

The Battle of Gettysburg through Union and Confederate Eyes, 1863



Timothy O'Sullivan, "A Harvest of Death, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania," July 1863, published in Gardner's Photographic Sketch Book of the War, vol. 1, 1865–1866, (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC03547)

The Battle of Gettysburg through Union and Confederate Eyes, 1863

BY KATHY WHITE (CREATED IN 2014, REVISED IN 2024)

Kathy White taught US History, AP US History, and AP Language and Composition for thirty years. She is a master teacher with the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History.

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GRADE LEVELS: 6–8

RECOMMENDED TIME FOR COMPLETION: Two 45-minute class periods

UNIT OVERVIEW

This unit is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute’s Teaching Literacy through History™ (TLTH) resources, designed to align with the Common Core State Standards. Students will learn and practice skills that will help them analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned points of view on visual and textual primary source materials. These skills will enable students to understand, summarize, and evaluate documents and other resources of historical significance.

The two lessons in this unit explore the 1863 Battle of Gettysburg. Students will read a letter and a speech by Abraham Lincoln and a letter by Robert E. Lee providing two leaders’ assessments of the battle and examine two photographs taken after the battle. You will assess student comprehension by asking them to summarize the main ideas in the texts and images and respond to one of the Essential Questions.

Students will be able to

- Analyze primary source documents using close reading strategies
- Demonstrate understanding of both literal and inferential aspects of text-based evidence
- Draw logical inferences and summarize the essential message of a written document
- Compose summaries of the major points in a document
- Compare and contrast visual materials
- Identify a key historical event (e.g., the Battle of Gettysburg)

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What are points of agreement in Abraham Lincoln’s and Robert E. Lee’s descriptions of the Battle of Gettysburg?
- What claims did Civil War photographers make about the Battle of Gettysburg, war, and war’s consequences?
- How did both Union and Confederate leaders judge the importance and success of the Battle of Gettysburg?

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.1: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2: Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary specific to domains related to history/social studies.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.7: Integrate visual information (e.g., in charts, graphs, photographs, videos, or maps) with other information in print and digital texts.

MATERIALS

- Summary Organizer 1: Excerpt from a Letter from President Lincoln to General George G. Meade, July 14, 1863, Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, [loc.gov/resource/mal.2480600/?st=text](https://www.loc.gov/resource/mal.2480600/?st=text).
- Summary Organizer 2: Excerpt from a Letter from Robert E. Lee to His Wife, Mary Lee, July 12, 1863, in *Recollections and Letters of General Robert E. Lee* by His Son Captain Robert E. Lee, ed. Robert E. Lee (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1904), pp. 101–102. Available in Google Books, books.google.com/books?id=SzkDAAAAYAAJ.
- Summary Organizer 3: Excerpt from Abraham Lincoln, The Gettysburg Address, November 19, 1863, The Avalon Project, Lillian Goldman Law Library, Yale Law School, avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/gettyb.asp.
- Photograph 1: Timothy O’Sullivan, “A Harvest of Death, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania,” July 1863, published in *Gardner’s Photographic Sketch Book of the War*, vol. 1, 1865–1866, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC03547.
- Photograph 2: Alexander Gardner, “Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter, Gettysburg,” July 1863, published in *Gardner’s Photographic Sketch Book of the War*, vol. 1, 1865–1866, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC03547.
- Analyzing a Photograph: The Battle of Gettysburg, 1863 activity sheet
- Computer screen, overhead projector, Smartboard, or similar device

