The Civil War: A Soldier’s Life (1861-1865) School Resource Kit

Central Michigan University
Museum of Cultural and Natural History
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The Care of School Resource Kits

Each School Resource Kit is comprised of authentic artifacts and modern reproductions.

Handling these particular objects is encouraged. Touching the objects and passing them around is allowed, but please remember that some items are delicate and should be treated with care.

Objects in plastic should remain in plastic though they may still be passed around for closer inspection.

Why do we ask you not to touch certain objects? The oils, dirt and moisture from your fingertips can stain textiles and etch metals, permanently changing them. One touch may not seem like much, but hundreds of touches in a year can wear a hole in a cotton dress or a notch in a wooden axe handle.

There are some items in certain kits that may be considered weapons in your school; be aware of your school’s policy regarding weapons and take appropriate action (i.e. inform the principal).

These items have been specially chosen for “hands on” learning and educational programs. In any museum, items on display and in the collection should never be touched unless a museum staff member has invited you to do so.

If an item is damaged, please gather all the pieces into a plastic bag and return it with the kit. When you return the kit, please let a staff member know that there is a damaged object.

If you find an item is missing or already damaged, please inform the museum’s student staff when you return the kit.

There are numerous benefits to the school resource kits. The “hands-on” aspect is one. Look closely at the materials used to make these historic objects. Look at their colors and decorations. Feel how light or heavy they are. Look at how they were manufactured. Consider who would have used these objects. Then, compare these historical artifacts to objects we use today. How are these items made today? Do we even use these objects today? What is different? What has remained the same?
Michigan Grade Level Content Expectations

History

History of Michigan (Through Statehood)
3 - H3.0.1 Identify questions historians ask in examining the past in Michigan (e.g., What happened? When did it happen? Who was involved? How and why did it happen?)

History of Michigan (Beyond Statehood)
4 - H3.0.4 Draw upon stories, photos, artifacts, and other primary sources to compare the life of people in towns and cities in Michigan and in the Great Lakes region during a variety of time periods from 1837 to the present (e.g., 1837-1900, 1900-1950, 1950-2000).
Introduction

The Civil War lasted from 1861 to 1865 and altered nearly every aspect of American life. One of the main factors leading up to the war between the states was tensions over the expansion of slavery into newly acquired western territories. This tension was coupled with the fact that newly elected Abraham Lincoln and the Republican Party felt that slavery was a national evil, perpetuated by the powerful southern plantation owners. Southerners were worried about the decline of their political power as a result of the rapid expansion of the northern economy. Several southern slave states seceded the Union and formed the Confederacy. The Civil War was a conflict between two extraordinarily different regions of the country.

The Civil War had an enormous effect on the United States. Over 10% of the country’s population (about 3 million people) were directly involved in the fighting. To this day, the Civil war is the only war fought on American soil between Americans. This conflict surely divided the country, but also divided families and friends. In fact, many of the generals in the Confederacy had attended the Army's officer training academy at West Point with Union generals as their classmates. Similarly, many officers who had fought together in the Mexican American War of the 1840s were on opposing sides of the battle field and enemies just 20 years later.

While the fighting was very intense, especially in battles like Antietam and Manassas, a large majority of the over 620,000 killed in the Civil War died from disease and infection. The number of soldiers killed during the fighting of the Civil War exceeded the total number of causalities in the American Revolution, the War of 1812, and World War I combined.

The Union Army won the Civil War, defeating the Confederacy, and the country was put together again and slavery was abolished. But the entire country was affected by the war economically, physically and emotionally. A long process called Reconstruction started after the war ended.

The goal of this loan kit is to inform students what it was like for soldiers on the battlefield and the hardships that they faced on a daily basis. The Museum of Cultural and Natural History hopes to give students a glimpse into the everyday life of the common soldier.
Civil War in Michigan

Although no battles took place within the boundaries of Michigan, our state was very active and important in the Civil War. In the years proceeding the conflict, the state militia only had about 1,000 members. However, when war with the South broke out in April of 1861, Michigan was quick to answer the call. Michigan provided its full requirement to the Union army with twenty-eight companies of militia. In fact, so many volunteered that some were turned away and forced to join the militias of other states. President Lincoln, upon seeing all the volunteers from our state, is said to have remarked, “Thank God for Michigan.” Michiganders volunteered from all walks of life. People came from schools, businesses, farms and everyplace in between to fight for the state and the preservation of the Union.

