

**Lesson Plan: Memphis—The Rebuilding of a  
Modern City in the Aftermath of Yellow Fever**

**Grades:** 8th grade, High School

**Subjects:** Social Studies, U.S History & Geography

**Time required:** 1-1.5 hours

**Author:** Mark Scott, Bellevue Middle School  
(Shelby County Schools)

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**OVERVIEW**

The city of Memphis was decimated by the yellow fever epidemic of 1878. The city lost just over two-thirds of its population in a matter of weeks. After the epidemic ended, the city had to rebuild itself. Local, state and federal governments came together in the aftermath, and the city was able to evolve from a dirty river town into a modern city.

**UNDERSTANDING GOAL**

Students will be able to identify the limited options that a city faces when it is hit by a devastating disaster, the forces that it takes to recover from that disaster, as well as how a city after being considered doomed can recover and rebuild not only its infrastructure but also trust in its ability to ensure the safety of its people. Students will analyze tables, interpret and analyze digital period newspapers, and speculate or judge which of the government's various reforms or infrastructure projects actually achieved the goal of a yellow fever-free city.

**OBJECTIVES**

Students will read a series of newspaper articles from the time. These will be used to analyze, annotate, and summarize the major events that led to the city's recovery. Students will be asked to judge which infrastructure improvements actually helped the recovery effort the most and will need to refer to evidence from the documents to support their conclusions.



[Bird's eye view of the city of Memphis, Tennessee 1870.](#)

**INVESTIGATIVE QUESTION**

What steps did the city take to recover from the devastating yellow fever epidemic of 1878? How successful were the federal, state, and local government in rebuilding Memphis?

**CURRICULUM STANDARDS**

TN State Standards

- 8.90 Describe the major developments in Tennessee during the Reconstruction Era, including the Constitutional Convention of 1870, the yellow fever epidemic of 1878 and the election of African-Americans to the General Assembly
- US.2 Summarize the major developments in Tennessee during the Reconstruction era, including the Constitutional Convention of 1870, the yellow fever epidemic of 1878, and the election of African Americans to the General Assembly

## MATERIALS

- [PowerPoint](#)
- [Newspaper Articles](#)
- [Writing Prompts](#)
- Discussion Questions and Timelines embedded within PowerPoint
- Informational / biographical notes on the images contained in the notes section within the PowerPoint

## RESOURCES

- [Bird's eye view of the city of Memphis, Tennessee 1870.](#)
- [Memphis Daily Appeal, "Surrender the Charter" January 15, 1879](#)
- [Memphis Daily Appeal, "A Filthy District" February 5, 1879](#)
- [Memphis Daily Appeal, "The Work to be Done" December 14, 1879](#)
- [Public Ledger, "The Sanitary Truce" January 12, 1880](#)
- [Public Ledger, "The Water Question" August 3, 1883](#)
- [Memphis Daily Appeal, "The Contest Closed—Memphis Water Company Sold to Artesian Water Company by Taxing District" April 12, 1889](#)
- *Memphis 1800-1900, Volume II Years of Courage 1870-1900s*, A Pink Palace Museum Book, compiled by Carole M. Ornelas-Struve, text by Joan Hassell, editor.
- *A Century on the Mississippi: A History of the Memphis District U.S. Army Corps of Engineers 1876-1976*, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Memphis District, January 1976, by Floyd M. Clay Ph.D.

## PROCEDURE

DAY 1	
Prior to Lesson	Print all <a href="#">newspaper articles</a> . Review PowerPoint with embedded notes and newspaper articles. Review <i>Memphis 1800-1900</i> and <i>A Century on the Mississippi</i> for additional background knowledge (optional).
Step 1	PowerPoint slide 1: Introduce lesson's understanding goals and objectives. You may tailor this to yellow fever, urbanization, or bureaucracy, whichever focus is best for your subject.
Step 2:	PowerPoint slide 2: Generate discussion using the <a href="#">overview map of Memphis</a> prior to the epidemic. How would an epidemic affect the population and business activities of a river port? Have students describe what they see and how what they see is contradictory to what they know will happen once the epidemic strikes.
Step 3:	PowerPoint slides 3 & 4: Have students read the newspaper reactions of the results of the epidemic as it happened. How does the advice from the local newspapers change as the epidemic unfolds?
Step 4:	PowerPoint slide 5: Have students look at the table showing demographic data for Memphis prior to, during, and immediately following the epidemic. Ask students to formulate responses to the following questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What would a city of 50,000 need in the way of infrastructure?</li> <li>• What challenges would half the citizens fleeing have on the city as it dealt with the epidemic?</li> <li>• What challenges would a city with only a 1/3 of its population remaining have in a recovery effort?</li> <li>• How much would recovery cost? From what tax base would these revenues come?</li> <li>• If the city was unable to finance recovery, who would?</li> </ul>

