Drummer Boys: Creating Historical Fiction and Studying Historical Documents

Daniel C. King

As my seventh grade social studies students took their seats, they looked quizzically at the photograph with no caption that I’d placed on each desk (HANDOUT A), then looked up at the board and read the questions:

1. **How old is this person?**
2. **What is he wearing, and why?**
3. **When and where was this photograph taken?**
4. **What is this person thinking and feeling?**

“Write down your best guesses in answer to these four questions,” I say.

We’d spent about a week discussing the Civil War at this point in the school year, so I had reason to believe my students had enough background information to understand my questions, and then make some coherent, educated guesses.

Five minutes later, when I saw pencils being put down and heard a murmur, “We’re done,” I called the class back to order, pulled out my chart paper easel, and asked students to share some of their answers. Sure enough, their responses were right along the lines I’d hoped for. The person in the picture was a child, too young to be a soldier, but dressed in a soldier’s uniform. Most students placed the photo during the time of the Civil War, but it was hard to tell (from this black-and-white image) whether this was a Union or Confederate uniform. Most students thought the boy might be feeling either scared or sad in this photo.

**Educated Guesses**

“What we’re going to do today,” I told the class, “is write a creative piece about the boy in the photograph. Of course we don’t know much about him, but you’ve already told me some important details. We know he’s about your age. We know he’s serving in the army, and I’ll inform you now that it’s a Confederate uniform. You’ve also guessed that he might be unhappy. Why might he be unhappy?” As we discussed this question, my 12-year-old students speculated about reasons for the boy’s mood: maybe he was bored, or sad because he missed his family and friends, or perhaps he was afraid of death.

I then invited my students to create a story about the boy in the photograph. (A variation of this assignment is to write a letter in the voice of the boy in the photo.) “Give him a name,” I suggested. “Tell about his background. Explain why he joined the army, where he was, and what was about to happen. Speculate about his life after the war. It is essential,” I reminded students, “that your story be as accurate historically as possible. No stealth bombers in battle and no Nintendo DS to pass the time in camp. No radios, or cars, or antibiotics if you get sick.”

I asked for two written pages, eliciting a few groans, but also the question “Can it be longer?” from a few students. I encouraged all the students to write as much as they could during the remainder of the period. I circulated around the room as they wrote, listening to students who wanted to bounce an idea off me, answering questions about historical details, and offering encouragement when the eternal question arose, “How do I get started?”

**Quiet Enthusiasm**

If there was one thing that stood out about this assignment, it was the enthusiasm with which the class worked. Here was an opportunity for them to express their knowledge in creative ways. It helped that several modalities of learning were used in this activity. There was a photograph (visual), discussion (auditory), and textbook reading that had been assigned earlier. Students who read at a low level did not have to struggle with a novel text and difficult, antiquated language, but they did engage with a primary document: the 140-year-old photograph. For strong writers, the sky was the limit. The activity was designed from the start to facilitate success, and I could sense the excitement build as students focused on their work and the room grew quiet.

**Variations on a Theme**

The first time I assigned this writing activity, the results were much better than I expected. Almost everyone produced the required two handwritten pages. Many students did more, the longest story being six pages. Most impressive was the substance of the stories my students had written about this sad-faced youngster in the photo. There were very few anachronisms or errors in these student creations. (Some students, having read about draft riots during the Civil War, wrote that the boy had been drafted into the army, although he was clearly too young.)

As for his battle experience, some authors had the boy serving as a flag bearer or drummer who saw violence but didn’t participate directly in the fighting, while others placed him in the heat of battle, rifle in hand. In a few cases, the boy saw friends or family members fall in battle, and one
Page 11: Private Edwin Francis Jemison, 2nd Louisiana Regiment. He served in the Peninsula campaign under General J.B. Magruder and was killed in the battle of Malvern Hill, July 1862. (Library of Congress) LC-B8184-10037.


ABOUT THE IMAGES
student wrote about family members fighting on opposite sides of the conflict. In most stories, the young boy survives the war, although in many versions he lost a limb. (My seventh graders are fascinated by Civil War field hospitals.) There were even a few poetic descriptions of his dying moments. These stories revealed a fairly good understanding of the conditions under which soldiers served in the Civil War, as well as students’ ability to apply their knowledge and creativity to hypothetical situations.

