



Chicago Historical Society



WHO WAS CONTRABAND?

Grade level: Middle school through high school

Estimated time: Two to three class periods

Specific Topic: African American involvement in the Civil War, government policy, and contrabands

Subtopic: American Civil War

Teacher background information

Educator note: This lesson is best used after or in conjunction with a unit on the American Civil War.

Roughly 180,000 African American soldiers fought in the Civil War. By the end of the conflict, these men made up 10 percent of the Union army. Studying the issues surrounding and the events leading to their involvement illustrates the United States' ambiguity and lack of commitment to the rights of African Americans.

The United States was fighting the largest, longest, and bloodiest war in its short history, and many African Americans were eager to fight to assert their freedom. A broad question throughout this lesson is, "Who or what freed enslaved African Americans?"

The answer is complex, but as these lessons demonstrate, it is important to convey to students that many African Americans freed themselves by running away to Union lines. Their reasons for fighting, as well as their military experiences, often differed from their white counterparts. President Abraham Lincoln and the Northern government were not committed to emancipation at the start of the war and the thought of using African Americans in battle seemed unnecessary and even made many whites uncomfortable.

From the start of the war, however, the issue surfaced of what to do with slaves who escaped to Union lines. Thousands of runaway slaves began to assert their freedom and forced this issue into prominence.

General Butler dubbed the fugitive slaves as "contrabands," literally "enemy property rightfully seized as an act of war." In the spring of 1861, he gave asylum to many runaways, and when their owners came to claim their "property," he refused to hand them over. His deed was not purely noble, as he maintained that the African Americans were property seized out of military necessity. Butler quickly put the fugitive slaves to work constructing military forts and hauling supplies. He understood the connection between depriving the enemy of their workforce and winning the war.

Lincoln did not initially agree and said that Butler's actions, and those who acted similarly, were not sanctioned by the government. As the war continued, however, shifting aims and the unforeseen difficulty of Northern victory changed the necessity of incorporating African Americans in the Union army. Eventually, a series of acts and policy changes resulted in the Emancipation Proclamation, which opened the door for African Americans to enlist in the army (the "African American Soldiers" lesson explores these policy changes).



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Similar to their white counterparts, African American soldiers faced many hardships, including family separation, harsh camp conditions, disease, and the brutalities of war. These men, however, confronted other distinct challenges while fighting for the Union: unequal pay, the inability to be recognized as commissioned officers, and the often harsh policies of the Confederacy and the Union.

The contributions of these brave African Americans undoubtedly had a great impact on the Northern victory. Even Lincoln acknowledged that these men helped turn the tide of the war. African Americans gained a new claim for equality, which began to dispel the racist notions of their capabilities. Also, many African Americans asserted a new claim to participate in the democratic government that had excluded them for many generations.

Key concepts

1. Examining the events and policies leading up to the participation of African American soldiers in the Civil War can help us understand trends in history.
2. Northern views of the roles of escaped slaves in Union lines help define this period of history.

Key questions

How were African Americans involved in the Civil War? What was the reality of life in a contraband camp? How did U.S. policy shift to enlisting African Americans? Why did African Americans join the Union army? How were African Americans portrayed during the Civil War?

Goals of this lesson

To examine and understand the various policies and events leading up to the enlistment of African American soldiers in the Civil War. To analyze a variety of primary source material to formulate opinions about the past.

Objectives

1. Students will consider the question, “Who or what freed enslaved African Americans?” through journal writing, primary source analysis, and class discussion.
2. Students will evaluate primary sources by recording both their observations and inferences.

3. Students will learn about “contraband” in the context of the Civil War and discuss differing viewpoints of contraband in both the North and the South.
4. Students will discuss Northern propaganda, racism, and the popular portrayals and stereotypes of African Americans during the Civil War.

Materials

Master copies of all primary sources and student handouts are provided.

