

The Family Heritage Series

A weekly discussion of Americanist truths and traditions for those "heirs of all the ages" who will have to preserve that most important inheritance of all — freedom. Produced by the Movement To Restore Decency.



Volume II

Lesson Sixty-Six

The War Between The States

LESSON IDEA

To describe the more important battles of the War Between the States.

PREPARATION

Obtain a pictorial history of the war from your local library and follow the battles with the aid of maps and photographs.

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ABRAMHAM LINCOLN once remarked that if our nation were ever to fall, it would be destroyed not by an external enemy, but by ourselves. The War Between the States almost proved him right.

The first shot of the war was fired from a hidden gun emplacement on the shore of Charleston Harbor, to prevent a supply ship from reaching the Union troops stationed at Fort Sumter, a small fortress located on a man-made island in the harbor.

Major Anderson was the Union officer in command of the fortress and his adversary was Brigadier General G.T. Beauregard of the Confederate States of America. Ironically, the two men were long-time friends, having attended West Point together. There was no personal hostility between them; each man was simply doing his duty as he saw it.

Before the opening shot was fired on Fort Sumter, Anderson received a note from General Beauregard's headquarters, asking for his surrender. It read: "By authority of Brigadier General Beauregard, Commanding the Provisional Forces of the Confederate States, we have the honor to notify

you that he will open fire of his batteries on Fort Sumter in one hour from this time. We have the honor to be, very respectfully, your obedient servants." It was signed by his aides-de-camp.

Anderson refused to surrender, but after a barrage of cannon fire from the shore, he changed his mind and ran up a white flag. He and his men were allowed to sail to New York City.

With the surrender of Fort Sumter, the War Between the States was a reality, but no one imagined it would last as long as it did. Certainly not President Abraham Lincoln, who called for 75,000 recruits to serve three months — in the mistaken belief that the secession would be quickly settled. In fact, when the Confederate forces marched toward Washington, D.C., in July of 1861 to challenge the Northern Army, many residents of Washington packed picnic baskets and followed the Union soldiers to the battle site. No one took the war seriously then; it was going to be fun sitting under a shady tree, eating sandwiches, watching the Union troops send the Southern "Rebels" fleeing in fear.

At the stream known as Bull Run the untrained recruits of both the North and the South got their first taste of battle; and men on both sides recoiled in horror. The Union troops were finally routed and hurried frantically toward Washington, along with the tearful spectators and their picnic baskets. War was not the "fun" they had imagined it would be. Many Confederate troops also fled the battlefield in fright; and in a desperate last-minute attempt to rally them, an officer pointed to Thomas J. Jackson's well-trained brigade, and

shouted: "Look, there is Jackson standing like a stone wall!" The nickname "Stonewall" stuck to Jackson, who was soon to become one of General Robert E. Lee's most valuable officers.

Both armies spent the rest of the year training their troops and devising battle plans. The plans of both sides were very simple, but difficult to carry out. The Union planned to blockade the Southern ports, gain control of the Mississippi River, and then capture Richmond, the new capital of the Confederate States of America. The Confederate plan was even more simple: Repel the invading armies and keep the ports open so the South could continue to receive war materials from abroad.

AFTER SIZING up the strength of the forces defending Richmond in the early stages of the war, the Union military strategists decided to send General Ulysses S. Grant's Army of the West down the Tennessee River in gunboats to capture Fort Donelson and Fort Henry. In this way, the Union hoped to destroy the Confederate states one at a time, instead of launching a massive assault against Richmond.

After the relatively easy capture of Fort Donelson and Fort Henry, General Grant marched his men through mud, sleet, and snow to Shiloh Church at Pittsburg Landing, Tennessee, where they were surprised by 40,000 Confederates. The Union troops retreated in confusion. The Confederates, however, not realizing the extent of their victory, called a cease-fire and waited. By the following morning Grant had reorganized his men, and the Union soldiers turned the brief Confederate victory into a defeat – although it was a costly one. Of 63,000 men under Grant's command, 13,000 were killed, wounded, or missing. The Confederates lost 10,000.

For the remainder of the year the Confederate and Union troops pushed each other all over Mississippi, Tennessee, Alabama, and West Virginia in hundreds of indecisive skirmishes. In December of 1862 they met at Fredericksburg, Virginia.

Union General Ambrose Burnside sent his troops against the impregnable position held by General Lee on the heights above the town. The Confederates repulsed the Union troops six times before the

defeated Union Army withdrew across the river.

