TEACHING WITH PRIMARY SOURCES—MTSU

LESSON ACTIVITY: What We Remember: Interpreting a Civil War Battlefield

Grades: 5th and 8th
Subject: Social Studies
Time Required: One 30- to 45-minute class period
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OVERVIEW

In this lesson activity, students will examine the changing interpretation of the Stones River National Battlefield. They will compare both the National Park Service mission statements and the park brochures for 1957 and 2014. A careful analysis of the mission statements and brochures should reveal a dramatic change in interpretation. The 1957 mission focuses on the scenic aspects of the park and the 2014 statement centers on the park’s responsibility to “educate...future generations.” Where the 1957 brochure focused simply on the events related to the battle, the 2014 brochure includes a timeline of the Civil War and information on the history of the neighboring town of Murfreesboro, women’s roles in a war-torn community, African American troops, and the small African American community of Cemetery that developed on the battlefield site after the Civil War. After completion of this activity, students should be able to discern and understand trends in America’s collective memory of not only Stones River, but the Civil War.

TENNESSEE CURRICULUM STANDARDS

Social Studies
- 5.6 Explain with supporting details why Tennessee was divided on the issue of secession and the events that led it to eventually leave the Union to include: state convention vote of 1861, the Free and Independent State of Scott, Hurst Nation, East Tennessee mostly pro-Union and divided families.
- 8.75 Explain the geographical division of Tennessee over the issue of slavery and secession, including Governor Harris, the secession convention vote of 1861, anti-secession efforts, and Scott County.
- 8.78 Describe African-American involvement in the Union army, including the Massachusetts 54th Regiment and the 13th U.S. Colored Troops in the Battle of Nashville.
- 8.80 Trace the critical developments and events in the war, including geographical advantages and economic advantages of both sides, technological advances and the location and significance of the following battles: ... Stones River...

Common Core for English/Language Arts
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.1, Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.8.1, Cite the textual evidence that most strongly supports an analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
PROCEDURE

Part 1

Step 1 Inform your students that the word “interpretation” is used frequently at historic sites and museums. It is a word they should know. Discuss the meaning of this word with your students. Have students find, define, and discuss synonyms: Is interpretation an explanation? Is it a judgment? Is it an opinion, perspective, or point of view? Or, is it a little of all of these? Do all things need to be interpreted or just things that are too difficult for us to understand? If it is just those things which are difficult to understand, what does interpretation mean? When we interpret something, do we hide details or do we tell all? Should we tell all? Have students decide on a definition before moving on with the lesson. For more information on how to define interpretation in the classroom, take a look at the article “Teaching the Skill of Historical Interpretation.”

Step 2 Distribute Handout 1—Mission Statements to students. Ask students to look at the National Park Service mission statement for 1957. Instruct them to individually analyze the statement, take notes in the space provided on the worksheet and ask themselves:
  - What are the key words?
  - What words are unusual and pop out at you?
  - According to the mission statement, what is the purpose of the National Park Service?
  - If you were in charge of Stones River National Battlefield and this was your mission statement, how would you interpret the battlefield site to visitors? What would you emphasize, what would you talk about, and what would you preserve?
  - In contrast, what would you not talk about as a park ranger? Why not?

Step 3 After the students finish their individual analysis of the 1957 mission statement, have them discuss their observations and opinions as a class. Prompt discussion with the same questions used earlier to prompt individual analysis. Bring up the following points and questions (if the students don’t):
  - The emphasis in the 1957 statement is on the scenic qualities of a park.
  - Parks are for the “benefit and enjoyment of...people.” Does talking about the blood and death associated with the war make for an enjoyable visit? What about the issues that divided the nation and caused the Civil War? What about slavery? Remind students that the mission statement was written in 1957—does that year change their answers to those questions? Remind your students that the children of Civil War veterans and slaves are still alive in 1957. Additionally, tell students that the Civil Right Act of 1964 is still seven years in the future.
  - Have your students write down any new thoughts in their notes.

Step 4 Following discussion of the 1957 mission statement, have your students independently analyze and take notes on the 2014 mission statement. Prompt analysis with the same questions used in Step 1 to prompt analysis of the 1957 mission statement.

