

"I DRILLED THEM WITH CORNSTALKS:" WILLIAM H. SINGLETON, A BLACK SOLDIER'S STORY

A SOCIAL STUDIES LESSON PLAN

GRADES 3-5

Overview

Serving as a Union soldier in the Civil War was one of the ways that African Americans demonstrated their resistance to slavery; by fighting against the Confederacy they sought to overthrow slavery and free their people. In this lesson, students learn about African American military service in the Civil War through exploring the specific experiences of one black soldier from North Carolina, William Henry Singleton. Born ca. 1843, William Henry Singleton was the son of an enslaved woman and a white man. By law, Singleton inherited his mother's slave status even though his father was a free white man. At the onset of the Civil War, Singleton (like many other blacks) wanted to join the Union forces to fight against the Confederacy, but blacks were initially not allowed to serve. Although rejected at first, Singleton took initiative and formed a band of 1000 men and drilled them by marching "with cornstalks for guns." In 1863, he was accepted into the Union Army when Abraham Lincoln lifted the ban on black service. Singleton brought the regiment he had trained with him into the Union Army. William Henry Singleton and thousands of other black men served with distinction, even though they faced discrimination and racism.

Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Provide an overview of William Henry Singleton's life with a focus on events that led to his military service.
- Recall key facts about black military service such as the year blacks were allowed to serve in the Union Army and Navy; the most well known regiment (the 54th) and why they were distinguished; how black soldiers prepared for service; and the numbers of blacks serving in the Union.
- Define terms used in Singleton's description of his military service like "contraband" and "regiment."

Guiding Questions

Why was it so important for William Henry Singleton and other former slaves to serve in the Union Army (and Navy)? How does Singleton illustrate the sayings "never give up" and "be prepared?" How is fighting for the Union different from the other forms of "resistance" Singleton engaged in? How can oppressed people use strategy and planning to achieve their liberation? How can a minority group change a society?

Suggested Time

2 class periods

Preparing to Teach the Lesson

1. Review Teacher Tool 1, which is a brief biography of William Henry Singleton.
2. Review Teacher Tool 2, which contains the full text of the narrative written by William Henry Singleton.
3. View the short video, *Boy Runaway*, which features an actor portraying a young Singleton describing his escape from slavery and long journey to the plantation where his mother was enslaved.
4. Review Teacher Tool 3, which provides an overview of the black military experiences during the Civil War. You can also review another overview of black military service during the Civil War at <http://memory.loc.gov/learn///features/timeline/civilwar/aasoldrs/soldiers.html> and a more detailed summary at http://www.itd.nps.gov/cwss/history/aa_history.htm.
5. Visit the following websites to view images of black Civil War soldiers:
 - http://americancivilwar.com/colored/Colored_Troops_Pictures.html
 - <http://memory.loc.gov/learn///features/timeline/civilwar/aasoldrs/photocol.html>
 - <http://people.virginia.edu/~jh3v/retouchinghistory/essay.html> (The article with this photo explains how it was modified to misrepresent black Union soldiers as Confederate soldiers.)

Choose three or more images of black soldiers that you wish to show your class. You can select the images from the above websites or others of your choosing. Be prepared to project these images for students to view them in class.

6. Review a few pieces of music (like *Battle Hymn of the Republic*) from the Civil War era. The following sites have examples from which you can choose:
 - <http://www.historyplace.com/specials/different/battle-hymn.htm>
 - <http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/ihas/loc.natlib.ihas.200000003/default.html>

Decide if you wish to play any of these songs. If you choose to do so, be sure to have any necessary equipment.

7. Review Student Handout 1, which features an excerpt from William Henry Singleton's narrative. The excerpt highlights Singleton's experiences serving in the Civil War. If you reviewed the full text of the narrative in Teacher Tool 2, you do not need to re-read this. Just be sure to be aware of what students will learn from Student Handout 1 so that you can provide an overview of the other important highlights of Singleton's life that preceded his military service.
8. Review Student Handout 2, which asks a series of objective questions for students to answer about the experiences of William Henry Singleton and other black soldiers in the Civil War.
9. Review Teacher Tool 4, which provides the correct responses to the questions in Student Handout 2.

