Grades: 4th and 8th
Subjects: Social Studies, English Language Arts
Time required: 2 45-minute class periods
Author: Teaching with Primary Sources — MTSU

**OVERVIEW**
Writings from prominent figures of the Civil War era are readily available, but firsthand accounts about the plight of common soldiers are rare. Sam Watkins of the First Tennessee Regiment wrote *Co. Aytch* in 1882, providing a unique perspective of the war from the field. Born in Maury County, Tennessee, Watkins joined the Confederate Army early in the war. He participated in the Battles of Shiloh, Perryville, Murfreesboro, and Chickamauga, and he describes his experiences in vivid, readable prose. Although Watkins came from a wealthy family who owned slaves, *Co. Aytch* is widely accepted as a common soldier’s story because of Watkins’s rank as a private, and has provided a unique perspective for historians to study.

**UNDERSTANDING GOAL**
Students will examine aspects of the Civil War from the viewpoint of Sam Watkins. Students will also analyze the implications of Watkins’s label as a common soldier and determine how writing decades after the war may have affected his memoir.

**OBJECTIVES**
Students will:
- Analyze excerpts from Sam Watkins’s *Co. Aytch*.
- Discuss the experience of common soldiers during the Civil War.
- Identify the Battle of Shiloh on various maps (8th grade).

**INVESTIGATIVE QUESTION**
What is Sam Watkins’ purpose in writing the “Retrospective”? According to Watkins, what was the experience of common soldiers in the Civil War?

**CURRICULUM STANDARDS**

**4th Grade Social Studies**
- 4.34 Examine the significance and outcomes of key battles and events of the Civil War, including: Battle of Shiloh.

**8th Grade Social Studies**
- 8.63 Explain the significance of the following battles, events, and leaders during the Civil War, including: Battle of Shiloh.
- 8.66 Analyze how the writings of Sam Watkins and Eli-sha Hunt Rhodes illustrated the daily life of the common soldier.

**Social Studies Practices (4th/8th grade)**
- SSP.01 Gather information/Collect data and information from a variety of primary and secondary sources, including: Printed materials (literary texts, autobiographies), Graphic representations (maps).
- SSP.02 Critically examine a primary or secondary source in order to: Recognize author’s purpose, point of view, and reliability/bias.
Step 1
Ask students if they have ever heard of Sam Watkins. If so, what do they already know? Explain that much of what we know about the experience of common soldiers during the Civil War comes from Watkins’s memoir, *Co. Aytch*. Read Sam Watkins’s biography from the National Park Service’s Chickamauga and Chattanooga Web page as a class.

Step 2
The full title to Watkins’s book is *Co. Aytch, Maury Grays, First Tennessee Regiment: A Side Show of the Big Show*. Ask students what they can assume about the text based on the title. What might the “side show” be? What do you predict *Co. Aytch* will be about? The way Watkins spelled “aytch” to describe Company H is deliberately folksy. Why do you think he chose this spelling?
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<th>Step 3</th>
<th>As a class, define “retrospective” (adjective: directed to the past; contemplative of past situations, events, etc.; looking or directed backward; retroactive, as a statute). Why does Watkins choose to begin <em>Co. Aytch</em> with a retrospective?</th>
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<td>Step 4</td>
<td>Split the class into seven groups and distribute the <em>Co. Aytch</em> “Retrospective” excerpts. Each group should review the vocabulary terms listed at the bottom of their worksheet, read the excerpt, and put it into their own words.</td>
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| Step 5 | Reconvne as a whole class to discuss Watkins’s “Retrospective.” Have students share interpretations of their excerpts to put together a more complete version of the “Retrospective.”  
- Ask students why Watkins used figurative language and the cardinal directions to explain the Civil War. What was his purpose in doing so? What kind of storyteller is Watkins?  
- Discuss the limitations of *Co. Aytch*. Ask students what is missing. Explain that Watkins does not mention slavery or other divisive factors that contributed to the war. Why might this be?  
- Watkins refers to the war’s beginning as a “little unpleasant misconception.” He is not following “The Lost Cause” interpretation. Why does he downplay the causes of the Civil War? Do you think other common soldiers felt this way?  
- Watkins is perceived as a common soldier because of his rank as a private, but as wealthy slave-holders, his family was anything but common. How might Watkins’s upbringing have affected his viewpoint on the Civil War?  
- Watkins wrote this memoir twenty years after the Civil War. How might an account written directly after the event have been different? |
| Step 6 | Ask students to recall the phrase from part 1 of the “Retrospective” excerpts that begins: “We are one and undivided” as well as information and thoughts their classmates provided during the class discussion. Have them write a one paragraph response describing Watkins’s ultimate purpose in the “Retrospective.” What was he trying to prove to readers? |

### DAY 2

**The Battle of Shiloh**

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<th>Step 7</th>
<th>Using Sam Watkins’s words about the Battle of Shiloh is a great way to teach this important event. Use the Resources on page 2 for content. While students have <em>Co. Aytch</em> fresh in their minds, repeat the directions for the “Retrospective” activity to analyze “The Battle of Shiloh” excerpts. (Divide into seven groups. Review vocabulary words. Analyze the text and put it into your own words.)</th>
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<td>Step 8</td>
<td>Once the seven groups have reconvened, discuss how common soldiers experienced battle. What did Watkins find fun? What did he find demoralizing? Have students look at <a href="https://example.com">this map</a> and trace where <strong>Battle of Shiloh or Pittsburg Landing, Tennessee</strong> [1863-1865]</td>
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### EVALUATION

- *Co. Aytch “Retrospective” and “Battle of Shiloh” Excerpt Worksheets* — 50 pts.
- Post-discussion response paragraph — 50 pts.

### EXTENSION

Sam Watkins became a household name after Ken Burns’ *The Civil War* documentary was produced by PBS in 1990. If your school’s library has a copy or you have access to the film on Netflix, Sam Watkins is introduced in Episode 1: *The Cause (1861)*, 1:00:40-1:01:37. Show this segment to your students and ask why Burns would have highlighted his story.