By the time the war was over, Michigan had given the Union Army 90,000 men, 85,000 of which were volunteers. This number was about 1/4 of the state’s total population. These volunteers formed 30 infantry and 11 cavalry regiments. Interestingly, Michigan’s cavalry regiments were so revered in the Union Army that our state was allowed a larger portion of cavalry members than others. Infantrymen from Michigan were very well respected on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line and within the Union Army. Michiganders were held in such high esteem that they were commissioned with the task to capture the President of the Confederate States of America, Jefferson Davis. They completed this task in June of 1865.

Of the 90,000 Michiganders that fought in the Civil War, nearly 15,000 died. That is about one out of every six men. Michigan’s contributions to the Union Army were essential and greatly helped the cause.
Artifacts: What They Wore

**Federal Forage Cap (Bummer) (E90.20):** These caps were part of the military uniforms during the Civil War. They were made of wool and were most effective in the winter time, though they were also required in the summer as well. Use of this style of head gear was common before 1864, and was typically worn by enlisted men. Each soldier was given one when they enlisted, however if they wanted a new one it would cost them $.65. This does not seem like much today but keep in mind that the average soldier earned about $13.00 a month.

**Sack Coat (E88.58):** Union uniform regulations called for coats and hats of dark blue flannel and trousers of sky-blue jersey. Confederate regulations specified grey coats and hats and sky-blue or grey trousers. Later in the war, as supplies became scarce, many colors appeared in regular confederate uniforms, butternut brown being the most common.

**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. How is this Civil War soldier’s uniform different from the way modern soldiers dress?
2. Most Army regulation clothing was made of wool. What would it be like to wear that year round? What are your clothes made out of?
3. Where do you wear a uniform? What does your uniform mean to you? Does it symbolize anything?
Artifacts: What They Carried

Housewife (E90.21): ‘Housewife’ was the name given to sewing kits carried by many soldiers in the Civil War. This kit usually contained spare buttons, needles and thread. Kits like these were needed because as the war continued, many supplies were scarce. Many men had to repair their torn and worn out clothes themselves as new ones were not available. Mothers, wives, sisters and sweethearts provided these housewives to their fighting men so that they would be able to repair what was damaged on their uniforms.

Pipe (E90.17): When armies on both sides of the war had downtime, the soldiers liked to relax and smoke tobacco. Thus, many soldiers during the Civil War would have been carrying a pipe. Tobacco was primarily grown in southern states and it became hard for Union soldiers to acquire it once the war started. (Conversely, since the Union Navy blocked the access of trade through southern ports it was difficult for Confederate soldiers to get coffee from Central and South America.) When Union and Confederate soldiers met on opposite sides of picket lines they would exchange news and also trade goods. As both coffee and tobacco were hard to come by in each army, it is not surprising that these stables were popular items to trade.
Artifacts: What They Carried

A Letter Home (E90.29): Soldiers on both sides of the war wrote letters home whenever they got the chance. Conversely, letters received from home were often read over and over again as soldiers enjoyed the temporary connection to their families and homes. In their letters, soldiers would sometimes describe battles. However, they mostly wrote about their daily life in their camp and their desire to be back home. The soldiers tried to ease the minds of their loved ones and assure them of their safety. For many soldiers letter writing could be difficult since most had only a fourth grade education. Thus, most letters contained many misspelled words and incomplete sentences. In fact, many soldiers came from rural areas with almost no schooling; some were illiterate and needed fellow soldiers to assist them in reading and writing letters. In the field, stationary, envelopes and other writing materials could be bought from sutlers. Sutlers were merchants that traveled with the armies selling items to soldiers, most likely at inflated prices. Much of what we know about soldiers’ lives during the Civil War comes from these descriptive and emotional letters. They are, therefore, incredibly important to the historical record.

