“The world will little note, nor long remember, what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.”
— from Abraham Lincoln’s “Gettysburg Address,” 1863

GETTYSBURG

Introduction

Over the course of more than four years, starting in April of 1861, the American Civil War shook the nation to its core, leaving more casualties than any other American wars combined. During the war and in retrospect, several turning points have taken on amplified meaning, coming to represent larger truths about this profound conflict. The three-day battle that took place in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania from July 1st through 3rd, 1863 is one of those events. Forever associated with the intensity and gravity of the war, over 51,000 soldiers lost their lives or were injured in this battle. The epic clash and its aftermath set the stage for President Lincoln’s timeless “Gettysburg Address.”

Gettysburg is a groundbreaking two-hour on-air event airing on HISTORY in May. Raw, emotional and intense, this special introduces little-known stories about the everyday soldiers and citizens who waged this fierce battle, or were unexpectedly caught up or were injured in this battle. The special presentation, with compelling CGI and powerful action footage, is a gripping cinematic experience that will transform students’ understanding of the complexity and significance of the Civil War.

Curriculum Links

Gettysburg would be useful for History and Politics courses, and course units on the American Civil War. It is appropriate for high school and college students. Note: Teachers should view this program before recommending it to students to make sure it is appropriate for their age group.

Key Identification Terms:

Ask students to define the following people and words, using a dictionary, encyclopedia or online source such as History.com. Students can also keep their own list of terms as they watch this program.

Casualty
Consecrate
General
Hallow
Infantry
Major General
Musket
Pickett’s Charge
President
Abraham Lincoln
Robert E. Lee
George G. Meade

Discussion Questions:

1. How and why did Gettysburg, Pennsylvania become the site of a major Civil War battle? Was the battle unexpected?
2. Imagine it is July 1, 1863. At the start of the battle of Gettysburg, would you have thought the Union or Confederate side was most capable of winning? Why?
3. What do you think motivated the average soldier fighting at Gettysburg? What were the costs of the battle for those who fought in it?
4. What strategies and tactics do you think were most important on the Union and the Confederate sides at Gettysburg? What was unique about this battle?
5. Today, Gettysburg is remembered as a key Civil War turning point. Do you think it was considered to be of enormous significance at the time? Discuss.

Primary Source:

Gettysburg: A Young Woman’s Account

The following account was written by a 15-year-old girl who wrote down her experiences at the time the Gettysburg battle took place and published them years later. This excerpt details her reactions as Confederate troops arrived in the town of Gettysburg.

“We were having our literary exercises on Friday afternoon, at our Seminary, when the cry reached our ears. Rushing to the door, and standing on the front portico we beheld in the direction of the Theological Seminary, a dark, dense mass, moving toward town. Our teacher, Mrs. Eyster, at once said:

‘Children, run home as quickly as you can.’

It did not require repeating. I am satisfied some of the girls did not reach their homes before the Rebels were in the streets.

What a horrible sight! There they were, human beings! Clad almost in rags, covered with dust, riding wildly, pell-mell down the hill toward our home! Shouting, yelling most unearthly cursing, brandishing their revolvers, and firing right and left.

I was fully persuaded that the Rebels had actually come at last. What they would do with us was a fearful question to my young mind.

Soon the town was filled with infantry, and then the searching and ransacking began in earnest. They wanted horses, clothing, anything and almost everything they could conveniently carry away.

Nor were they particular about asking. Whatever suited them they took. They did, however, make a formal demand of the town authorities, for a large supply of flour, meat, groceries, shoes, hats and (doubtless, not least in their estimations), ten barrels of whisky; or, in lieu of this five thousand dollars.

But our merchants and bankers had too often heard of their coming, and had already shipped their wealth to places of safety. Thus it was, that a few days after, the citizens of York were compelled to make up our proportion of the Rebel requisition.”

Citation: Alleman, Tillie Pierce. At Gettysburg or What a Girl Saw or Heard of the Battle. W. Lake Borland, 1889.

