

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

Civil War Timelines

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The days when students simply memorized names, dates, and events on timelines in history classes are mostly long gone. Though it is still important to remember key facts in history, modern history students construct arguments based on evidence, honing their writing and critical thinking skills that can apply to many career paths. Despite the welcomed movement away from rote memorization solely focusing on events, names, and dates, historians and other organizations, such as museums and textbook publishers, frequently use timelines to supplement content and provide readers important context about historical events. Timelines can help with context; they also help non-experts visualize change over time, interpret cause and effect, and better understand the relationship between events, improving historical literacy. Though many authors and organizations design timelines for a wide variety of historical events such as the American Revolution, the Civil War timelines are particularly popular. Many websites or books on the subject, authors will frequently include a timeline as a helpful tool for readers. Though most are directed at the general public new to Civil War history; timelines can also serve as useful tools to historians.

Another area where timelines are often crucial for historians is in the archives. Many archival collections containing items from the Civil War era can fill cubic feet of space and span many years. For example, the letters of William Tecumseh Sherman are quite numerous. The William T. Sherman Papers at the Library of Congress (Mss 398000), for instance, include 18,000 items, filling 113 containers and 4 oversize boxes; they cover 22 linear feet on the shelf and, when microfilmed, fill 51 reels. To go through each document one by one would probably consume much of a researcher's time, time that is often crucial when facing a funding limit or a deadline.

For exceptionally large collections, many archives and libraries will create a finding guide detailing a collection's content and how the collection is organized. In order to guide a researcher to specific content, many finding guides will contain a timeline detailing the box or folder containing documents from a specific year. For some large collections, a few archives have created timelines that point out the location of

specific materials from that collection that deal exclusively with the Civil War. These timelines can be essential as the clock ticks down on a research trip, especially if a collection spans numerous decades.

One area where timelines can prove crucial is in content created for those new to Civil War history. Though the war is always a hot topic among the general public, recently, due to the sesquicentennial of the Civil War and conflicts over the public display of the Confederate flag and monuments, public interest in this crucial era of American history has increased. The renewed interest among a great portion of the public has led to a proliferation of books, internet sites, and other media on the war that introduce new readers to the conflict. In much of this new media, timelines play a key role in giving a brief overview of the war years in a short amount of space.

Older introductory works on the Civil War may have simply started with the firing on Ft. Sumter in April 1861 and concluded with either Robert E. Lee's surrender in April 1865, or Joseph E. Johnston's surrender a month later. Most authors of new introductions to the conflict realize that the outbreak of fighting was the result of numerous decades of debate over slavery's continued existence in the United States. Timelines allow an author to keep the focus of the content on the war years while still providing the basic necessary background information on the build-up to the conflict. Authors sometimes place events such as the debates over slavery at the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, the Missouri Compromise, the Compromise of 1850, and the Kansas-Nebraska Act, on timelines to save space for content on the war years. All of these events were crucial in exacerbating sectional tensions before the Civil War took place and need to be included to give a new reader proper context.¹

Just as with the war's origins, most authors of introductory works now recognize the Civil War's many legacies that lasted long after the fighting ended. Newly freed slaves in the South faced racism and challenges to their freedoms as former Confederates fought to restore as much of their old slave society as possible. In order to defend African-Americans, the United States stationed thousands of troops in the South until 1877 when Rutherford B. Hayes removed the all remaining troops and many ex-Confederates returned to power. Timelines allow authors the ability to keep the focus on the war years while not neglecting the crucial years that followed. One book that follows this pattern is National Geographic's *Atlas of the Civil War: A Comprehensive Guide to the Tactics and Terrain of Battle*. Though the authors mainly focus on events during the war, a timeline allows a quick review of the events that led to the conflict.²

Other books serve as largely timelines and lay out a near daily account of events in the Civil War era. First published in 1983, *The Civil War Almanac* provides an account of the events leading to the Civil War starting with the introduction of slavery to the

¹ Otto Eisenschiml and Ralph Newman, *The Civil War: The American Lliad as Told by Those Who Lived It* (New York: Mallard Press, 1991).

² Neil Kagan, *Atlas of the Civil War: A Comprehensive Guide to the Tactics and Terrain of Battle* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 2009).