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

THE BATTLE OF GETTYSBURG

by Gary W. Gallagher, University of Virginia

Gettysburg is one of the most recognizable names in United States history. The Civil War's largest and most famous battle, it ended General Robert E. Lee's invasion of the United States in the summer of 1863. Lee marched his Army of Northern Virginia across the Potomac River intending to keep US forces off balance, secure supplies in Pennsylvania's rich farming areas, and encourage opposition to Abraham Lincoln's Republican administration. His 70,000 soldiers passed through western Maryland and into southern Pennsylvania before colliding with the Army of the Potomac at Gettysburg on July 1–3. The Union troops, 90,000 strong and led by General George G. Meade, defended high ground against attacking Confederates. Fighting swirled in the Peach Orchard, the Wheat Field, Devil's Den, and on the slopes of Little Round Top and Cemetery Ridge—previously unremarkable places that assumed long-lasting importance in historical memory. The failure of Pickett's Charge on the third day settled the issue and led Lee to retreat on July 4. Meade pursued cautiously, and by July 14 the Confederate army had safely re-crossed the Potomac into Virginia. Although casualty figures remain somewhat imprecise, each side lost at least 22,000 killed, wounded, or taken prisoner, and some reckonings put the total at approximately 50,000.

The three-day clash at Gettysburg is often described as the conflict's great turning point. Before the battle, goes a common argument, the Confederacy had hopes for independence; after Lee's retreat, the rebellious states began an irreversible slide toward defeat.

A fair assessment of Gettysburg's impact suggests a less sweeping result. People in the loyal states initially rejoiced at reports of Lee's defeat, but many came to share Abraham Lincoln's more pessimistic assessment that the victory did not mark a grand turning point. The president thanked Meade for "the magnificent success" at Gettysburg while lamenting Lee's withdrawal from Pennsylvania with his army intact. "I do not believe you appreciate the magnitude of the misfortune involved in Lee's escape," stated Lincoln. "As it is," he concluded sadly, "the war will be prolonged indefinitely."

Confederate testimony from 1863, as opposed to postwar writings by ex-rebels who ascribed special importance to Gettysburg, reveals a pervasive view that the battle dealt no catastrophic blow to hopes for independence. Most Confederates concluded that Lee's foray into Pennsylvania and subsequent retreat represented only a temporary setback with few long-term consequences. Typical was a North Carolina officer who lamented the "awful cost" of Gettysburg but remained guardedly upbeat. "I suppose that there will be one more battle this summer or fall," he mused on July 29, "and if we do have a fight here we will give them one of the worst thrashings they ever got." Tellingly, the defeat did almost nothing to compromise Lee's high reputation in the Confederacy.

Whatever the precise breakdown of Union and Confederate opinion in 1863, one thing is certain. In the summer of 1864, as civilian morale in the United States dropped to its wartime low, virtually no one, North or South, would have insisted that Gettysburg had been a great watershed. It by then amounted to scarcely more than a distant memory, and Confederates held high hopes for a Democratic victory in the upcoming presidential election.

One notable event did set Gettysburg apart from all other Civil War battles. On November 19, 1863, Abraham Lincoln offered an eloquent tribute to Union soldiers killed in the battle. His brief comments, which celebrated those who had "given the last full measure of devotion" to save a "government of the people, by the people, for the people," became enshrined as perhaps the greatest of all presidential speeches.

*Gary W. Gallagher is John L. Nau III Professor in the History of the American Civil War, Emeritus, in the University of Virginia's Corcoran Department of History. He is also the former director of the John L. Nau III Center for Civil War History, co-editor and co-author of *Lens of War: Exploring Iconic Photographs of the Civil War* (2015), and author of *The Enduring Civil War: Reflections on the Great American Crisis* (2020).*

LESSON 1

LINCOLN AND LEE ON THE BATTLE OF GETTYSBURG, 1863

BY KATHY WHITE (CREATED IN 2014, REVISED IN 2024)

OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students will read primary source documents written by President Abraham Lincoln and General Robert E. Lee. They will select keywords from the documents and use those keywords to develop a statement expressing each leader's thoughts about the Battle of Gettysburg and its outcome.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What are points of agreement in Abraham Lincoln's and Robert E. Lee's descriptions of the Battle of Gettysburg?

MATERIALS

- Summary Organizer 1: Excerpt from a Letter from President Abraham Lincoln to General George G. Meade, July 14, 1863, Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, loc.gov/resource/mal.2480600/?st=text
- Summary Organizer 2: Excerpt from a Letter from Robert E. Lee to His Wife, Mary Lee, July 12, 1863, in *Recollections and Letters of General Robert E. Lee* by His Son Captain Robert E. Lee, ed. Robert E. Lee (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1904), pp. 101–102. Available in Google Books, books.google.com/books?id=SzkDAAAAYAAJ.
- Summary Organizer 3: Excerpt from Abraham Lincoln, The Gettysburg Address, November 19, 1863, The Avalon Project, Lillian Goldman Law Library, Yale Law School, avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/gettyb.asp.

