually led that discussion just guided by me through the Venn diagram and some class discussion.

Students really wanted to share specifically John White's letter. They really wanted to share the fact that John White wasn't a bad guy. That he was really worried about an uprising, a slave uprising around his home.

And they were also interested in talking about how their letters were written. The grammar, the spelling, the fact that John White might have very much been in a hurry because he was between battles when he wrote his letter, and those type of intricacies really came out in this discussion.

## **6. Students and Primary Sources (2:51)**

One of the best things about using primary sources is we're able to use students previous knowledge to build off of primary source documents so that they can create their own history, their own form of history. Some of these letters are really hard. Jasper Barney's writing is difficult to read, but not nearly as difficult as John White's.

Because John White apparently folded this letter and actually wrote on both sides of his paper, so that you see some of the bleed-through of the ink. Those type of things you really have to take in consideration when you start dividing out classes with primary sources because a lot of these students have difficulty reading anyway, let alone reading primary source documents from the 1800s. So keeping that in mind I divided out the class into groups so that they'd have, not an easy time, but maybe an easier time, taking a look at these letters and being able to really dive into them and transcribe them and feel a sense of accomplishment in and of itself.

When I first handed out the transcripts I asked the students what resources do we have in this room if you run into trouble in your group. A dictionary, some of these words are old or some of these words are unfamiliar to them.

On day two we talked about a regiment and what a regiment was in comparison to a unit. We talked about ranks, sergeant, private, but not all of these words do they totally understand. For example, furlough was brought up in one of the letters and they have to look it up in the dictionary because that's just not a common word amongst eighth grade students.

Interestingly enough they also understood that furlough, as it was spelled in the letter "furlow" is not our modern day spelling of furlough, so they had to work around that a little bit.

Their second resource in the class was obviously the textbook. Secondary sources are great reference material. And then they identified me as the teacher, as third. We've been working with primary sources a lot this year in class and they understood the hierarchy of asking for help and they tried to do it themselves first, and that was really spectacular.

Interestingly enough when I read their essays, they had a really difficult time merging the sources. I'd say out of about 160 students that I teach, only about five actually referenced John

White and Jasper Barney. Only about 10 probably referenced the Emancipation Proclamation itself. Most of them relied on the textbook.

### **7. Civil War Letters Lesson: Day 4 (1:47)**

Day four is when we took a look at the Emancipation Proclamation itself. The students had read about it and heard about it and they'd obviously read about it in the two letters, but we hadn't taken a look at the Emancipation Proclamation itself, in its own words.

I broke it down into the main sections where Abraham Lincoln talks about what exactly—who exactly is freed, why he has the authority to free them and what it means for the border states.

I again put them in heterogeneous groups and I jigsawed them so that when we all came back together as a class we could piece together exactly what the Emancipation Proclamation was all about.

I think the most, the difficult thing is the idea that this is a military measure.

That this wasn't a law and that Abraham Lincoln was working as Commander-in-Chief not necessarily as President, and that that was his authority to actually end slavery in the South, in the Confederate rebel states. They had a difficult time at first understanding how he could Constitutionally ban slavery when previously we talked about how the Constitution allows for slavery.

When it came time for the BCR or the essay at the end, I had the students take a look at both the Emancipation Proclamation, both letters that we worked with, and the textbook, and I asked them the question, "Was the Civil War about slavery prior to the Emancipation Proclamation?" And I said they were to use all of these sources in a paragraph.

### **8. Changing Understanding of Slavery (1:09)**

What I think was great about this lesson was that it pulled that morality back a little bit and said, "Okay, why did the southerners have slavery? Why were they fighting for slavery? Was it a moral issue? Did they really like to have slaves?"

And vice versa with the north. What were they thinking and what did the abolitionists believe? And that spawned really good discussions even after this lesson sequence was completely done about abolitionism, about the end of the Civil War, about the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment and why our nation decided to end slavery officially. And what did ending slavery mean for the actual slaves themselves? Why did we need the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment? So this lesson sequence gives building blocks for students much later on as a foundation for discussing slavery, for discussing the economy and the politics around slavery.

### **9. What Did Your Students Learn? (1:43)**

The students tended to like the lesson. In fact, I think their favorite part was actually transcribing. It was something that very rarely do we get to do or take the time to do in history class. So as a new skill I think they really enjoyed it.