A Final Document
Peer editing of drafts is a discipline that my classes practice all year long. I pair each student with a neighbor. Students peer-edit one another’s work using a form with a key showing basic editing marks and a space for positive comments and/or constructive criticism and suggestions. After a draft has been corrected, it is submitted to me along with the peer editing form. (In most cases, writing an entire second draft is not needed.) I look at the quality of the draft and at comments made by peer editors. I add my thoughts, give the work back to its author to be typed, and grade the final work.

Finally, I share the caption provided by the Library of Congress. This is the image of “Private Edwin Francis Jemison, 2nd Louisiana Regiment. He served in the Peninsula campaign under General J.B. Magruder and was killed in the battle of Malvern Hill, July 1862.” I tell the class that although I do not know of any letters in the historical record by Pvt. Jemison, many letters have survived from this era that may enjoy reading.

Extensions and Variations
This classroom activity leads naturally into other lessons that examine in more detail what life was like for young soldiers in the Civil War.

- Play instrumental music from the Civil War era while students write.
- Students can read an actual letter written by a Civil War drummer boy, transcribed in HANDOUT B (with “historian’s annotations” on page 12 that the teacher can use in classroom discussion) or a series of letters by a Confederate soldier published in Social Education.1
- Give half of your class a photograph of the Confederate boy soldier HANDOUT C, (page 11) while the other half gets a photo of a Union boy soldier (page 14), who is an African American. Then contrast, in a class discussion, what students imagine in their stories about these two boys.
- Students can visit Internet sites HANDOUT D, (page 15) where they can “dress a Union soldier” in four layers of winter clothing, examine up close all sorts of artifacts (shaving equipment, game pieces, writing implements) from Gettysburg National Park, or read collections of Civil War letters.
- You could read aloud from one of several excellent books that have been written about the experiences of boy soldiers during the Civil War.2

This writing activity allows students to analyze a historical document, draw thoughtful conclusions, practice writing, participate in peer review, and use creativity and imagination. Extension activities could involve music, websites, and additional primary sources. What more can a social studies teacher ask for in a lesson plan? 

Notes

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Historian’s Annotations to a letter by a boy soldier

A charity provided stationery.

Felix’ spelling is left unchanged in this transcription.

“Dr Brth” = Dear Brothers

“Thank God” and other religious expressions and prayers are often found in letters of this period.

“Home in A few days” = The war had ended in April 1865 and weary soldiers were hoping to be discharged soon.

Union forces marched into Richmond, Virginia, the capital of the Confederacy, in early April 1865.

Felix offers to pay his brothers for his drum, which the Army apparently did not supply.

Felix expects to be paid by the Army. Meanwhile, he asks for “Post. St.” = postage stamps.

“Ugly and Headstrong” = Parents usually did not want their sons to join the army. Boys would argue with them and then run away from home, seeking military adventure and glory and escape from school work or farm chores.

“in Hospital!” = Even absent the injuries of combat, many men were ill, and many died, due to unclean food or water. Exposure to the sun and weather, and accidents also landed soldiers in the infirmary.

A list of friends and loved ones and prayers are often found in letters of this period.
A Letter by Felix Voltz

Felix Voltz, was a drummer boy in the 187th New York Volunteer Regiment during the Civil War. Letters he wrote to his family describe the rigors of Union Army life from February through June 1865. By the time Felix sent this letter, the war had ended. Troops were to be discharged—or redeployed south for Reconstruction. Here he writes from Arlington, Virginia to his family in Buffalo, New York. Several of his letters conclude with this sentiment: “write as soon as possible for I am most sick to hear from home.”

U.S. Christian Commission [letterhead]
May 20th / 65  Camp at Arlington Hydes

Dr Brth

I take the pen in Hand to write you once more that I am thank God all well yet Hoping these few lines will reach you the same. The reason I say ounce more is because We are all thinking of being Home in A few Days. Dr Brths I beg you to excuse me for not writing sooner. The reason was because we was on such hard Campaing and I was most all the way sick.

The Day we marched through Richmond it so dreadfull hot that nobody hardly could stand it and I was sunstruck and was taken to the hospitall in Richmond but I got over that in two days and was send to my Regt again.

Dr Brth another thing that my Drum arived here yesterday allright in good Order and Joe Roach says that you could not send A better one for here in the Army I thank you Brth A W for doing that favor and as soon I get my Pay or my Bounty I will make it all right with you.

Dr Brth I wish you would Answer soon and send me some Post. St. and some paper and Envelops I know no more news at Present.