Jamestown settlement in 1619. When the book reaches the Civil War, the narrative shifts to an almost day by day account of the war's more important events. The timeline portion of the book ends in April 1877 when Rutherford B. Hayes withdrew federal troops from the South; ending Reconstruction. Other authors have replicated the almanac format and these books crop up quite frequently. Many of them appeared during the 150th anniversary of the Civil War and can serve as handy guides when researching primary documents and as quick reminders of the era's important dates for scholars. Time-Life's *The Civil War: An Illustrated History, 150th Anniversary Edition* appeared in time for the war's sesquicentennial in 2011. Time-Life included numerous pictures and facts about the antebellum and Civil War Eras organized around a timeline format.³

Some authors vary on the events they wish to include on a timeline in order to fit their book's theme. One example is Bruce Levine's *The Fall of the House of Dixie: The Civil War and the Social Revolution that Transformed the South*. Levine uses several maps in the book's beginning to give his readers a succinct account of the Union's advance into the South. James Oakes's *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861-1865* includes a map that serves as a timeline. The map depicts when and how slavery ended in the southern states. Both authors use timelines to augment their narrative, however, they present their timelines as maps.⁴

Though the *Civil War Almanac* provides a fairly lengthy list of the most important events before, during, and after the war, the book could only be so long. Certain items still had to be cut out in order to fit the book's length. The internet, however, has allowed timelines to expand on their content and length. Websites can contain more content than books, and authors can update online timelines on their websites frequently with little worry about space constraints. Like their counterparts in books, website designers use timelines to succinctly note the war's most important dates and events for a person new to the war.

Similar to timelines in printed material, website designers frequently relegate timelines to individual pages on their website in order to provide just enough content to give the reader appropriate context. Two examples are the *Civil War Trust* and the *National Parks Service's* website for the Gettysburg National Battlefield. *The Civil War Trust* works to preserve battlefields and much of their website documents the efforts to save many of the war's most important sites. The organization provides an interactive timeline where visitors can learn more about the key events of the war. The timeline on the *National Park Service's* website for Gettysburg serves the same purpose; the site's content is mainly devoted to the battle and events taking place at the battlefield, while a reader can use the timeline to place the battle within the war as a whole.⁵

³ Henry Steele Commager, *The Civil War Almanac* (New York: Gallery Books/Simon & Schuster, 1983).

⁴ Bruce Levine, *The Fall of the House of Dixie: The Civil War and the Social Revolution that Transformed the South* (New York: Random House, 2013). James Oakes, *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861-1865* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2013).

⁵ The *Civil War Trust* publishes numerous timelines within the many topics it covers. Their general timeline for the Civil War is <https://www.civilwar.org/learn/articles/day-civil-war>, accessed June 15, 2018.

Recently, blogs devoted to timelines of the Civil War have cropped up. Devoting an entire blog to a timeline of the war provides an almost unlimited amount of space to document the war's many events. Starting with the 150th anniversary of events leading up to the war, several authors and organizations created blogs that contained information in a day by day format on the events that took place 150 years earlier. The *New York Times* published a blog called *Disunion: The Civil War*. The *Times* published headlines that appeared in the *New York Times* from each day before during and after the war. Supplementing the headlines, historians such as Sven Beckert and Harold Holzer published articles commenting on the day's events. The blog's authors later published a book and CD set containing every article the *New York Times* published about the war from 1861 to 1865 on the CD; and major articles in the book. Blogs such as these are often targeted for the general public instead of merely focusing on those in the historical profession.⁶

One of the more unique timelines on the Civil War that can appeal to both the general public and researchers, is centered on the life of Abraham Lincoln. The *Lincoln Log* is a searchable database that details the events in Abraham Lincoln's life, often on a day by day basis. Lincoln met with abolitionists, African-Americans such as Frederick Douglass, politicians, and military leaders as he struggled to lead the United States through the war. Sites like the *Lincoln Log* give researchers and students of many subjects of the era a valuable resource that is easily accessible.⁷

The Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library at the University of North Carolina published a blog during the 150th anniversary of the war featuring items from their collections such as letters and diaries, 150 years to the day after each item was created. The blog presented the items in chronological order and usually posted an item at least once per day. Many items were from individuals other than major politicians and military leaders, effectively demonstrating the war's immense impact on Americans living through those profound days of change. The individual items also allowed students and researchers the ability to see the scope of the library's collections and appreciate the potential for research at the library.⁸

Many timelines are created for the general public and are a relatively easy way to introduce new readers to the Civil War's most important events. Though the quality of published timelines varies widely, most of those found in introductory books and

The National Park Service manages the Gettysburg National Military Park and includes a Civil War timeline at <https://www.nps.gov/gett/learn/historyculture/civil-war-timeline.htm> , accessed June 15, 2018.

⁶ The *New York Times* blog *Disunion: The Civil War* is available at <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/opinion/disunion.html> , accessed June 15, 2018; Harold Holzer and Craig Symonds, eds., *The New York Times: The Complete Civil War, 1861-1865*. (New York: Black Dog and Laventhal Publishers, 2010).

⁷ *The Lincoln Log: A Daily Chronology of the Life of Abraham Lincoln* is available at <http://www.thelincolnlog.org/> , accessed June 15, 2018.

⁸ The Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library at the University of North Carolina's blog *The Civil War Day by Day* is available at: <http://blogs.lib.unc.edu/civilwar/> , accessed June 15 2018.

websites written by historians can quickly educate a reader new to the Civil War and are highly useful in the classroom to make sure all students have understood the essential events of the Civil War. The resources material that accompanies this essay covers a larger range of published timelines than those which have been briefly discussed here.