I think they did enjoy getting away from the textbook and this textbook definition and working with these complex concepts. I'm not sure that every single student fully got it, but I believe

working with these primary sources and working with how to analyze these complex concepts, they're slowly starting to develop cognitively how to put this history together and how to work with cognitive dissonance and these differing opinions on again, complex issues.

I think the students learned skills that they can apply to other lessons that really help them with historical thinking.

The other day I handed out a poem by Walt Whitman, "Oh Captain, My Captain" to discuss Lincoln and what the nation felt, how the nation felt about Lincoln, especially right after his death. And the very first thing that they did was say, "Who wrote this? When was this?" And that sourcing is very key.

The context clues really help too, especially when you're dealing with a poem. I know that they've gained skills through this activity especially working with the letters of Barney and White and how to pull that context—those context clues out.

### **10. What Did You Learn From Teaching This Lesson? (2:26)**

As a teacher I really learned that students like working with these primary sources. I've done a lot of primary source activities in the past, but a lot of them have been pre-made. They've already been pre-transcribed or maybe broken down a little bit already by the textbook people or by worksheets.

Giving the students the opportunity to work directly with these primary sources, to hold them in their hand, to see the written words on the page, I think really made a connection with the students that really brought them into this lesson a lot more. [39:00]

What I've learned about students is I think even more fascinating, is that they really like these complex concepts. They don't like the distilled history. When I was talking with some of the students, one of the students enjoined in by a number of others said, "Wow, that was really interesting" and I asked them, "Well why was it interesting?" They said, "Because it wasn't easy." And as a teacher I kind of smiled because so often we hear, "Oh, this is too hard; I don't want to do it." What made it interesting for them, after further discussion, was the fact that these concepts weren't cookie cutter. We had moved away from—"The slavery is bad concept" and, "The north was good. The south was bad. The Civil War was horrible"—these elementary ideas, to more complex ideas of the social and political concept at the time, that northerners weren't all abolitionists, that they had their own ideas about slavery and about the Emancipation Proclamation as opposed to southerners.

So it was really a way that the students got to play with the ideas and read about the ideas of these people in more complex, less general terms. And I think they really found that interesting.

I think as a history teacher what I'd like to focus on now is not just incorporating more of these primary sources in more lessons like these into my teaching, but also taking a look at how I can build those skills so that they can integrate these concepts.

### **11. How Often Did You Use Primary Sources This Year? (3:14)**

This past summer I took the “Teaching American History” course through George Mason University. So starting from that vantage point I walked into this year, really pumped up with some primary sources that I really wanted to try to use.

So from the very beginning I started working with my students on trying to source material. Who wrote it, when did they write it, trying to build context for the material, such as Yankee Doodle. What is a Yankee Doodle? Well, what could that possibly mean? Understanding that it started off as a British song and it was later taken by the Yankees as kind of mockery or a satire, and using those contexts to build historical meaning. And I think the students have really started to get into it, in understanding that history is not nice and neat like the textbook makes it seem, but really these historical documents, these historical songs, go back and forth between groups of people and they have different uses. And depending on the use, depending on the time period, depending on the context, these historical documents really take on different meanings.

So I think starting off the year with primary source documents and working historically with them has helped the students better understand the letters of Jasper Barney and John White. They already had the skills of sourcing. They already had an idea that they might have to look for context clues, and also that it’s okay not to know a word.

That being said, I think we almost have to take time as history teachers to, as a whole class, model putting these sources together. In the other classes, English class, you’re working with one source, your book, your novel. In science class you talk about your experiment. History is different though we are putting together multiple sets of data, multiple documents to try to build a cohesive argument, and that’s not something that comes readily for any student, even college students.

I saw my students change and become more like historians. I think the general understanding of history in our country is that history is boring, and it is boring because that’s the way we’ve been teaching it. You can’t give somebody a textbook and have them jump for joy over the opportunity to read said textbook.

Using the actual sources gives the student the ability to see what it was really like back then to the best of our ability, using actual pictures from the time, using actual handwritten documents from the time, gives the students a connection to the past that they don’t get from typewritten material. And I think that understanding, that connection, helps build a love for history that hopefully will continue on.