Of course, the war wasn't all fighting, as any soldier knows. More of it was boredom – sitting for weeks at a time, knee-deep in mud, waiting for the generals to decide what they were going to do. And for the troops of both sides, even eating was no pleasure once the supplies started getting scarce. The Union troops were daily treated to "hardtack" – small biscuits made from flour and water, three inches square and half an inch thick. Often these biscuits were inhabited by boll weevils. The ingenious soldiers soon found a way of getting rid of the unwanted guests. They'd dunk the hardtack in boiling hot coffee and watch the bugs dog-paddle to the surface. Then with a finger, they'd skim the floundering weevils off the top, continue drinking coffee and devouring the soggy hardtack. Many of the soldiers were so disgusted by the bugs, they preferred to eat in the dark. A lot of jokes about hardtack were passed around the camps. One told of a sergeant sitting on a stump near a campfire, who said, "Boys, I was eating a piece of hardtack this morning, and I bit on something soft; what do you think it was?" A private asked, "A worm?" "No," said the sergeant. "It was a tenpenny nail."

During lulls in the fighting, the pickets on duty on both sides would sit together out along the lines playing poker and swapping food and tobacco. Then when the order came to prepare for battle, each man would gather up his booty and scurry back to his own side. The men who were so happily playing poker and joking with one another at one moment, might be killing each other the next. That the men who were fighting were not really enemies was one of the most tragic aspects of the War Between the States.

THE BATTLE of Chancellorsville in the spring of 1863 would have been General Lee's Waterloo had not the Union commander, General Joseph Hooker, been incompetent. Hooker had

FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

Read a biography of one or more of the following officers who fought in the war: G.T. Beauregard, Ulysses S. Grant, William T. Sherman, George Meade, Robert E. Lee, Thomas J. Jackson, John B. Hood, Joseph Hooker, or David Farragut.

134,000 men under his command at the time – Lee half as many. Before the battle, Hooker boasted, “The rebel army is now the legitimate property of the Army of the Potomac” – but he blundered badly. By pulling his forces from the high ground surrounding Chancellorsville to defensive positions below, Hooker sealed the fate of his men. His corps commanders were enraged. “If he thinks he can’t hold the top of the hill,” stormed Major General George Meade, “how does he expect to hold the bottom of it?”

To counter Hooker, Lee boldly split his small force into three parts so as to outflank the sluggishly moving Union Army. Major General Jubal A. Early and 10,000 Confederates manned the heights at nearby Fredericksburg and watched fearfully as 28,000 Union soldiers crossed the Rappahannock River. General Lee with 12,000 men stood against the main Federal force of 73,000, and Stonewall Jackson led 31,700 men into Hooker’s right flank.

For some reason, General Hooker thought Stonewall Jackson was retreating instead of attacking. When Jackson launched a surprise attack on the Union troops, they fled like scared jackrabbits toward Chancellorsville. Hoping to capitalize on his surprise attack, Jackson and a few staff officers rode out of camp at dusk to reconnoiter. When they returned, the Confederate pickets mistook them for Union troops and opened fire, shattering Jackson’s left arm with three mini-balls. The doctors amputated his arm and he might have survived had he not contracted pneumonia. He died a few days later. (*Stonewall Jackson led a fascinating life. Read a biography of this great soldier.*)

Although the battle of Chancellorsville was a victory for the South, the death of Stonewall Jackson was an irreplaceable loss to the Southern cause.

THE SOUTH won many such battles, but the inexhaustible industrial strength and numerical superiority of the North doomed the Confederacy to failure. One of the most devastating defeats for the South took place at Vicksburg, Mississippi, after a forty-seven-day siege in June and July of 1863. With Union troops dug in on three sides of

the town and constantly firing cannon balls into the center of the city, the Confederates were slowly worn down.

Cave diggers in the city did a brisk business during the siege, as the townsfolk sought shelter in the hills for protection from the continual shelling. The cave diggers charged from \$30 to \$100 per cave.

Prices went out of sight. With food supplies cut off, the townspeople were paying \$5.00 a pound for flour, \$10.00 a pound for molasses, and \$10.00 a bushel for corn. By the end of the siege, the people of Vicksburg were reduced to eating tree buds simmered in water as soup.

