

The Civil War in the Chesapeake Bay

By studying maps and battles, students will understand the strategies used by the Federal and Confederate forces during the Civil War. Issues to be discussed include how topographic and maritime features influenced the sites and outcomes of battles and the importance of the governments controlling access to certain cities, waterways and other features. This information can be used while experiencing the field trips on the following pages. SOLs addressed will focus on social sciences, history and geography.

Background

During the Civil War (1861-1865), with the capital of the Confederacy in Richmond and the capital of the United States in Washington, D.C., only about 100 miles apart, both cities needed to be protected by their respective military units. If the government of one side was under the control of the other, vital records, buildings and governmental officials would be in peril. Even moving officials or records during wartime would expose them to danger.

In the 1860s traveling by water was much faster and more efficient than traveling by land. Larger amounts of cargo could be moved on ships than by wagon. Today paved roads can be built over waterways and wetlands, and hills can be smoothed for easier travel. In the 1860s bad or incomplete roads, swamps and marshes, even fallen trees and other vegetation, made travel by horse and wagons difficult in some areas.

Most ships and boats traveled under wind or human power. Some were powered by steam. In 1862 the first ironclads fought in the James River. These were wooden ships with iron sidings.

Many battles occurred to secure major waterways, such as the Chesapeake Bay, or forts and cities that could help secure a safe landing space for armies. Each worksheet will investigate one battle and help the students understand how geography played a role in action around the Chesapeake Bay and coastal plain during the Civil War.

Procedure

Before the class:

Run off a worksheet for each student and have a map for each group of students.

1. Divide students into groups. Give each group a copy of the map, pencils and one of the battle backgrounds. (Each student should receive a worksheet.)
2. Have the students read about the battle, determine the objective of the battle and complete the exercises on the worksheet to determine how geography influenced the outcome of the battle.
3. Students can share their answers with the rest of the class.
4. You are encouraged to develop additional worksheets for your local area. For example, schools, parks and historic areas along the James River might develop a worksheet related to the battle at Drewry's Bluff and Fort Darling or the siege of Petersburg.

Follow-up activities:

1. Have the students write a report about their findings.
2. Study battles in the area around your school. Analyze the way geography played a role in the outcome of the battle.

Grade Levels: 4–12

Objectives

Students will understand the role of the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries in naval and land battles of the Civil War.

Materials

Map of the Chesapeake Bay
Pencils
Ruler
Copies of worksheets

Where

Inside the classroom

When

Anytime of the year, preferably before visiting a park

Resources

National Park Service,
<http://www.chesapeakebay.net/discover/bayhistory/civilwar>

Civil War Website
www.civilwar.com

Books

- Bailey, Ronald H. and the Editors of Time-Life Books, *Forward to Richmond: McClellan's Peninsular Campaign*, Time-Life Books, 1983,
- Beatie, Russel H., *Army of the Potomac: Birth of Command*, November 1860 – September 1861, Da Capo Press, 2002,
- Beatie, Russel H., *Army of the Potomac: McClellan's First Campaign*, March – May 1862, Savas Beatie, 2007,
- Burton, Brian K., *The Peninsula & Seven Days: A Battlefield Guide*, University of Nebraska Press, 2007,

The Civil War in the Chesapeake Bay

3. Visit a state park near you and follow the related lesson plan in this book.
4. Have students study a map and develop a hypothesis about other possible geographically important locations. Have them research military activities at these spots.
5. Have students brainstorm about other reasons a port or city may be important. (commerce, universities, governmental centers, and others)

Books continued

- Miller, William J., *The Battles for Richmond, 1862*, U.S. National Park Service and Eastern National, 1996,
- Mills, Eric. *The Chesapeake in the Civil War*, Tidewater Publishers, 2007
- Salmon, John S., *The Official Virginia Civil War Battlefield Guide*, Stackpole Books., 2001.
- Sears, Stephen W., *To the Gates of Richmond: The Peninsula Campaign*, Ticknor and Fields, 1992,
- Webb, Alexander S, *The Peninsula: McClellan's Campaign of 1862*, Castle Books (reprint 2002), 1981.

Developed by Charlene Talcott, Belle Isle State Park

Worksheets:

The Battle between USS Monitor and CSS Virginia

(The Battle of Hampton Roads)

Background:

Monitor and *Virginia* were classified as “ironclad” ships. Most of the ships during the Civil War were made of wood and powered by sails. These two were different. They were made of wood, but ship surfaces above the water line were covered with iron plates. A rotating turret on the *Monitor* allowed guns to be fired in almost any direction. Both ships were powered by steam made from burning coal.