1. Primary sources (one copy of each per student)
 - A. “Contrabands, 1862” (CHS, ICHi-22092)
 - B. “John Henry, Contraband at Headquarters, Army of the Potomac” (CHS, ICHi-22091)
2. “Teaching the Contrabands” (CHS broadsides) (one per student)
3. “Analyzing Photographs” worksheet (one per student)
4. “Analyzing a Broadside” worksheet (one per student)
5. Dictionary
6. Blackboard or overhead projector

Procedures

Day 1

Ask students, “Who or what freed enslaved African Americans?” and instruct them to respond in their journal. Discuss common suggestions as a class, such as Abraham Lincoln, Emancipation Proclamation, etc., and inform students that they will further explore this question during the upcoming class periods. Educator note: If desired, the journal exercise can be assigned as homework in advance of Day 1.

Distribute the contraband photographs (labeled A and B) and the “Analyzing Photographs” worksheet.

Do not give students any background information about the photographs. Ask them to use the photographs to answer the questions on the worksheet, and discourage discussion with their peers. Explain that they are not expected to have all the answers. Rather, encourage students to look carefully at the photographs and infer answers.

Educator note: If necessary, explain the difference between an observation and an inference. An

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observation is something we see, while an inference is what we believe or think because of what we see. For example: She is wearing all black (observation) so she is going to a funeral (inference). No one can dispute the claim that she is wearing all black, but the inference that she is going to a funeral is an educated guess using the observed information.

After students complete the worksheet, ask for volunteers to share answers. Provide feedback and discuss as a class.

Write the word “contraband” on the board. Ask for a volunteer to look the word up in the dictionary and read the definition. Make sure he/she reads the definition that has to do with smuggled goods in war.

As a class, using the blackboard or overhead projector, make a list of the things students think could be considered contraband in a time of war. The list might include weapons, houses, and hospitals.

Share the captions for the photographs:

Caption A: “Contrabands in a Union camp, c. 1862”

Caption B: “John Henry, Contraband at Headquarters, Army of Potomac, c. 1862”

Discuss why these people were considered contrabands. Point out that General Butler was the first to use this term for fugitive slaves who crossed Union lines.

Discuss and list the advantages and disadvantages for both sides (North and South) to harbor contrabands. Be sure to discuss the negatives: The South losing a workforce; the North not having enough supplies to clothe, feed, and shelter the fugitives; etc. And the positives: Some slave owners feared open rebellion or revenge by their slaves as Southern cities began to fall to the Union; the North could use these former slaves to help win the war.

Day 2

Remind students of the previous day’s discussion by displaying photographs A and B and asking them to summarize what they remember about the photographs.

As a class, brainstorm: What issues would result from fugitive slaves escaping to Union lines? What hardships would the contrabands face? What challenges would the white soldiers and generals have to face

because of having these men and women in their camps? The discussion should include the following points: the fugitive slaves might be afraid, apart from family, without food, etc. Generals had to provide food and clothing for these contrabands while still providing for their troops. The task of educating the fugitive men and women became an important issue.

Distribute copies of the “Teaching the Contrabands” broadside and “Analyzing a Broadside” worksheet. Ask for a volunteer to look up “broadside” in the dictionary and read the definition aloud. (Broadside: a sheet of paper with commercial, political, or personal announcements or advertisements, which is usually posted in public.) Instruct students to study the broadside and answer questions 1 to 7 on the worksheet.

After students have completed questions 1 to 7, discuss the questions as a class and record student responses on the overhead projector or blackboard.

Distribute copies of photograph A from Day 1. Explain that different sources provide different types of information and multiple perspectives on past events. Instruct students to compare and contrast photograph A with the broadside to complete question 8.

Discuss the answers to question 8 as a class. Point out the clothing of the “slaves” depicted on the broadside and the subject being taught. Ask the students if they see any racist notions being portrayed in the broadside drawing.

Return to the journal exercise from Day 1. Ask students to reflect for a second time on the question: Who or what freed enslaved African Americans? Discuss students’ responses. How have they changed? Be sure to reinforce that many African Americans emancipated themselves by running to Union lines.

Close the lesson by asking students: What new issues began to emerge in the United States as the end of slavery drew near? Make a class list on the blackboard or overhead projector.

Educator note: For more information about the military and social issues surrounding African Americans fighting in the Civil War, see the second lesson of this unit, African American Soldiers.