Step 5 Have the students engage in class discussion about the 2014 mission statement. Prompt analysis with the same questions used in Step 1 for the 1957 brochure. Bring up the following points and questions if the students don’t:
  - What has changed between 1957 and 2014? Why? Is the change for the better?
  - The emphasis in the 2014 mission statement is on “education” and “inspiration” of “future generations.” Does the 1957 mission statement even mention future generations or education? How does this change the purpose of the National Park Service?
• What is the importance of the word “unimpaired”? Is the National Park Service more likely to talk about blood, death, divisive causes of the Civil War, and slavery? It may surprise your students to know that National Park Service Civil War sites did not officially mention slavery on park grounds until 1998 (and only then because of Congressional legislation.)

Have your students write down any new thoughts in their notes.

**Part 2**

**Step 1** Distribute [Handout 2—Brochures](#) to students. Project the [1957 Stones River Park Brochure](#) on your classroom’s screen. Zoom in, scroll around, and give your students time to look at the brochure. Instruct your students to record any observations in the space provided on the handout and ask themselves:

- Does the brochure reflect the mission statement from the same year? How?
- What subjects are covered in the brochure? Why?
- What subjects are not covered? Does it mention bloodshed, causes of division, or slavery? Why?
- How far is the park from Murfreesboro? How would this influence the interpretation of the battlefield?
- Does the brochure reflect a northern bias, southern bias, or is it neutral?
- What kind of visitor would be interested in reading this brochure?
- If this brochure is all the information you had concerning the Civil War, what would you think the Civil War was about?

**Step 2** After the students finish their individual analysis of the 1957 brochure, have them discuss their observations as a class. Prompt discussion with the same questions used earlier to prompt individual analysis. Bring up the following points and questions if the students don’t:

- Stones River used to be three miles outside of the town of Murfreesboro. The city limits now come up to two sides of the park. How would the distance to town influence the interpretation or use of the park?
- Notice that the brochure provides illustrations of two Union monuments. Why are they Union and not Confederate? Remind your students that Civil War monuments were often built by veterans of the battles. Why wouldn’t Confederates have built monuments at Stones River?

**Step 3** Following discussion of the 1957 brochure, have your students independently analyze and take notes on the [2014 brochure](#). Prompt analysis with the same questions used in Step 1 for the 1957 brochure.

**Step 4** Have the students engage in class discussion over their thoughts on the 2014 mission statement. Prompt analysis with the same questions used in Step 1 for the 1957 brochure. Bring up the following points and questions if the students do not:

- Have the students list off topics addressed in the 2014 brochure that were not addressed in the 1957 brochure. Why are there so many diverse topics? Has the audience changed? Is the Park Service trying to change the audience and draw new people to the site? Which brochure has a better chance of drawing you to the site: 1957 or 2014? Why?

Have your students write down any new thoughts in their notes.
HANDOUT 1—MISSION STATEMENTS

Directions: Read the following mission statements, ask yourself the following questions, and write down your answers in the blank spaces:

- What are the key words?
- What words are unusual and pop out at you?
- According to the mission statement, what is the purpose of the National Park Service?
- If you were in charge of Stones River National Battlefield, and this was your mission statement, how would you interpret the battlefield site to visitors? What would you emphasize, what would you talk about, and what would you preserve?
- In contrast, what would you not talk about as a park ranger? Why not?

(1.) 1957 mission statement: “The National Park System, of which this area is a unit, is dedicated to conserving the scenic, scientific, and historic heritage of the United States for the benefit and enjoyment of its people.” (Library of Congress: Stones River National Military Park, Tennessee. [1957])

(2.) 2014 mission statement: “The National Park Service preserves unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the national park system for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations.” (NPS: Mission [2014])
Directions: After carefully looking over the brochures, ask yourself the following questions, and write down your answers in the blank spaces:

- Does the brochure reflect the mission statement from the same year? How?
- What subjects are covered in the brochure? Why?
- What subjects are not covered? Does it mention bloodshed, causes of division, or slavery? Why?
- How far is the park from Murfreesboro? How would this influence the interpretation of the battlefield?
- Does the brochure reflect a northern bias, southern bias, or is it neutral?
- What kind of visitor would be interested in reading this brochure?
- If this brochure is all the information you had concerning the Civil War, what would you think the Civil War was about?

(1.) **1957 brochure:**

(2.) **2014 brochure:**