The CSS *Virginia* was fashioned from the hull and engines of the sunken USS *Merrimac*. Metal plates, turrets, guns and other parts of the ship were added at a naval yard in Norfolk. Although the ship was renamed, it is often referred to as *Merrimac*. (Sometimes it is spelled *Merrimack*.)

The Union navy blockaded (blocked with ships) the Hampton Roads area. Any unauthorized ships could be fired upon. This seriously affected travel of Virginia ships in and out of the Chesapeake Bay. Norfolk, Richmond and

other cities depended on ships bringing them goods and shipping out products that were made in those cities. On March 8, 1862, *Virginia* fired upon several Union ships and rammed others with the strong metal bow. Several Union ships were sunk and many sailors were injured or killed.

On March 9, *Monitor* arrived and began a battle with *Virginia*. The ships fought for several hours, with both ships unable to sink the other. A shell hit the turret of the *Monitor*, causing an explosion of its ammunition. The ship retreated to tend to its wounded. *Virginia* saw this as a retreat, and left to celebrate a victory. When *Monitor* returned and saw that *Virginia* had left, the crew thought that they were victorious.

1. Look at a map and locate Hampton Roads. It is where the James, Elizabeth, and Nansemond Rivers meet before entering the Chesapeake Bay.

2. Since Hampton Roads was blockaded by the Union navy, do you see other ways that cities such as Norfolk and Richmond could continue trade? What would be the advantages and disadvantages to these new routes?

Answers will vary, but could include land routes; Norfolk could try to use the ocean via Virginia Beach.

3. Both sides saw this battle as a victory. Each thought that the other had retreated. *Virginia* caused more damage to ships and crew than *Monitor*. However, the blockade was still in place. Even today some historians disagree about which side won, although others claim it was a tie. What do you think?

Answers will vary.

The Civil War in the Chesapeake Bay

The Peninsula Campaign

Background:

In the spring of 1862, the largest army ever assembled in North America gathered at Fort Monroe. Almost 150,000 Union men, 3,600 wagons, 300 artillery pieces, 700 ambulances, and 25,000 horses and mules were planning to travel from Fort Monroe to Richmond, a distance of about 80 miles.

They chose Fort Monroe because it stayed in Union control after the start of the Civil War. General George B. McClellan was in charge of this operation.

Two groups of soldiers marched toward Richmond, one near the York River and one near the James River. By staying near the river, they hoped the

navy could help keep the Confederate forces away.

It was not easy. Most soldiers walked, even in heavy rains that turned the dirt roads to mud. Confederate forces fought them at several places along the way. The soldiers took more than two months to get close to Richmond.

1. Locate Fort Monroe on a map. Trace a possible route from Fort Monroe to Richmond.
2. The Confederate troops were led by General John Magruder. He stationed many soldiers with cannons and other artillery along a

line stretching from Yorktown to the James River. Why do you think he did this?

Blocking the movement of Union soldiers, including alternate routes.

3. The Union naval ships traveled several days ahead of the Union army. Why do you think they did this? *Possible answers: Shelling towns ahead of the army to force retreats; causing panic among Southerners in the towns; testing the strength (number of people and weapons) of the army.*

The Potomac River

Background:

The Potomac River serves as the border between Maryland, which remained part of the United States during the Civil War, and Virginia, which became part of the Confederate States. The river itself is considered part of Maryland.

During the war there were many skirmishes (small battles) along the Potomac. The Union army blockaded the river throughout the war. A blockade occurs when one side blocks a river with its ships and only allows boats and ships from its side to navigate the waterway.

The blockading ships do not need to stay in one place but can move up and down the river. The Union called the boats patrolling the river “The Potomac Flotilla.”

1. Locate the Potomac River on the map. Locate Washington, D.C.
2. The Confederate Army of Northern Virginia kept many men between the Potomac River and Richmond. Why do you think that was important for them to do? *Possible answers: Prevent Union forces from*

marching to Richmond; be ready to attack Washington, D.C.

3. Besides protecting the United States capital, what are some other reasons the Union forces would want to blockade the Potomac River? *Possible answers: Transportation of goods and people, keeping the Potomac River in Union hands; preventing the Confederate forces from being able to land in Maryland; prevent people living in Virginia from using the Potomac for transportation.*

Life Aboard Ship

Background:

Life aboard ship was filled with hard work. With permission from the parents, boys as young as 13 years old could enlist in the Union, while boys 14 years old could enlist with the Confederates. Union adult sailors were paid \$12 to \$18 a month, depending on their rank. Boys were ranked according to their knowledge

and skills. Third class boys were paid \$7 a month, second class boys \$8, and first class boys \$9. Girls and women were not allowed to serve on ships.

There were many skills to master in order to move up through the ranks. Coal was shoveled into steam engines, decks were cleaned, brass was polished, ropes were knotted and spliced, ripped sails were repaired, small boats were

rowed and sails were raised and lowered from high masts. In addition, crew members were continuously drilled in handling guns, cannons, boats and other equipment. The work was very hard. Sailors usually worked in four-hour shifts called watches. Then they would have four hours off before working another four-hour shift, and so on around the clock.

The Civil War in the Chesapeake Bay

The sailors were assigned stations throughout the ship. They had numbered hammocks that went into numbered spots on the ship. When they rose in the morning, the hammocks and bedding were rolled up, and put into their assigned spaces on the ship's deck. The sailors had assigned seats and times at mess (meals), and had dishes, cups and eating utensils assigned to them. Each sailor who worked with sails was assigned to a specific spot on a specific mast. Each cannon had sailors assigned to it with specific duties. Even the order in which they left and boarded a ship was assigned. Assignments were posted on the ship in case anyone lost track of where he was supposed to be.

1. Watches ran from 8 a.m. to noon, noon to 4 p.m., 4 p.m. to 8 p.m., 8 p.m. to midnight, midnight to 4 a.m., and 4 a.m. to 8 a.m. On many ships, the four-hour watch between 4 and 8 p.m. was split into two 2-hour watches, called dog watches. Why do you think the ships did this?

If dog watches were used, then sailors would not have to work the midnight to 4 a.m. shift two nights in a row.

Students may also note that this would give sailors working 4 to 8 p.m. a chance to eat dinner. While correct, this is not the main reason.

2. Why do you think everyone had specific stations throughout the ship?

Possible answers: During a battle, it caused less confusion if everyone knew where he was supposed to be; all stations would be covered; it helped someone learn his station and duties very well.

3. The Confederate navy often gave captured sailors a choice: They could be prisoners of war or become sailors for the Confederacy. Which would you choose?

Answers will vary. Some possibilities: Become a prisoner of war rather than fight for the other side; less work but also worse treatment as a prisoner; better to be a free worker than suffer in a prison camp.

The Northern Neck Home Front

Background:

Because many battles took place in Virginia, everyone was affected. Soldiers marching by a farmstead might expect food, horses or equipment to be given to them. This would leave less for the farmer's families. Fathers and older sons who usually plowed fields and worked the farms might be off fighting in the war.

The Northern Neck area of Virginia lies between two rivers. The Rappahannock River on the lower part of the peninsula is part of Virginia. The Potomac River is part of Maryland and was under the control of the Union Army. Both rivers empty into the Chesapeake Bay. Boundary markers and other landmarks were all on land, so if a ship was too far away from shore, its crew may not be able to tell which state it was in.

No major battles occurred on the Northern Neck, but the area was patrolled by members of the Union army and navy. The people who lived there relied on fishing to make money and feed

their families. Transportation more than a few miles was mostly by boat or ship. During the Civil War, people living on the Northern Neck were not allowed to travel or work in boats because the Union feared that some of them might be spies. Although only the Potomac was in the United States at that time, the Rappahannock, Chesapeake Bay, and the many rivers and creeks leading to those rivers were patrolled by Union forces.

1. Locate the Northern Neck on the map. Do you see a major city on the Potomac that the United States would want to protect?

Washington, D.C.

2. What kinds of information would spies for the Confederacy be able to find? Why do you think the Union was afraid of spies?

Answers will vary, but possibilities are Union troop and ship movements and availability of supplies. Many

attacks were surprises, and if the Confederacy knew that an attack was coming, they could prepare by bringing in more troops. They could also plan their own surprise attacks.

3. If you were a child living on a farm on the Northern Neck, what concerns would you have?

Answers will vary, but could include worried about a family member at war, fear of being attacked, not having enough to eat.