Harpers Weekly Magazine (E90.28): Soldiers often read the newspaper to keep busy. However, they did not receive the daily paper like we do today. Oftentimes, the newspapers they received were weeks old. These papers were often passed from one soldier to another and helped to connect them to the homes that they missed. Harper’s Weekly is an example of such a publication.
Artifacts: What They Carried

**Deck of Cards (E90.22):** Another popular activity in both the Confederate and Union Armies was playing cards. Some games that the soldiers played are still popular today, like euchre and poker. Actually, many soldiers were susceptible to losing their entire paychecks in poker games. Card playing and gambling was considered sinful by many during the mid-1800s and as a result, soldiers would often throw their decks of cards and dice into the woods on their way into battle. They realized that if they were killed their belongings would be packaged up and sent to their families and they did not want people back home to know about their ‘sinful’ activities.

**Tin Cup (E90.16):** The soldier’s tin cup of the Civil War had numerous uses. Soldiers drank out of the cups, used them as bowls, and boiled water in them. Soldiers did not carry pots and pans because they became too cumbersome when marching. Instead, tin cups would be placed directly over the fire when cooking. It was common to have tin cups covered in black soot. Most of the tin cups were cheaply made and overheated easily. But the cheap manufacturing was beneficial as it made the cups light and easy to carry around. Soldiers usually buckled the cups to their haversacks while on the march.
Artifacts: What They Carried

**Tintype (E90.27):** Soldiers today carry pictures of their loved ones with them, just as Civil War soldiers did in the 1860s. Men often carried tintype pictures of their sweethearts or mothers with them during their enlistments to remind them of happier times and the people they missed. The tintype was a photo negative printed on a sheet of tin or thin metal in the place of paper. Photographers often followed armies around taking pictures of soldiers in camp and charging them for photos of themselves in uniform to send home to their loved ones.
Artifacts: What They Carried

**Haversack (E90.19):** This bag was initially designed to carry rations while soldiers were on the march. However, as the war continued, it was known to hold many essential items for soldiers. In fact, many of the artifacts in this kit were once carried in haversacks including: playing cards, a housewife, a plate, eating utensils, a pipe and tobacco.

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**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. A soldier’s haversack could be compared to a students backpack. What items do you carry everywhere with you, and how are these items similar or different from what Civil War soldiers would have carried?

2. Many soldiers carried sewing kits with them to repair their clothes. Would you be more likely to sew a hole in a pair of pants or just buy a new one? Could soldiers do this?

3. Soldiers would play cards, smoke, read and write letters from home, read the newspaper, or just sleep in their down-time. What do you do to relax? Are these activities similar or different?
Artifacts: What They Ate and Drank

**Hardtack:** Believe it or not, hardtack was a dietary staple for soldiers in the field. Hardtack was hard bread, made from salt, flour and water, and cut into three inch squares. It became army field rations because it could be kept outdoors in various weather conditions without spoiling. Soldiers often called it hard bread, crackers, teeth dullers or even worm castles. This moniker comes from the fact that oftentimes hardtack would come to the battlefield moldy or infested with worms. Civil War veterans, when recalling memories of the battlefield, often mentioned the hardtack and their dislike of it.
Coffee Beans (E88.77): The soldiers’ favorite beverage during the Civil War was coffee. The army issued coffee to their soldiers in bean form and had to be ground before it could be used. Soldiers would complete this task by using the butt end of their rifles or the closest rock. The ground beans were then added to the boiling water in a soldier’s tin cup. Like today, many soldiers liked to flavor their coffee with sugar, milk or even molasses. Sugar was usually provided when the coffee was distributed to the soldiers. However, milk and molasses were a luxury on the front and not widely available.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION
1. If you had to be outside for long periods of time what food would you take with you? Would this food spoil or stay eatable? Was this food available to the troops fighting in the Civil War?
2. Do your parents have to grind their own coffee beans in the morning, or do they come already ground?
3. Hardtack was a staple food for both armies. What one food could you eat over and over again? Would you eventually become tired of it?
Artifacts: What They Fired

A) Cartridge (E90.30): Guns during the civil war were much harder to load and fire than those today. The muzzle-loading firearms used by Union and Confederate soldiers were loaded with pre-packaged ammunition as it was nearly impossible to accurately measure grains of gun powder in the field. To fire a gun in the Civil War, the soldier had to tear off the tail of the cartridge with his teeth and pour the powder down the gun barrel. Then the bullet was shoved down the breech with a ram rod. Only after the percussion cap was added was the gun ready to fire.