I will close my writing with sending my best Regards and love to you all in the Family tell Mother not weary herself about me because I am as healthy as ever I was and tell Father that I beg him to forgive me for being so Ugly and Headstrong tell him that I have found out what A home is and that there is nobody on this world thank Father & Mother and A Home and tell him if God safe my Health and lets me get Home Safe again that I will try and behafe and mind my Parents better than I have.

Tell Lechlerters Boys that Tony Beilman has come to the Regt again he was in Hospitall since last Fall. I will close my writing by sending my best Respects to Lechlerters Boys and Family to all Duchenes Family and I wish you would let me know in what Regt Joe Duchenes is Enlisted—give my best Respects to both Uncle and Bonmans Foalks.

So no mor news at Present

I remain yours truly       Brother Felix Voltz

A collection of letters written by young Felix Voltz—both transcripts and images of the hand-written letters—can be seen at Virginia Tech Digital Library and Archives (Blacksburg, Virginia), spec.lib.vt.edu/voltz/
Civil War Drummer Boys: Online Resources

Please read descriptions and review any website before recommending it for student viewing.

Camp Life
Gettysburg National Military Park, National Park Service
www.nps.gov/history/museum/exhibits/gettex/index.htm
Soldiers battled boredom by playing games, writing, drinking and smoking, whistling, making music, praying, and taking or posing for photographs. At this website, students can examine images and read descriptions and explanations. Click on a small image to call up a large color photograph of an artifact from the museum along with a detailed caption. These wonderful images—of writing implements, dice, shaving tools, etc.—appear quickly on your screen.

Child Soldiers in the Civil War
Digital History
www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/learning_history/children_civilwar/child_soldiers.cfm
This website contains a short introduction to the topic and excerpts from letters that boys wrote home to their families during the Civil War. The excerpts are organized by topic: drilling, marching, fighting, life as a soldier, and prison camp confinement. Digital History is a project of Houston University, National Park Service, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, and others.

Civil War: Drummer Boys
eMINTS National Center
www.emints.org/ethemes/resources/S00000789.stml
This webpage provides ten links to online visual, music, and text resources (provided by various organizations) on topics related to young Civil War soldiers. The activities are at the middle school level. eMINTS is a University of Missouri center for using educational technology.

The Union Army Uniform
www.memorialhall.mass.edu/activities/dressup/civil_war_soldier.html
Click the arrow to see four stages of dress, from underwear to full armor, at this nifty website of the Memorial Hall Museum in Deerfield, Massachusetts. There’s a lesson about Civil War letters at the “In the Classroom” link.

The Civil War Through a Child’s Eye
American Memory, Library of Congress
lcweb2.loc.gov/learn/lessons/99/civilwar/overview.html
This middle level lesson plan requires 5-6 class periods, but a teacher could also use just part of the material, such as the nine-image slide show “Children in the Civil War.” Students work from a webpage to analyze a photograph, write a “literary portrait” of a child, and rehearse a part for a reader’s theater. (A large collection, Civil War Photographs, is nearby, but not recommended for student browsing, as it includes images of corpses, military executions, and the like. See memory.loc.gov/ammem/cwphtml/cwphome.html.)

Johnny Clem
Ohio History Central
www.ohiohistorycentral.org/entry.php?rec=85
This brief biography of Clem (or Klem), with a photo of the lad, mentions the “controversy raging” between historians over aspects of Clem’s activities. When the war began, he was only ten years old. Although he clearly served as a drummer boy early on, “some scholars now contend that Northern reporters enhanced Clem’s exploits to help promote the war effort.” At OHC, one can also read about the fifteen (or so) members of the McCook family who fought for the Union, earning them the nickname, “The Fighting McCooks:” Four died in service.

Teaching with Documents:
Civil War and Reconstruction
National Archives and Records Administration
www.archives.gov/education/lessons/civil-war-reconstruction.html
Although the readings are at a high school level, this website has activities that middle school teachers might use. There are lessons on black soldiers, Mathew Brady’s photographs, and the Fugitive Slave Law. There’s an audio recording of the last surviving Confederate veteran singing “Hang Jeff Davis from the Sour Apple Tree” among materials at the end of the lesson, “Letters, Telegrams, and Photographs.”

Civil War Related Weblinks
U.S. Civil War Center, Louisiana State University
www.cwc.lsu.edu/links/links6.htm
This portal contains long lists of links to Civil War diaries, letters, and recollections. Teachers looking for additional primary source material could begin at this website, but it would be daunting for students, and the material is not screened or edited for young readers. The Center also hosts the Civil War Book Review website, www.cwbr.com, which includes reviews of juvenile books at the “For Kids” link.