



Chicago Historical Society



ON DECK OF A UNION WARSHIP

Grade level: Late elementary through middle school

Estimated time: Two to three class periods

Specific topics: Civil War and naval blockades

Subtopic: Photographic analysis

Teacher background information

The Civil War was the first widely photographed war. For the first time in history, the American public could observe the realities of war through photographic images. Many of the existing Civil War photographs came from the studios of Matthew Brady. At the onset of the war, Brady recognized the importance of documenting the war and suspected that such photography would be profitable. Brady began to recruit photographers to document the events of the war and paid them for their negatives. After the war, he hoped the United States government would purchase his collection for a healthy profit. Unfortunately, Brady only collected \$25,000 for his work after investing close to \$100,000. He died in 1896 deeply in debt.

Despite Brady's failure to profit financially from his photos, the historic and educational value of his work is priceless. This lesson will focus on just one of Brady's photographs, titled, "On Deck of a Union Warship." This image reveals several key aspects of the Civil War, including naval blockades, uniforms, and social issues of the time.

Before presenting this lesson to students, make sure that they have some background understanding of naval blockades. The purpose of a naval blockade is to cut off the supply lines of the enemy. At the onset of the Civil War, Major General Winfield Scott, proposed a daring plan for the Union. He believed the Union navy should blockade all the Southern ports along the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico. At first, this plan was widely criticized within the military and in public opinion for not being aggressive or bold enough. Scott's strategy was nicknamed the "Anaconda Plan" because of its similarity to the snake's ability to surround and slowly strangle its victims. Despite this reaction, Abraham Lincoln endorsed the idea, and the Anaconda Plan was put into motion. It called for a naval blockade covering more than 3,500 miles of coastline and almost two hundred inlets, harbors, and river mouths. In order to carry out this massive effort, the Union launched a rebuilding program to refit existing ships and build more than 150 new ones. The Union faced other difficulties in implementing the blockade, including the loss of almost all harbor forts. As states seceded, they seized the harbor forts that had once belonged to the federal government, which adversely affected the Union's ability to repair and supply its vessels.



Eventually, the blockade proved to be a very successful tactic. Union forces grew quickly, tripling the fleet in the first eight months of the war. Most importantly, within thirteen months of the start of the blockade, the Union was able to recapture forts or seal off every Confederate port on the Atlantic coast, with only two exceptions: Wilmington, North Carolina, and Charleston, South Carolina, both remained active Confederate ports for blockade runners (fast steamers that slipped past Union warships to bring food and other goods to the blocked-off South, usually for a profit) until almost the end of the war.

The blockade impeded the Confederacy’s ability to receive much needed imports, including medicine, clothing, household goods, and war supplies. It also limited the Confederacy’s ability to export its main economic products, such as tobacco, indigo, and cotton; the Confederacy needed to sell these products to finance the war. Interestingly, the War of 1812 was waged on the preface that free trade on the seas would not be infringed. Yet, on occasion, the Union seized neutral merchant ships that were trading with the Confederacy. The blockade was a long process, but it played an important role in the defeat of the Confederacy.



Detail of “On Deck of a Union Warship” (CHS, ICHi-21295)

Key concepts

Naval blockades played an important role in the Union war strategy. Photography was a new and effective form of documentation during the Civil War. Under analysis, “On Deck of a Union Warship” provides information about life on a Union warship.

Key questions

What was life like on a Union warship? What is a naval blockade? What evidence does a photograph provide about the Union navy? How does knowledge of naval terms increase our understanding of the photograph?

Goals of this lesson

To provide students with the opportunity to learn about Union naval tactics and sailors’ work and living conditions through analysis of a Matthew Brady photograph.

Objectives

1. Students will learn about the purposes and affects of naval blockades during the Civil War.
2. Students will analyze a primary source and make detailed observations about the people and the activities depicted in the image.
3. Students will learn and apply vocabulary words related to the Civil War, the navy and economics to their analysis of the photograph.

Materials

Master copies of the photograph and student worksheet are provided.

1. “Vocabulary” worksheet
2. “Vocabulary Answer Key”
3. “On Deck of a Union Warship” photograph (CHS, ICHi-21295) (one copy per student or group)
4. “Photograph Analysis” worksheet
5. Paper and pencils
6. Computer with Internet access (optional)
7. Additional resources: Encyclopedias, dictionaries, social studies textbooks, and math textbooks (optional)

Procedures

Day 1

Begin the lesson by asking students what they know about ships during the Civil War. Ask the following questions to assess prior knowledge: What purposes did ships serve during the Civil War? Were ships powered with engines or sails? What is a naval blockade?