B) Percussion Cap: The percussion cap is what detonates the gunpowder charge and fires the bullet. The cap is placed under the hammer of the gun and when the trigger is pulled, the hammer hits the cap which explodes, igniting the powder that fires the bullet.

C) Minie Ball (E90.31): Even though it is called a ‘ball’, the minie ball is actually conical shaped. This .58 caliber bullet could be fired by a Springfield Rifle accurately up to 500 yards, mostly due to the bullet’s hollow base. This feature enabled the bullets’ base to expand upon firing and take the form of the barrel of the gun. Springfield guns had a circular rifling in their barrels that caused the bullet to spin upon exiting the gun barrel. This feature increased accuracy and fatality.
QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Has anyone in the class ever seen a muzzle loaded rifle fired? If so how was it different from a modern gun being fired? How was it similar?
2. Do modern weapons require as long of a period of time to load and fire? How has battle changed with the invention of modern weapons such as automatic arms?
3. How has industrialization played a role in modern warfare?
Suggested Classroom Activities

1. Make hard tack
   Hardtack is very simple to make and really gives students a taste for what soldiers’ everyday lives were like. Ingredients: Flour, salt, and water. Directions: add 1 teaspoon of salt to 4 cups of flour, add water to create dough. Roll the dough flat in a greased cookie pan to a thickness of 1/4 to 1/2 inch. Cut into 2 1/2 to 3 inch squares, and perforate the top of each square with 13-16 holes. Bake at 400 degrees for 35-45 minutes or until the top begins to brown. Remove and allow to cool.

2. Write a journal
   Journal and letter writing are two of the biggest sources for information about the everyday soldier. A possible activity could have students write letters to their friends in the class, or to family members from the perspective of a civilian or soldier in the North or South. What kind of things would soldiers want to know from their loved ones? What types of things would families generally want to know from their soldier? Discuss these points and use them to compose letters.

3. Produce campaign signs for the 1864 election
   President Lincoln was running for re-election but did not have the support from many of the voters who had put him in office in the election of 1860 because of the way he was handling the war. So, in 1864 Lincoln, with the famous campaign slogan “don’t change horses in the middle of a stream”, ran against George B. McClelland, the former head of the Army of the Potomac and General in Chief of the Union Army. McClelland, who was running on an anti-war platform, wanted to bring a quick end to the war and negotiate a truce with the south. Lincoln wanted to keep the war going until the Union preserved a victory.
   Students could choose a side, then make a campaign poster for their chosen candidate. These posters could describe what people found appealing and off-putting about each candidate

4. Bring in a re-enactor to speak to the class
   The students could find it interesting to see a Civil War re-enactor in his full uniform and regalia. The speaker could give a first person perspective on the war, and the life of a common soldier.
Credits

Edited by: Abbie Diaz, Brittany Hild
Layout: Abbie Diaz

We acknowledge the use of materials from the following sources:
http://www.civil-war.net/
http://www.civilwar.org/
http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/cwphtml/tl1861.html
http://sunsite.utk.edu/civil-war/warweb.html
http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/qdc02

Every effort has been made to find and credit the sources of information used in this publication. If a source has been inadvertently omitted or errors made, please contact the Museum of Cultural and Natural History. Any oversights will be remedied.
School Resource Kit Evaluation Form: The Civil War

Kit Use:  ___ Mid Tier Lesson
___ Student Teaching
___ College Classroom Presentation (Class Number ____________)
___ Elementary Classroom (Grade Level _________)
___ High School Classroom (Subject Area __________)
___ Other (___________________________________)

1. Did the kit meet your needs?  Yes ________  No ________

2. Was the kit easy to use and understand?  Yes ________   No ________

3. Is there anything not included in this kit that would be useful?  Yes ________  No ________
   If yes, please include your suggestions: __________________________________________________

4. Was the printed guide easy to use and understand?  Yes ________   No ________

5. Was the kit in good condition?  Yes ________  No ________

6. Would you use this kit again?  Yes ________  No ________

7. Would you recommend this kit to a colleague?  Yes ________  No ________

8. Is there a topic that you would suggest we develop a loan kit for?
   If yes, please include your suggestions: __________________________________________________

Additional Comments: __________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________

Thank you for your feedback!
-The Museum of Cultural and Natural History