

Electronically Submitted Lesson Plan

Uncovering the Local Home Front Experience

What can gravestones and other primary sources tell us about the Civil War experience in small-town New England?

Remembering the time-worn adage, “All history is local,” my objective is to use concrete objects, i.e. gravestones, and other primary sources to increase students’ understanding of the effects of the Civil War in their town (Winchendon, MA).

Additionally, students will understand that the experiences of the citizens of Winchendon were similar to the experiences of thousands of other small-town inhabitants throughout the Northern states.

My history curriculum framework learning standards are: 3.9 Identify historic buildings, monuments, or sites in area and explain their purpose and significance; 3.12 Explain how objects or artifacts of everyday life in the past tell us how ordinary people lived and how everyday life has changed. Draw on the services of the local historical society and local museums as needed; 5.23 Describe the responsibilities of government at the federal, state, and local levels; 5.35 Identify the key issues that contributed to the onset of the Civil War; USI.27 Explain the importance of the Transportation Revolution of the 19th century including the stimulus it provided to the growth of a market economy; USI.35 Describe how the different economies and cultures of the North and South contributed to the growing importance of sectional politics in the early 19th century; USI.37 On a map of North America, identify Union and Confederate States at the outbreak of the war; USI.40 Provide examples of the various effects of the Civil War.

Prior to beginning this lesson, I will do legwork in our three local cemeteries. I will find gravestones listing names, dates, and interesting facts concerning former residents of Winchendon who served in the Union Army. One gravestone identifies Martin McCabe as “a musician in the Union Army.” Another recognizes Francis Hart as a “soldier in the War of the Rebellion.” Henry Parrott was a volunteer in a New York infantry regiment. There are many informative gravestones in the three town cemeteries.

In class, I will introduce the lesson by posting pictures of two gravestones in the classroom. Students will uncover details about the person(s) named on the gravestones by analyzing the words engraved on the headstones. After practicing in class, we will review what we know about primary sources. “Is a gravestone a primary source?” “Why do you believe this to be true (or false)?”

Shortly thereafter, we will make our visits to the cemeteries. On the day prior to our walking tour, we will go to the G.A.R. Park across from our schoolyard. The names of the fallen are engraved on the monument. Additionally, four battles in which sons of Winchendon died are engraved on the monument. “How might the deaths of these men have affected their families and their community?”

At the cemeteries, students will be in the company of able adult chaperones. (All participants in the field experience will be given a lesson on “cemetery etiquette” before the trip.) They will be guided to various headstones where they will record information from the headstones in their notebooks. “What can we know about people by reading their headstones?”

The follow-up to our field experience will be a sharing of information gathered by the students. Students will also be guided through excerpts from A.P. Marvin's History of Winchendon, Mass. (Publication date: 1868) The final chapter is a "gold mine" of references to primary sources.

Assessment will be in the form of either a student-created portion of a Civil War diary written by a child, wife, or parent of the soldier researched or a student-created set of letters from a family member to a soldier researched.

The lesson outlined above should take approximately one week to complete. Although the lesson is based in Winchendon, it can easily be adapted to any small town in New England. The link with current events is very pertinent considering the ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many students will know one or more people who have served or are currently serving in a hostile environment. Finally, other "home front" experiences can be accessed at www.cr.nps.gov or <http://valley.vcdh.virginia.edu>.

This investigation into local history in the context of national events will allow students to access both town and national history of the Civil War years more completely. Making connections to local places, events, and people as often as possible is an essential part of awakening an interest in history for many young people.

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