Teach students about blockades during the Civil War. (They will need this knowledge to complete the “Photograph Analysis” worksheet.) Students should know the definition of a blockade, its uses, and the effects it had on the Confederacy. You may refer to the “Teacher Background Information” from this lesson or choose to have students conduct their own research using the optional resources listed under “Materials.”

Distribute the “Vocabulary” worksheet and have students work in teams to conduct research and define the terms. Have students share their definitions during a class discussion. Distribute the “Vocabulary Answer Key” and review the specific definitions. From this point forward, all students should be working from the same set of final definitions. At the conclusion of Day 1, students should be able to define all of the vocabulary words and answer these questions:

1. What is a naval blockade and why was it used during the Civil War?
2. What types of supplies did the Union blockade prevent the Confederacy from importing?
3. How did the blockade affect the Confederacy’s ability to export products?
4. What types of products did the South produce and export for profit?
5. What are blockade runners?

Day 2

Put students in small groups. Distribute a copy of the photograph “On Deck of a Union Warship” to each group. Give students time to study the photograph and make oral observations in their groups.

Give each group a “Photograph Analysis” worksheet. Inform students that the worksheet includes both implicit and explicit questions. If necessary, explain

that an implicit question is one where the answer is implied, where as an explicit question has a definite answer. Instruct the class to discuss and answer the questions with their group members. Students should consult the “Vocabulary Answer Key” and incorporate the terms in their answers.

After the groups have completed their work, hold a class discussion about the photograph, using the worksheet as a guide. Some specific details to discuss include:

1. Although not much information is known about the photograph, it appears that the ship in the photograph is part of a naval blockade. To support this assumption, notice the proximity of the ship to the land and the ship to a second ship in the distance. Finally, notice that the main ship photographed appears to be anchored, since the sails are not up.
2. Note the subtle differences between the uniforms of the people pictured. All of the men are wearing hats but not of the same type. The students should consider the reasons for differences in uniform. It appears that the captain of this ship is standing tall at the bow (front) of the ship.
3. Notice that the men are engaged in a variety of leisure activities. There is a man reading a book on the port (left) side of the ship. On the starboard (right) side, there are men, who appear to be sewing, possibly sails or clothes. There are others playing checkers or music. From studying this picture, it seems there was a lot of downtime when conducting a blockade. Ask students to consider what they do to occupy themselves when they are “stuck” somewhere indefinitely.
4. Consider some of the social issues of the time that are evident in this photo. There are no women in this photograph; research continues to be conducted about the extent of women’s participation in the army and navy during the Civil War. There are, however, African American sailors on the ship. In the Union navy, African American sailors held rank as landsmen, seamen, engineers, and pilots. Estimates vary widely, but one study at Howard University concluded that about eighteen thousand African Americans, approximately fifteen percent of the total enlisted

force, participated in the Union navy during the Civil War. Eight African American sailors received the Medal of Honor for bravery, the highest military combat award an American can earn.

- Students may have the misconception that life on a Union warship was engaging and exciting. Realistically, it is more likely the opposite. Most of the sailors serving in the blockade spent their time working on supply ships or floating at assigned stations, keeping watch for Confederate blockade runners. Sailors woke at sunrise and spent their days cleaning: scrubbing decks, polishing brass, and cleaning guns. They were also responsible for checking the sails and rigging. Sailors practiced battle drills and safety exercises. Some helped to navigate the ship or keep lookout. Crewmen performed maintenance: painting, carpentry, and making and mending sails. The youngest sailors called “boys” acted as officer’s servants, but during battle they supplied powder charges for the ship’s guns. Although this kind of duty was repetitious and held little glamour, it was very important to the war effort.

Provide each student with a photocopy of “On Deck of a Union Warship.” If time remains in class, or as a homework assignment, have students imagine that they are one of the individuals on the ship. Instruct them to write a letter to a friend or family member describing the day the picture was taken: What were they doing? What was the weather like? Why was the photograph taken? How long did it take? Who were they sitting next to? What were they wearing? Was it the most interesting thing that happened that day? Did they have the opportunity to see the photograph after it was developed? Require that students’ letters incorporate some of the words from the “Vocabulary” worksheet. Students should remember to give names to themselves and the recipient of the letter, date the letter, open with a greeting, and conclude with a closing and a signature. The body of the letter should be at least one paragraph.

