

Educator Resource

Vicksburg

**Dates &
Eras**

1863

ThemesBattles,
Homefront,
Women,
Soldiers,
Surrenders

Grades5–7
9–12

StandardsVS.7,
USI.9,
VUS.7;
CSS.ELA.LITERACY.
RH.6-8.4,5,6

History Overview

As commander of the United States Army in the West in 1863, General Ulysses S. Grant spent much time trying to take the town of Vicksburg, Mississippi. Located on the Mississippi River, taking Vicksburg meant the U.S. Army would gain control of the river and divide the Confederate States, separating Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas from the rest of the country.

After a long campaign that utilized river crossings, cavalry movements, and battles, Grant forced the town into a nearly two-month long siege. The constant shelling from May–July 4, 1863, meant it was not safe to be outside and move about. The Confederate Army and the civilians of Vicksburg were desperate and hungry. The Confederate commander, General John Pemberton, surrendered his army and the city to General Grant on July 4, 1863, one day after one of the worst Confederate defeats, Gettysburg.

By gaining control of the Mississippi River, Vicksburg was just as important as Gettysburg in deciding the outcome of the Civil War.

During the 47-day siege, many people moved into caves they dug into the hillsides. The caves were much safer than being in a home or on the street with flying debris. Single-family caves had only one or two rooms, while others were much larger and could hold more people. The citizens of Vicksburg took things from their homes to make these caves more comfortable and familiar. They brought carpets, furniture, books, etc. Thanks to the widespread use of caves, only a small number of Vicksburg citizens were killed or wounded during the siege.

Civilians suffered in other ways, however. Food was scarce in Vicksburg. The Confederate Army seized livestock, vegetables, and produce and drained the town of supplies. The people of Vicksburg had to use substitutes for real food. They brewed sweet potatoes or other vegetables for coffee. Frogs, mules, squirrels, and rats became meat. Newsprint was also in short supply. Things were so scarce that the Vicksburg Daily Citizen printed its news on wallpaper. The reprint featured here demonstrates this.

Suggested Questions

1. What would you take with you if you left your home to live in a cave? Make a list of the top five things you would choose and explain why.
2. How would you feel if the Confederate army took all of your food and you and your family had nothing to eat? What would you do about it?
3. Why do you think it was so important capturing the city of Vicksburg? How do you think the capturing of Vicksburg affected the longevity of the Confederacy?
4. Why do you think it was of such importance during the siege to still print the Vicksburg Daily Citizen?
5. How does the information/text provide insight on the Siege of Vicksburg? List a few words/phrases below that express the significance of the paper providing insight on the siege.

Resources

[The Daily Citizen](#)

[Vile and Ciphred Message](#)

Additional Links

[Project Gutenberg](#)

[NatchezBelle.Org](#)

Suggested Activities

1. Begin by telling students they are going to use firsthand accounts written by women and children in Vicksburg to gain a better understanding of the thoughts and experiences of life during the Siege of Vicksburg in 1863. Have students read the excerpts of accounts from Mary Ann Loughborough and Dora Miller. Once students have read their accounts, hold a class discussion on what people like Mary and Dora were feeling and thinking during the siege. Then divide students into small groups. Give each group a sheet with one line from either Mary Ann Loughborough or Dora Miller's memoirs. Have students use that one line as a writing prompt. Have students use the one line they are given to brainstorm ideas for a short story, approximately one to three pages depending on the age of the students. Have students assign each person in their group a role, such as scribes and readers. Once the stories are written, have students read them to the class.
2. For upper level students, have them read these accounts and other primary sources. Have students write an essay in response to the following question: Why do you think Independence Day was not celebrated in Vicksburg again until 1945? What does this say about the collective memory of the South after the war?

3. Have the students pretend that they are citizens that are living in Vicksburg during the time of the battle. Have them read the newspaper article provided, after have them write their own newspaper article about living in Vicksburg just days before the city surrendered. Give the students 20-30 minutes to complete. Collect the finished articles once completed.
4. Begin by explaining to students that history is full of mysteries. Explain to students the mystery of the message in a bottle. During the Civil War, many generals wrote messages and orders in secret code. If the messages ended up in the hands of the enemy, the enemy would not know what the message said if they did not know how to decode it. Many times the messages reached the correct officers who knew the secret code. However, sometimes messages never reached the intended officer and were returned to the sender, never opened.

Resources

[The Daily Citizen](#)

[Vile and CIPHERED Message](#)

Additional Links

[Project Gutenberg](#)

[NatchezBelle.Org](#)

One such message is this message in a bottle from Vicksburg. Confederate General Joseph Johnston did not believe the army had enough troops to continue the siege and wanted General John Pemberton to abandon Vicksburg and save the army. He tried to plan an attack with other Confederate soldiers under General John G. Walker. The message inside the bottle was sent by General Walker to General Pemberton on July 4, 1863, the very day that General Pemberton surrendered to Union General Ulysses S. Grant. The message was never delivered and was returned to the sender. It remained unopened for another 146 years. The message was opened and decoded in 2009. Photographs of the message and the bottle are included with this lesson plan. The message reads; "July 4th. Gen'l Pemberton: You can expect no help from this side of the river. Let Gen'l Johnston know if possible, when you can attack the same point on the enemy's line. Inform me also and I will endeavor to make a diversion. I have sent some caps. I subjoin dispatch from Gen. Johnston."

Divide students into small groups. Give each group a cipher. Instruct groups to create a message about something they have learned about the siege of Vicksburg. Have each group trade their secret message with another group and use the cipher to decode the message.

The Daily Citizen (reprint)



Eleanor Brockenrough Library
American Civil War Museum

Vile and Ciphered Message



“July 4th. Gen’l Pemberton: You can expect no help from this side of the river. Let Gen’l Johnston know if possible, when you can attack the same point on the enemy’s line. Inform me also and I will endeavor to make a diversion. I have sent some caps. I subjoin dispatch from Gen. Johnston.”

American Civil War Museum