The town of Vicksburg surrendered to the Union on July 4, 1863 – a day after General Lee’s defeat at Gettysburg.

THE BATTLE of Gettysburg began on July 1 and proved to be the turning point of the War Between the States. A young farm boy living near Gettysburg recorded what he saw during this historic fight: “Fellows who write history books sometimes forget that history happens to everybody – not just to generals and soldiers. Now take me on July 1st, the day the great battle started. That morning a couple of friends and I were picking ripe raspberries along the ridge on Newville road. There we stood, stuffing ourselves, when *boom!* When that cannon went off, you should have seen us jump – clear over those raspberry bushes – and the way we legged it home, you’d have thought we had been fired from that cannon”

The Union and Confederate troops never intended to fight around Gettysburg. They met there accidentally in a brief skirmish on June 30th, but the real fight began the following day as the Confederates fought their way through the town.

The Union troops retreated to Cemetery Hill, Cemetery Ridge, and Culp’s Hill. The Confederates gathered on Seminary Ridge. Between them lay a gently sloping field a mile wide. Across this field, during George Pickett’s futile charge, marched 15,000 Confederate soldiers toward the entrenched Union troops. Half of them did not live to see another day.

The Confederates retreated; but again because of poor leadership, this time by General George Meade, the Union army failed to take the initiative and to destroy the Army of Northern Virginia when they had the chance. Meade allowed Lee to evacuate his troops across the Potomac to safety. Had Meade not been indecisive, the war might have ended with the battle of Gettysburg. Instead, it dragged on for two more years.

ONE OF the final blows to the Confederacy came as General William Tecumseh Sherman and his 60,000 troops marched to the sea through Georgia. After taking Atlanta, Sherman divided his army into four sections and gave them the order, "Forage for your food." It was Sherman's purpose to destroy the South's will to win and its war-making capability. His troops spread out over a sixty-mile-wide area and began destroying crops, burning homes, bridges, and factories, and ruining machine shops. Every morning, bands of Union soldiers left camp to scour the countryside, gathering hams, bacon, cornmeal, corn, potatoes, and cattle for the hungry soldiers, leaving the civilians to starve.

Sherman was an advocate of total war, and if that meant laying waste to every town, factory, and field in the South, he was willing to do it if it brought "peace." He warned the officials of occupied Atlanta, "You cannot qualify war in harsher terms than I will. War is cruelty, and you cannot refine it. . . . You might as well appeal against the thunderstorm as against these terrible hardships of war." But, said Sherman, ". . . when peace does come, you may call on me for anything. Then will I share with you the last cracker, and watch with you to shield your homes and families against danger from every quarter. . . ." And the war continued. In December of 1864 Abraham Lincoln wrote, "The important fact remains demonstrated that we have more men now than we had when the war began; that we are not exhausted, nor in the process of exhaustion; that we are gaining strength, and may, if need be, maintain the contest indefinitely."

The South on the other hand, was exhausted and was losing strength. In April of 1865, General Lee's decimated army found itself trapped by

General Grant's overwhelming forces. Lee had no choice but to surrender.

On the 9th of April, the two generals met for the formal surrender in the small village of Appomattox Court House, Virginia. When Lee arrived, they shook hands and Grant reminisced briefly about their experiences in the Mexican War, years before. Then, at a small table, General Grant wrote out the terms of surrender.

Grant proved to be a generous victor, not vengeful in the least. He paroled every Confederate officer who pledged not to take up arms against the United States again, and gave the officers the responsibility of paroling their men. All Confederate arms were to be turned in — with the exception of the officers' side arms. Grant also added that every man who owned a horse would be allowed to take it home with him for the spring plowing. Lee, greatly relieved, told General Grant, "This will have the best possible effect upon my men. It will be very gratifying, and will do much toward conciliating our people."

For General Grant, the victor, and General Lee, the vanquished, the war was over; but tragically, only a few hours after the surrender, Union and Confederate troops mistakenly fought one another near Blakeley, Alabama. Hundreds died needlessly, but it was the last battle of the War Between the States. The Union had been preserved.

DURING THE WEEK

Discuss the pros and cons of war with your children. Point out to them that although wars bring suffering and hardship to both sides, there is nothing immoral about defending your nation against an enemy invader, or rising up against a tyrant, or being willing, as was Robert E. Lee, to defend your principles. Also note that America would not be a free and prosperous nation if patriots had not been willing to fight for it.

The Family Heritage Series

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