Document-based questions:

1. According to Tillie, what were some of the things soldiers took from citizen’s homes in Gettysburg?
2. Do you think the residents had any defense against these actions?
3. What do the words “requisition” mean at the end of this paragraph? Based on that definition, what do you think this sentence means?

“Children, run home as quickly as you can.”

— from Abraham Lincoln’s “Gettysburg Address,” 1863
Extended Activities:

1. Pondering Pickett’s Charge. Civil War scholars have carefully analyzed Robert E. Lee’s daring decision to attack the center of the Union line in an action known as Pickett’s Charge. Ask students to research Pickett’s Charge, exploring the actions that led up to the decision and the outcome. Then, ask them to write a letter to General Lee explaining their view on why the assault failed, and why it is remembered as a groundbreaking strategic event.

2. Mapping Gettysburg. Geography played a crucial role in the Gettysburg battle. Working in groups, ask students to locate and print a map of Gettysburg at the time of the battle. Assign each group one day of the battle to research, and have them show the location of the armies and their engagements on that day. The class can analyze the maps in order of each day of the battle and review the progress of the battle. Each map should include a key and other relevant details. Students may want to present their maps on poster board or in PowerPoint format as well.

3. The Civil War Through Young Eyes. As the example of Gettysburg proves, it is important to remember that young people are also a part of history. Ask students to imagine they were one of the young people at Gettysburg, either a citizen or a soldier, and write a poem or letter from their perspective.

4. Gettysburg Address: In Our Own Words. Lincoln’s “Gettysburg Address” is one of the most significant speeches in U.S. history. Ask students to read the speech carefully. Then, break the class up into small groups. Ask each group to rewrite one segment of the speech in their own words, but keeping Lincoln’s main ideas intact. Students can read these writings aloud and compare/contrast their versions with the actual address, discussing the document’s relevance today.

Bonus Activity: One of the most interesting stories to emerge from Gettysburg involved a civilian soldier named John Burns. Ask students to research his story. Then, ask them to write a short story or create a short play about Burns and his role at Gettysburg.

Books


Websites

More on the Civil War from History.com
www.history.com/topics/american-civil-war

HISTORY’S Give 150™ Campaign
www.qive150.com

The Gettysburg National Military Park site
www.nps.gov/gett/index.htm

Text of the Gettysburg Address from the National Archives
www.ourdocuments.gov

More information on Gettysburg from the Library of Congress:
myloc.gov/exhibitions/gettysburgaddress/Pages/default.aspx

In 2011, HISTORY kicks off an extensive four-year initiative to observe the 150th Anniversary of the American Civil War. This May, we will feature an entire week of Civil War–themed programming that will give viewers powerful new perspectives on the enormity of the war and the transformations that resulted from this conflict.

In addition to on-air programming, HISTORY is organizing a series of activities to engage audiences in the history of the war. Our Give 150™ national campaign encourages Americans to give donations to help preserve Civil War sites and stories. All donations go directly to the Civil War Trust and the National Park Foundation. To learn more and find out how you can get involved, visit us online at www.history.com/topics/american-civil-war and www.qive150.com.

In 2011, we’ll be featuring exciting Civil War–related interactive games and resources, original video clips, and thorough lesson plans with primary sources at www.history.com/classroom.

HISTORY is proud to lead the national effort to examine the history of the Civil War and share in a national conversation about its relevance in our society today.

Recommended Civil War Resources:

Books


Websites

Below is a list of helpful online resources for Civil War plans and activities. Visit us online at History.com for many more links, original articles and videos.

History.com
www.history.com/topics/american-civil-war

Civil War Preservation Trust
www.civilwar.org

Library of Congress
www.loc.gov/rr/main/uscw_rec_links/civilwarlinks.html

National Archives
www.archives.gov/research/civil-war

Smithsonian Institution/National Portrait Gallery
www.civilwar.si.edu

The Journey Through Hallowed Ground Partnership
www.hallowedground.org