Teaching the Lesson (Suggested Steps)

1. To begin this lesson, play the music that you selected in the background (if you decided to do so) and show your preselected images of black Civil War soldiers to engage

students in the era. Ask students to look closely at the selected images. Ask them questions such as: Who are these men? Why do you think they are dressed in uniforms? Some people believe that African Americans did not fight for their freedom in the United States, do you think that is true?

2. Using Teacher Tool 3 and information from one of the above websites on black military service in the Civil War (optional), present key factual information about blacks who served in the Union Army. Tell students to listen carefully and take notes because they will answer questions about black service in the Civil War later.
3. Using Teacher Tools 1 and 2, provide students with an overview of the life of William Henry Singleton. Here, focus more on his early life so that students will understand his experiences in slavery and the ways that he resisted prior to his service in the Civil War. Note that Singleton ran away several times as a young boy and that he also hid and pretended to be ignorant in resistance to his enslavement. Play the short video, *Boy Runaway*, which features a young Singleton running away all the way from Atlanta, Georgia to North Carolina when he was only six or seven years of age.
4. Distribute Student Handout 1 and ask students to follow along as you read aloud the bold segment of the excerpt. This segment highlights his experiences and feelings when working for both the Confederate and Union Armies. You may also choose to read more of the narrative.
5. After reading (at least) the bold segment, lead a discussion focusing on Singleton's military experiences and the meaning of them. Ask them to think about his motive in accompanying a Confederate officer to war. Explore the guiding questions for this lesson: Why was it so important for William Henry Singleton and other former slaves to serve in the Union Army? How does Singleton illustrate the sayings "never give up" and "be prepared?" How is fighting for the Union different from the other forms of "resistance" Singleton engaged in? How can oppressed people use strategy and planning to achieve their liberation? How can a minority group change a society?
6. Distribute Student Handout 2 and ask students to complete it with partners or in small groups.
7. Using the correct answers provided in Teacher Tool 4, go over student responses to Student Handout 2.

Extending the Lesson

1. Ask students to research the experiences of the 54th Regiment of Massachusetts, the most famous black regiment in the Civil War. There are numerous websites that treat the experience of the 54th such as:
 - http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/american_originals/54thmass.html
 - <http://www.54thmass.org/>
 - <http://www.historynet.com/americas-civil-war-54th-massachusetts-regiment.htm>
2. Lead a discussion with students comparing and contrasting the experiences of soldiers in the 54th with those of William Henry Singleton.
3. Ask students to research the participation of African Americans in another war such as the American Revolution, World War I, World War II, or the Vietnam conflict. Lead a discussion with students considering the similarities and differences in the experiences of black soldiers in the Civil War and those in this other war.
4. Ask students to write a letter describing the experiences of a black man serving in the Union Army. This exercise in historical fiction requires students to set the story within

the context of the actual events of the times, but allows them to create a fictionalized character.

5. Pick a topic below and write a short research paper using information in the websites listed or other reliable sources.
 - The Battle of Fort Pillow
 - o <http://www.nps.gov/hps/abpp/battles/tn030.htm>
 - o <http://www.historynet.com/battle-of-fort-pillow.htm>
 - African American Sailors in the Civil War
 - o <http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/blacks-civil-war/article.html>
 - o <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/trm196.html>
 - The 54th Massachusetts
 - o <http://www.historynet.com/americas-civil-war-54th-massachusetts-regiment.htm>
 - o http://www.pbs.org/civilwar/classroom/lesson_shaw.html
 - o http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/american_originals/54thmass.html
 - o http://www.gilderlehrman.org/collection/doc_print.php?doc_id=137
 - The Battle of Fort Wagner
 - o <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6215/>
 - o <http://www.nps.gov/hps/abpp/battles/sc007.htm>
 - Frederick Douglass and the campaign to accept African Americans into the U.S. Army
 - o <http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/blacks-civil-war/>
 - o <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/aahtml/exhibit/aopart4.html>
 - o <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/dougl92/frontis.html> (Focus on the segments concerning his recruitment of the 54th and 55th colored regiments.)