

Patricia Stanley

Arizona Students Learn from a Georgia Civil War Prison

When teaching my seventh-grade students about the Civil War, nothing leaves more of an impression than the story of Andersonville Prison, a Confederate prison in Andersonville, Georgia, which is now preserved as a national historic site. The Teaching with Historic Places (TwHP) lesson plan, “Andersonville: Prison of War Camp,” is an excellent tool for bringing this story to life in my classroom. Even though they may not have the opportunity to visit the actual national park in Georgia, my Arizona students can learn exciting and relevant information about it by examining the maps, readings, and historic photographs in the lesson plan.

The clearly stated objectives gave me a quick overview of this lesson and enabled me to discern if it met our district assessments. While the readings and other materials in the lesson were outstanding, the activities presented in the Putting It All Together section were an excellent way of delving further into the lesson’s topic as well as meeting several of these assessments.

In the first activity, Empathetic Response, students imagine they are a prisoner in Andersonville as they describe what life was like through diary entries or a letter to a loved one. I was able to tie the book *The Boys War* by Jim

Murphy to the activity. When students learned that Civil War soldiers, including some at Andersonville, were sometimes as young as 12 years old, they were able to relate more to the soldiers’ experiences. In keeping with this, I modified the activity by having students keep a Civil War journal as if they were a 12-year-old soldier. To complete the activity, they created a timeline of their imaginary military career up to and including the time they became a prisoner at Andersonville.

Activity 2, Family History, asks students to research the life of an ancestor who fought in or lived during the Civil War. I was able to incorporate another district assessment—technology—into the activity by having them conduct genealogy searches as part of a Family Tree Internet project. It was a lot of fun for the students to try different search engines to find family descendants. What proved most interesting was that the students took the information home to their families, who became involved in the searches.

Activity 3, Money in Prison, was a great way to meet our economic standards. As literacy and math are the main focus at my school, it is important for me to be able to incorporate some form of math into my social studies lessons whenever possible. For this activity, I assigned a student the part of the “sutler,” a soldier who operated a small store within Andersonville’s stockade and sold vegetables and other food. I gave that student some prior information on the role a sutler played in prison life, and he conducted independent research to further his understanding of how he was to operate within the group. Each student “prisoner” was then given a small amount of currency. I wrote certain rules on chart paper that all students would follow when doing this role playing/economic lesson. When the students realized they would have to pay for everything in prison things got interesting. They immediately had strong feelings—either like or dislike—toward the sutler. He tended to favor some prisoners by giving them extra supplies while he made others pay

Rows of headstones dramatically illustrate the high mortality rate at the Civil War prison in Andersonville, Georgia. Photo by Beth Boland.



more for supplies or denied them things altogether. After the activity students wrote in their social studies journals about how they felt about the experience.

Activity 4, The Raiders' Trial, had students reenact the trial of a band of prisoners known as the Raiders who terrorized other prisoners, or act out the trial of Captain Wirz, the commandant of the prison who was ultimately hanged for war crimes. This activity was appropriate because conducting a mock trial is one of our district assessments. The class did research on Captain Wirz and gathered lots of good information about him and the way he ran the prison.

Activity 5, Prisoner of War Camps, and Activity 6, Interviewing a Former Prison of War, fit in with our Kids Voting lessons. Why would Kids Voting have anything to do with war camps and POWs? Part of Arizona's Kids Voting program covers past and current political candidates. John McCain, former Republican presidential candidate and Vietnam POW, is from Arizona. The class did in-depth research about John McCain and his experiences during the Vietnam War. We studied the war and the atrocities the

soldiers went through. We combined this activity with a visit to the traveling Vietnam War Wall. Students' journal writing was fantastic; they compared and contrasted the two wars.

I revised the lesson's final activity to meet several math standards and a geography standard as well. I developed a question-and-answer sheet based on a map from the lesson showing the locations of Civil War prison camps. Students then tracked distances from camp to camp and researched different elevations and climates. They were even very vocal about which camp they would rather be at because of year-round temperatures and better overall weather conditions. One group would rather brave the snows and the other would rather have the summer humidity.

The students really enjoy this TwHP lesson plan, and it is extremely teacher friendly. It meets several of our district's standards, and the students walk away with information about the Civil War that they won't soon forget.

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Civil War Prison Camps. Courtesy Andersonville National Historic Site, National Park Service.