PROCEDURE

1. You may have students work independently or in groups of two or three. You may choose to complete the first document with the whole class if they do not have experience reading and analyzing primary sources.
2. Tell the students that they will be reading a letter written by President Abraham Lincoln after the Battle of Gettysburg. It is not an eyewitness account but is a primary source. Do not provide too much information about the battle or the circumstances of the letter, since you want the students to develop ideas based solely on Lincoln's words. This letter was found in Lincoln's papers, sealed, with a note in his handwriting that says, "To Gen. Meade, never sent, or signed."
3. Distribute Summary Organizer 1 with the excerpt of a letter from President Lincoln to General Meade and "share read" the text with the students. This is done by having the students follow along silently while you begin reading aloud, modeling prosody, inflection, and punctuation. Then ask the class to join in with the reading after a few sentences while you continue to read aloud, still serving as the model for the class. This technique will support struggling readers as well as English language learners (ELL).

Kathy White taught US History, AP US History, and AP Language and Composition for thirty years. She is a master teacher with the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History.

GRADE LEVELS: 6–8

RECOMMENDED TIME FOR COMPLETION: One 45-minute class period

UNIT OVERVIEW: This unit is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute's Teaching Literacy through History™ (TLTH) resources, designed to align with the Common Core State Standards. Students will learn and practice skills that will help them analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned points of view on visual and textual primary source materials. The two lessons in this unit explore the 1863 Battle of Gettysburg. Students will read a letter and a speech by Abraham Lincoln and a letter by Robert E. Lee and examine two photographs published after the battle.

4. Explain that the objective is to select “keywords” from the text and then use those words to create one or two sentences that demonstrate an understanding of what Lincoln was saying about the Battle of Gettysburg and the Civil War.
5. The students will then select keywords from the text that reflect Lincoln’s views of the battle and of the war itself.
6. Guidelines for Selecting Keywords: Keywords contribute to the meaning of the text. Without them the selection would not make sense. These words are usually nouns or verbs (not “connector” words like *are*, *is*, *the*, *and*, *so*, etc.). The number of keywords depends on the length of the original paragraph. This selection is 284 words, so you can pick up to 12 keywords. The students must know what the keywords mean, so there will be opportunities to teach students how to use context clues, word analysis, and dictionary skills to discover word meanings. You may ask them to underline them in the text.
7. Survey the class to find out what the most popular choices were. After some class discussion and guidance from you, the students should select the best 12 keywords. For example, they might choose *grateful*, *magnificent success* (two words might be selected together if they encompass a single idea, but do not let whole phrases get by), *Gettysburg*, *deep distress*, *enemy*, *retreated*, *attacking*, *escape*, *war*, *golden opportunity*. Have them write the final selection in the Keywords section of the organizer.
8. Now they will use those keywords to summarize Lincoln’s feelings about the Battle of Gettysburg and the Civil War. This should be a class negotiation. For example, they might write “Lincoln was grateful for Meade’s magnificent success at Gettysburg, but when the enemy retreated and was allowed to escape Lincoln felt deep distress at the missed golden opportunity to end the war.” Have them write their final negotiated sentence(s) in the organizer.
9. Next, the students will restate the summary in their own words, not having to use the keywords in their summary. For example, they might write “The Battle of Gettysburg first appeared to be a great victory for the Union, but the delay in pursuing the Confederates lost the US the chance to end the war.” They will discuss and negotiate the restatement and write the final sentence in the organizer.
10. Once the class has completed the first summary organizer together, the students or student groups will complete the same activity for General Robert E. Lee’s letter and Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. They can select 10–12 words for Lee’s letter and 6–8 for the Gettysburg Address.
11. You may bring the class together to discuss their summaries and explore their different interpretations.