Suggestions for student assessment

The “Analyzing Photographs” and “Analyzing a Broadside” worksheets can be used for assessment as well as student participation in class discussion and writing activities. After the lesson, students may write an essay on the issues leading up to using African Americans troops. The “African American Soldiers” lesson completes this unit; students can be tested at the conclusion of both lessons.

Extension activities

1. During the Civil War, the word “contraband” was used to describe fugitive slaves. Allow students to research other words that came into common use as a result of the Civil War.
2. Analyze the song, “Colored Volunteer: Give Us a Flag.” This song was written from an African American perspective and touches on the desire of some men to fight for freedom. A broadside containing the lyrics to the song can be found in the book *Freedom’s Soldiers* (see Additional Resources) and a recording of the song can be found on the compact disc, titled, “Songs of the Civil War.”
3. After the Civil War, the U.S. government faced many obstacles, including providing the opportunity for formal education to African Americans, after years of withheld or unequal education. Have students research and discuss the Freedmen’s Bureau, schools, etc. Connect this to *Brown v. Board of Education*, the court case that finally desegregated the public schools in 1954. Discuss modern issues surrounding education: Are schools equal today? Why or why not? What is the state of public education? What are the present day struggles? Instruct students to conduct research to locate a variety of sources to back up their opinions.
4. Use modern conflicts (i.e., the war with Iraq) to discuss and research what is now considered contraband. Ask students to make connections about why these various items are considered contraband. Are people in modern conflicts considered contraband? Why or why not?

Additional resources

Berlin, Ira, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland, eds. *Freedom’s Soldiers: The Black Military Experience in the Civil War*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Franklin, John Hope, and Alfred A. Moss Jr. *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*. 8th ed. New York: A. A. Knopf, 2000.

Web resources

History Matters

www.historymatters.gmu.edu

Primary source: “We Feel as Though Our Country Spurned Us,” Soldier James Henry Gooding Protests Unequal Pay for Black Soldiers, 1863. (This is an excellent example of a soldier’s protest of unequal pay through a letter written directly to President Lincoln.)

Library of Congress: American Memory

<http://memory.loc.gov>

Search for “Negro soldier”

Long Island University

www.cwpost.liu.net

Click on “C. W. Post Campus” link, the “Library” link, and then the “Information/Publications” link or search for “African American Freedom Fighters.”

U.S. National Archives & Records Administration

www.archives.gov

Search site for African American soldiers, recruitment poster, etc.

This lesson fulfills the following Illinois Learning Standards:

English Language Arts

State Goal 3: Write to communicate for a variety of purposes.

State Goal 4: Listen and speak effectively in a variety of situations.

State Goal 5: Use the language arts to acquire, assess, and communicate information.

Social Science

State Goal 14: Understand political systems with an emphasis on the United States.

State Goal 16: Understand events, trends, individuals, and movements shaping the history of Illinois, the United States, and other nations.