## PROCEDURE

Step 5:	PowerPoint slide 6: Present guiding questions for the lesson to students.
Step 6	Distribute the first newspaper article, <a href="#">Memphis Daily Appeal “Surrender the Charter” from January 15, 1879</a> . Have students read the article aloud. You may choose to do this a popcorn read. At the end of each testimony for surrender, pause the reading to ask these questions: Who is this person? From what position of authority are they speaking? Why would they want surrender? Is their desire for state takeover surprising? Why or why not?
Step 7:	Pass out the next article: <a href="#">Memphis Daily Appeal “A Filthy District” from February 5, 1879</a> . Students will read this article silently. At the end of the silent read, have a short general discussion using textual evidence to support why prominent leaders of the community supported the idea of surrendering the city’s charter.
Step 8:	PowerPoint slide 7: Ask your students to discuss the following question based on what they have read and discussed thus far: What have we learned about state and local sentiment regarding the future of the City of Memphis?
Step 9:	PowerPoint slide 8: This slide may be used as an overall summary of what has occurred in the redevelopment of the city to date. Be sure to point out the creation of the Taxing District of Shelby County by Tennessee Authority and the establishment of the National Board of Health by President Hayes. Note the purpose of the National Board of Health, as it will be built upon in the next grouping of primary sources.
Step 10:	PowerPoint slide 9: This information will help students better understand the purpose of the National Board of Health.  PowerPoint slide 10: Show students image of Col. George Waring, who played an instrumental role in establishing the Memphis sewer system.  <i>*Slide 11 lists additional primary sources that can be used if you want students to read additional material.</i>
Step 11:	Divide the class into two large cooperative groups and have each read one of the two* primary sources: <a href="#">“The Work to be Done”</a> and <a href="#">“The Sanitary Truce”</a> based on the report of the National Board of Health and the implementation of that report. PowerPoint slide 12: Ask your students to consider these questions during their group discussions of the readings. Students should highlight relevant sections from the readings that address the questions.  <i>*In an effort to economize time, I suggest doing only two sources. As can be seen on slide 11, there are other articles that discuss the sanitation issue. You will find two other articles highlighted that are the next articles I would recommend using. You can successfully complete this lesson without using the additional articles.</i>
Step 12:	Ask each group to share their findings from the reading providing textual evidence. Then ask your students to compare and contrast the findings of the two groups. What does each source emphasize? Do the sources portray a city in complete agreement, or one that is dealing with different points of view?
Step 13:	PowerPoint slide 13: Discuss the role of the sewer system in the city recovery plan. PowerPoint slide 14: Discuss the role that the flood of 1882 played in helping to repopulate the city.

## PROCEDURE

Step 14:	<p>In their cooperate groups, have the students read one of the two primary sources that describe the process of locating a clean and safe water supply: <a href="#">“The Water Question”</a> and <a href="#">“The Contest Closed—Memphis Water Company Sold to Artesian Water Company by Taxing District.”</a></p> <p>Ask your students to discuss their readings. How does this factor into the city’s recovery from the yellow fever epidemic?</p> <p><i>*Slide 15 lists additional articles that can be used if you want students to read additional source material.</i></p>
Step 15:	<p>PowerPoint slide 16: Discuss the history of utilities in Memphis. This will provide students with a larger context and help them understand how this connects with utility service in the city today.</p> <p>PowerPoint slide 17: This slide may be used as an overall summary of what has occurred in the redevelopment of the city to date. Be sure to note the actions taken by the Taxing District based on the report from the National Board of Health by President Hayes.</p>
Step 16:	<p>PowerPoint slide 18: What do we know? Allow students to reflect on what they have learned thus far.</p> <p>PowerPoint slide 19: Discuss how these events lead to making Memphis a modern city.</p>
Step 17:	<p>PowerPoint slide 20: Read the quote to the class. Ask students what they think Dr. Thornton meant. Does this apply to situations that occur in our own time?</p> <p><i>Note: It might be helpful if the teacher thinks of local or national current events that students know about and are being discussed in their community at the time that this lesson is presented.</i></p>
Step 18:	<p>PowerPoint slide 21: Review the questions and have students write out their responses on <a href="#">this work-sheet</a>. This can be done as a class or homework assignment. Teachers may request a paragraph or short essay.</p>

## EVALUATION

- Written responses to guiding questions—50%
- Student discussion, questions, and observations made throughout the lesson—50%

## EXTENSION

- Have students read and discuss the following articles regarding the current debate over the use of the Memphis Sands Aquifer by the Tennessee Valley Authority: [“TVA and the Memphis Sand Aquifer—Special Viewpoint”](#), [“Water Works”](#), [“Memphis TVA Plant Versus Memphis Sand Aquifer”](#)
- Have students research [the lawsuit](#) filed by the State of Mississippi over the use of the Memphis Sands water supply by the City of Memphis.

Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_

*Please respond to each of the following questions citing evidence from today's readings and discussion to support your answers. If you need additional space to respond, please use the back of this sheet.*

1. What options did the city of Memphis have after the Yellow Fever Epidemics of 1870's (especially 1878)?
2. What steps did the city take to recover from the devastating Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1878?
3. How successful were the federal, state, and local governments in rebuilding Memphis?
4. What was the most significant part of the Memphis recovery following the Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1878?  
(Person, Event, Technology, Governmental Involvement)