LESSON 2

PHOTOGRAPHS TAKEN AFTER THE BATTLE OF GETTYSBURG, 1863

BY KATHY WHITE (CREATED IN 2014, REVISED IN 2024)

OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students will view two photographs taken after the Battle of Gettysburg and analyze them using close-reading strategies for images. The students will then demonstrate their comprehension of this unit's themes and ideas by incorporating knowledge gained from both lessons in a written response to one of the Essential Questions.

Note: Some of the documents essential to understanding war's consequences might be challenging for younger students. One of these photographs ("Harvest of Death") may have been doctored after it was taken and the other ("Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter") was staged. When Civil War photographers published photographs of dead bodies or put them in gallery shows, they were making claims about the gravity and significance of Civil War battles and of war itself. Students will learn to analyze photographs in this lesson in much the same way they analyzed written documents in Lesson 1.

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ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What claims did Civil War photographers make about the Battle of Gettysburg, war, and war's consequences?
- How did both Union and Confederate leaders judge the importance and success of the Battle of Gettysburg?

MATERIALS

- Photograph 1: Timothy O'Sullivan, "A Harvest of Death, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania," July 1863, published in *Gardner's Photographic Sketch Book of the War*, vol. 1, 1865–1866, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC03547
- Photograph 2: Alexander Gardner, "Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter, Gettysburg," July 1863, published in *Gardner's Photographic Sketch Book of the War*, vol. 1, 1865–1866, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC03547
- Analyzing a Photograph: The Battle of Gettysburg, 1863 activity sheet
- Computer screen, overhead projector, Smartboard, or similar device

PROCEDURE

1. You may have students work independently or in groups of two or three.

2. Distribute copies of the two photographs or display them using a projector or similar device, and distribute the Analyzing a Photograph activity sheet.
3. After reflection, the students will complete the Analyzing a Photograph activity sheet.
4. Once the students have completed the activity sheets, lead a class discussion focusing on the details of the Battle of Gettysburg that are revealed in the photographs. The students will analyze the intent and message of each photograph and discuss how this primary source impacts their understanding of the battle and of war in general.
5. Only after students have explored the ideas above, provide them with additional information about the Gardner photograph of the sharp-shooter. This photograph was staged by the photographer. Gardner moved the soldier's body from another location, moved the soldier's head to face the camera, and positioned his own rifle in front of the body. Ask students how and when historians might find a staged photograph useful. If it doesn't simply show what happened, what exactly does it show? Students might also want to consider that photography was a new form of media. The time that a subject needed to pose without "blurring" and the time that a photographer needed to spend in a safe and dark place to develop film were longer than today. Why might that have made taking photographs during a battle very difficult?

There is also some question about "Harvest of Death." When Gardner published this photograph in 1865, he used the same scene, taken at different angles, to represent both Union and Confederate dead. In addition, some believe the background of "Harvest of Death" may have been doctored a bit to fill in the tree line and the figures in the distance.

The readings provided below, in Additional Resources, may be useful to you in guiding and supplementing the class discussion.

6. Summary Evaluation: At the conclusion of the discussion students will write a paragraph, or more if appropriate, addressing the Essential Question using evidence from Lessons 1 and 2: How did both Union and Confederate leaders judge the importance and success of the Battle of Gettysburg?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Sandweiss, Martha A. "Photography in Nineteenth-Century America," *History Now* 10 (Winter 2006), gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/essays/photography-nineteenth-century-america.

"Does the Camera Ever Lie? The Case of Confused Identity," Library of Congress, loc.gov/collections/civil-war-glass-negatives/articles-and-essays/does-the-camera-ever-lie/the-case-of-confused-identity/.

"Does the Camera Ever Lie? The Case of the Moved Body," Library of Congress, loc.gov/collections/civil-war-glass-negatives/articles-and-essays/does-the-camera-ever-lie/the-case-of-the-moved-body/.