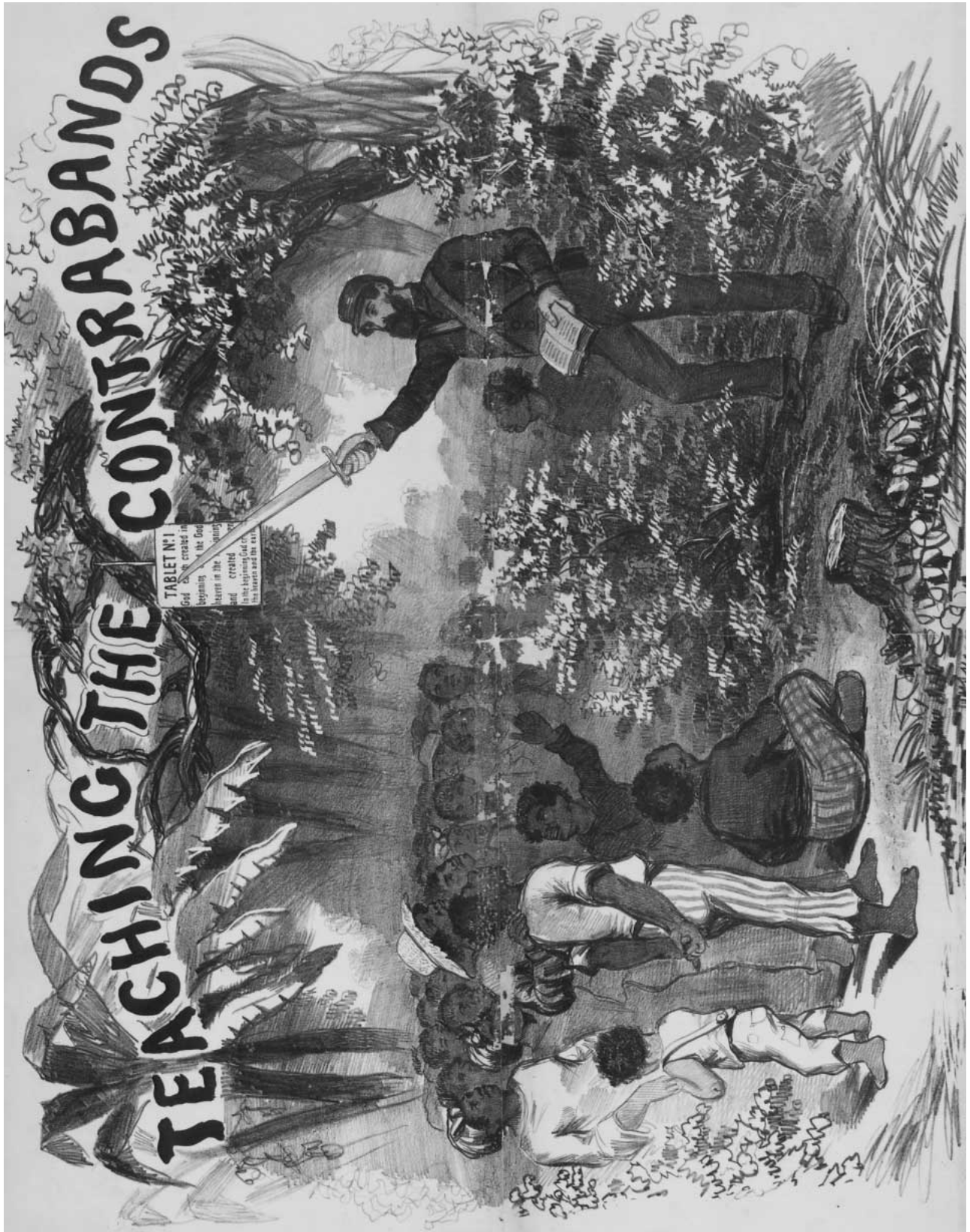
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Chicago Historical Society, Broadside Collection

ANALYZING PHOTOGRAPHS

Name _____ Date _____

Directions: Using photographs A and B answer the following questions in complete sentences. Be sure to support your statements with evidence from the photographs.

Photograph A

1. What do you see in this photograph?

2. How many people are pictured? How are the people different from one another?

3. What are the people doing? How do you know?

4. When was this picture taken? Who are the people? What evidence in the photograph supports your answers?

Photograph B

1. What do you see in this photograph?

2. Describe the man in the middle.

3. List five items in the background of the photograph.

- a. _____ d. _____
- b. _____ e. _____
- c. _____

4. When was this picture taken? Where was it taken? What evidence in the photograph supports your answers?

ANALYZING A BROADSIDE

Name _____ Date _____

Directions: Using the copy of “Teaching the Contrabands” answer the following questions in complete sentences. Be sure to back up all of your statements with evidence from the broadside.

1. Who do you see? What are the groups? What do you think these people represent?

2. What are the people doing? How do you know?

3. Describe the people. What are they wearing?

4. Who is the man in the center? What is he doing?

5. Where is this scene taking place? How do you know?

6. What are the African Americans being taught? Why are they being taught this?

How do you know?

7. Why do you think this image was made? Who was the intended audience?

8. Refer back to the first contraband image. How does the broadside compare with photograph A?

What are two similarities and two differences?

Similarities:

a. _____

b. _____

Differences:

a. _____

b. _____