Suggestions for student assessment

The “Photograph Analysis” worksheet can be assessed by giving each question a maximum value of five points. The students’ letters can be assessed

for incorporation of vocabulary words, level of description, and proper friendly letter format.

Extension activities

- Have the students draw a picture of a ship and illustrate the naval terms studied in this lesson.
- Incorporate math into this lesson. Distribute a copy of the photograph to each student. Ask the class to look carefully at the ropes on the ship. Which ropes create angles (obtuse or acute)? Also, notice the parallel floorboards on the deck of the ship. Instruct students, either individually or in small groups, to locate the following geometric terms in the photograph and mark them with arrows: obtuse angle, acute angle, right angle, intersecting lines, perpendicular lines, parallel lines, vertices, squares, cylinders, and circles. The geometry lesson can be graded by awarding students one point for each example identified.

Additional resources

Bowman, John. *The Civil War Almanac*. New York: Facts on File, 1983.

Davis, William, and Belli Wiley. *The Image of War: 1861–1865 Shadows of the Storm*. Garden City, New York: Double Day and Company, Inc, 1981.

Web resource

www.fortunecity.com/campus/history/683/brady.htm

This lesson fulfills the following Illinois Learning Standards:

English Language Arts

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

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

Social Science

State Goal 15: Understand, analyze, and compare economic systems, with an emphasis on the United States.

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

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VOCABULARY

Civil War Terms

Confederacy _____

Union _____

secession _____

abolitionist _____

slavery _____

enlistment _____

Economic Terms

import _____

export _____

Naval Terms

blockade _____

port _____

starboard _____

bow _____

stern _____

mast _____

keel _____

rudder _____

gunwale _____

reveille _____

hammock _____

holystones _____

rigging _____

hardtack _____

messes _____

VOCABULARY ANSWER KEY

Civil War Terms

Confederacy

The group of eleven Southern states that seceded from the United States in 1860 and 1861. Jefferson Davis led the Confederacy.

Union

The group of Northern states that fought against the Confederate states during the Civil War. Abraham Lincoln led the Union.

secession

a formal withdrawing from an organization or group

abolitionist

a person who wished to put an end to slavery

slavery

the act of owning another human being

enlistment

a pledge to serve in the armed forces for a specific amount of time

Economic Terms

import

anything brought into one country from another country

export

anything that is sent from one country to another

Naval Terms

blockade

the act of controlling what goes into or out of a port or area on land by the use of army or navy forces

port

the left side of a ship; a harbor town or city where ships take on or discharge cargo

starboard

the right side of a ship

bow

the front of a ship

stern

the back of a ship

mast

the large pole in the middle of a sailing ship used to support the main sail

keel

the main timber or steel piece that extends on the bottom of the ship

rudder

a piece of metal or wood at the back of a boat that aids in the steering

gunwale

the upper edge of a boat's side

reveille

a wakeup call at sunrise sounded by a bugle

hammock

a portable place to sleep made of woven rope

holystones

pieces of soft sandstone used to clean ship decks

rigging

a system of ropes and chains, which supports and controls the masts and sails on a ship

hardtack

a hard biscuit made from flour and water

messes

people who eat together



Chicago Historical Society, ICHS-21295

PHOTO ANALYSIS

Name _____ Date _____

Directions: Answer the following questions using the photograph “On Deck of a Union Warship.” Some of the questions will not have a right or wrong answer. Instead, you will be graded based on the quality and support of your answers.

1. Find three clues in the photograph that indicate it was taken aboard a ship.
 - a. _____
 - b. _____
 - c. _____
2. Describe the uniforms the sailors are wearing. What distinctions can you make among the different uniforms? Why do you think the men on this ship are wearing different uniforms?

3. Find and name at least three different activities that the men are doing on this ship.

4. List three types of equipment you see on the ship.
 - a. _____
 - b. _____
 - c. _____
5. Describe the crew. Are there any women? Are there any African Americans?

6. Who in the photograph is in charge of the ship and why?

7. Make a list of at least five questions you have from viewing this photograph.
 - a. _____ d. _____
 - b. _____ e. _____
 - c. _____
8. Do you think it would be exciting to participate in a naval blockade during the Civil War? Why or why not?