NAME

PERIOD

DATE

Summary Organizer 1

President Abraham Lincoln to General George Meade, July 14, 1863

Original Text

... You had at least twenty thousand veteran troops directly with you, and as many more raw ones within supporting distance, all in addition to those who fought with you at Gettysburg; while it was not possible that [Lee] had received a single recruit; and yet you stood and let the flood run down, bridges be built, and the enemy move away at his leisure, without attacking him. And Couch and Smith! The latter left Carlisle in time, upon all ordinary calculation, to have aided you in the last battle at Gettysburg; but he did not arrive. At the end of more than ten days, I believe twelve, under constant urging, he reached Hagerstown from Carlisle, which is not an inch over fiftyfive miles, if so much. And Couch's movement was very little different.

Again, my dear general, I do not believe you appreciate the magnitude of the misfortune involved in Lee's escape. He was within your easy grasp, and to have closed upon him would, in connection with our other late successes, have ended the war. As it is, the war will be prolonged indefinitely. If you could not safely attack Lee last monday, how can you possibly do so South of the river, when you can take with you very few more than two thirds of the force you then had in hand? It would be unreasonable to expect, and I do not expect you can now effect much. Your golden opportunity is gone, and I am distressed immeasurably because of it.

I beg you will not consider this a prosecution, or persecution of yourself. As you had learned that I was dissatisfied, I have thought it best to kindly tell you why.

Source: President Abraham Lincoln to General George G. Meade, July 14, 1863, Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, loc.gov/resource/mal.2480600/?st=text.

Keywords

Keyword Summary

In Your Own Words

NAME

PERIOD

DATE

Summary Organizer 2

General Robert E. Lee to His Wife, Mary Lee, July 12, 1863

Original Text

. . . The consequences of war are horrid enough at best, surrounded by all the ameliorations of civilisation and Christianity. I am very sorry for the injuries done the family at Hickory Hill, and particularly that our dear old Uncle Williams, in his eightieth year, should be subjected to such treatment. But we cannot help it, and must endure it. You will, however, learn before this reaches you that our success at Gettysburg was not so great as reported—in fact, that we failed to drive the enemy from his position, and that our army withdrew to the Potomac. Had the river not unexpectedly risen, all would have been well with us; but God, in His all-wise providence, willed otherwise, and our communications have been interrupted and almost cut off. The waters have subsided to about four feet, and, if they continue, by to-morrow, I hope, our communications will be open. I trust that a merciful God, our only hope and refuge, will not desert us in this hour of need, and will deliver us by His almighty hand, that the whole world may recognise His power and all hearts be lifted up in adoration and praise of His unbounded loving-kindness. We must, however, submit to His almighty will, whatever that may be. May God guide and protect us all is my constant prayer . . .

Source: Robert E. Lee to His Wife, Mary Lee, July 12, 1863, in Recollections and Letters of General Robert E. Lee by His Son Captain Robert E. Lee, ed. Robert E. Lee (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1904), pp. 101–102.

Keywords

Keyword Summary

In Your Own Words

NAME

PERIOD

DATE

Summary Organizer 3

Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, November 19, 1863

Original Text

. . . But in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead who struggled here have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth.

Source: Abraham Lincoln, *The Gettysburg Address*, *The Avalon Project*, Lillian Goldman Law Library, Yale Law School, avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/gettyb.asp.

Keywords

Keyword Summary

In Your Own Words

Photograph 1



Timothy O'Sullivan, "A Harvest of Death, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania," July 1863, published in Gardner's Photographic Sketch Book of the War, vol. 1, 1865–1866 (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC03547)

Photograph 2



Alexander Gardner, "Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter, Gettysburg," July 1863, published in Gardner's Photographic Sketch Book of the War, vol. 1, 1865–1866 (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC03547)

NAME

PERIOD

DATE

Analyzing a Photograph

The Battle of Gettysburg, 1863

Photograph 1

Creator, title, location, and date (if available):

Subject of the photograph:

Details and their significance:

What message was the photographer trying to convey? Support your argument with specific evidence from the photograph:

Photograph 2

Creator, title, location, and date (if available):

Subject of the photograph:

Details and their significance:

What message was the photographer trying to convey? Support your argument with specific evidence from the photograph:
