

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

Children in the Civil War

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The Civil War affected every aspect of the lives of American children, lending excitement to the lives of Northern children, imposing hardships and limitations on Southern white children, and changing the lives of African-American children forever.

Two entries in the diaries of a little boy in Massachusetts and a little girl in Georgia from the same week in the fall of 1864 display the extremes of children's experiences. While Gerald Norcross complained about the boring and ineffective "battle" between model ironclads he witnessed one night on Boston Commons—perhaps the most distressing experience he recorded in a diary he kept virtually every day of the war—at almost the same moment Carrie Berry recorded her description of the burning of Atlanta, as Confederate forces evacuated the city and federal troops marched in. Carrie had spent weeks writing short, terse entries about the bombardment of the city, the closing of her school and church, the constant search for food and safety. By contrast, Gerald wrote in great detail about the various interesting, even fun ways the war intersected with his life: playing war games, reading novels and magazines, collecting toys and other mementos.

Gerald's and Carrie's experiences occupy opposite ends of the spectrum of how white children witnessed the war. Not all southern children saw their cities burned to the ground and most northern children were not so completely untouched by the sharp end of war as Gerald. Yet they represent the fact that the war was very different for Northern and Southern children.

There were, however, similarities. Children of both races and in both sections were fearful but also excited when the war began. They rushed to village squares to watch local companies drill and gathered with other townspeople to watch regiments march off to the front. Many boys—and a few girls—formed their own companies. They practiced the same drills as their fathers and older brothers and staged mock battles. Children's magazines like *The Student and Schoolmate* and *Our Young Folks* were filled with stories of boys playing at war, but also of boys who went off to war as drummers or under-aged soldiers—and who often died heroic deaths. The war infused these and other magazines, dominating fiction and non-fiction articles, games, and every other aspect of their contents. Fewer children's magazines appeared in the Confederacy, but scores of

schoolbooks were published as part of the South's efforts to create separate cultural and educational traditions. Geography and history books proffered information about U. S. history and about racial beliefs that supported the Confederate cause, while arithmetic books featured problems that revolved around military concerns and jargon. Northern children, especially, could take part in the war culture that gripped both sections. Authors such as Oliver Optic and J. W. Trowbridge produced novels and histories of the war especially for children, who could also enjoy "panoramas" like "The Grand Panopticon Magicale of the War and Automaton Dramatique," which presented a series of giant paintings—stretched across a stage on giant spools—accompanied by special effects and dramatic narratives depicting the military highpoints of the war.

Children in both sections also took part in their countries' war efforts. Many recalled years later that they were constantly required to "pick" or "scrape" lint (which would be used to bandage wounds). Teenaged boys in the North and older girls in the South worked in ammunition factories and government offices, while younger children collected food and supplies for local regiments and hospitals. In the North, many children and youth took part as performers, volunteers, and consumers in fund-raising fairs sponsored by the United States Sanitary Commission.

Although many Northern children lost fathers and brothers and faced economic hardships because of the war, Southern children were much more likely to have their lives overturned by the conflict. A number of them became refugees, moving into crowded cities like Richmond or to far-away places like Texas, leaving behind friends and possessions. Others had to quit school to take the places of absent fathers and brothers on farms and plantations. The already stressed school systems in the South often closed because of a shortage of funds or because teachers had gone off to the army. Many children and their families, especially those living in cities, where the price of food skyrocketed, or those living in the paths of invading armies, had to get used to sparse, plain diets and often went hungry. The occupation of ever-expanding swaths of the Confederacy by Yankee soldiers also affected children, whose homes were sometimes taken over, whose schools were sometimes invaded by soldiers who might arrest their teachers or censor school lessons and performances if they were suspected of being too sympathetic to the Confederacy. At least a few children were hurt or killed during the sieges of cities such as Vicksburg, Atlanta, and Petersburg, and the presence of armies always led to increased rates of disease among all civilians, but especially children.

One of the biggest adjustments for white children of the planter class was the disruption and eventual destruction of slavery. Young boys and girls on large plantations found themselves doing chores, cleaning their rooms, and even dressing themselves for the first time when slaves ran away or were taken by the Confederate government to work on fortifications. And, like their parents, they had to deal with the increasing tension between whites and blacks, as discipline among the slaves declined and, with most white men in the army, Southern women and children felt isolated and threatened.

Of course, slave children's lives were seriously disrupted by the war, too. They were even more likely to be affected by food shortages or disease than white children. When Southern families "refugeed" away from their farms and plantations, they took their slaves with them, and tens of thousands of slave children were dragged away from familiar places and separated from their families during the war. But the most dramatic experience of the war for black children came when they were brought under the control of Union troops, either when Northern armies occupied their homes or when, like hundreds of thousands of slaves, they freed themselves by running away.

Freedom brought conflicting and often confusing experiences to black children. For the first times in their lives they were no longer anyone's property. Yet, like other "contraband" slaves, they were not officially free. Many lived in so-called "contraband camps," rather informal gatherings of escaped slaves living in tobacco barns, abandoned shacks, or discarded army tents (although Freedman's Village outside Washington and a few other camps were actually built as small towns, with wooden houses, churches, and schools). Here children might be able to attend school for at least a few weeks or months. White and black missionaries from the North and a number of former slaves organized schools for freed people, ranging in size from a few dozen students to hundreds. Northern publishers created schoolbooks, flashcards, and other teaching aids especially for these schools; lessons featured Bible verses, hints on cleanliness and manners, stories of famous African-Americans, and events from American history. But most children were also required to work; in the Sea Islands, for instance, children worked either in the morning or the afternoon and went to school the other half of the day. Even though many black children got their first tastes of freedom in the contraband camps, many also died. With irregular food supplies, virtually no access to medical care, and little protection from the damp, cold winters or steamy, buggy summers, the death rate in the camps could rise as high as 30 per cent.

The end of the war made it possible for slave families torn apart by sale or by the confusion of war to reunite. Postwar newspapers published for African Americans included ads from parents and children seeking information about long lost relatives, and countless slave couples went before Union army chaplains to have their marriages—not recognized by Southern slave codes—legitimized.

Following the war, at least a few Civil War children were cared for in the soldiers' orphans' homes founded in most Northern states and a few Southern states. Although no one knows exactly how many children lost fathers in the war, the number clearly reached hundreds of thousands. Beginning late in the war, and continuing into the 1890s, schools and homes were established for the children of men who died in the war, or children born after the war to veterans who later died or who could no longer care for their children. The residents of these homes became potent symbols of their fathers' sacrifice, but also of the nation's gratitude. They often became part of Memorial Day events, decorating soldiers' graves in nearby cemeteries and singing patriotic songs or reciting patriotic poems. Most of the homes had closed by the 1890s, although in Illinois

and Indiana they were turned into large, state-run institutions for all orphans or abandoned children.

The main effect of freedom on black children by the ending of the war—aside from the obvious, exhilarating fact that they no longer belonged to anyone—was the creation of public school systems. Although they were, of course, segregated, and although they received less support from states than schools for white children, within a generation most Southern blacks were at least able to read and write. However, by the time the last generation of slaves became adults, the processes of disfranchisement and segregation had already begun to chip away at their new-found liberty.

The Civil War shaped the adult lives of children in countless ways. For many Northern children—at least those who did not lose a father or brother—the excitement and the ultimate success of the Union created romantic, patriotic memories of a time when the nation was saved. For many Southern children, the wrenching disappointment of losing the war, combined with the economic hardships that followed, inspired a dedication to preserving the memory of the “glory days” before the war and of the devotion of the brave Confederate soldiers. Finally, for Southern black children, the war provided a glimpse of a freedom for which they had yearned, but which would not be fully redeemed for almost a century.
