

Teaching American History Project

April 1861: Edward Washburn Whitaker's Enlistment By Kathy Bryce

Grade – 8

Length of class period – 45 minutes

Inquiry – Who was Edward Whitaker?

What were his reasons for joining the Connecticut Volunteers in 1861?

What were Whitaker's expectations of the Civil War as a private in Rifle Company A, First Regiment?

Objectives – After reading two letters written by Edward Whitaker, students will cite his reasons for enlisting in the army, and describe his first impressions of being a Union soldier.

Students will compare Whitaker's expectations of the impending war with historical facts regarding horrors of the Civil War battlefields.

Materials – Background information on Brevet Brigadier General Edward W. Whitaker, materials primarily gathered by Ashford resident John Regan to support Whitaker's induction into the Connecticut Veterans Hall of Fame. Photograph of Edward Whitaker.

<http://www.arlingtoncemetery.net/ewwhit.htm>

Transcriptions of letters written by Edward Whitaker to his sister, Adeline Whitaker James, dated April 16 and 20, 1861. Babcock Library, Ashford, CT

Activities – Have students view the photograph and read the background information about General Whitaker. This can be done with the whole class via computer projection or copies can be handed out to small groups. Through class or small group discussion, have students record their observations about Whitaker.

Distribute the two letters Whitaker wrote to his sister in April of 1861. Have students read the letters with a partner and respond to the worksheet questions.

Assessment – Class discussion about Edward Whitaker's photograph and biographical information, and student recognition of Whitaker's accomplishments.

Observation of group work as students examine the letters.

Written responses to questions about Whitaker's first two letters to his sister regarding his enlistment in the Connecticut Volunteers in 1861.

Connecticut Social Studies Framework: Grade Level Expectations – 1.2; 2.1; 2.2

Analyze the connections between and among Ashford's and Connecticut's participation in the Civil War.

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary source letters.

Identify aspects of a text that reveal an author's point of view or purpose.

Brevet Brigadier General Edward Washburn Whitaker

- Born in Killingly, CT on June 15, 1841; eight brothers and seven sisters (four of whom became teachers in the South after the war)
- Raised in Ashford; educated in Ashford and Olneyville, RI; spent most of his adult life after the war in Washington, D.C.
- One of four Whitaker brothers who enlisted in Union regiments in the Civil War; Edward and Daniel enlisted together in Company A, First Connecticut Volunteers; transferred to Company B, Second New York Cavalry Volunteers, then to First Regiment Connecticut Cavalry Volunteers; Daniel was the only fatality of the family, killed in action at Aldie, VA on June 17, 1863
- Attained the rank of Brevet Brigadier General by the end of the war; youngest general in the Civil War (age 23)
- Served as commander of the First Connecticut Cavalry and as Chief of Staff for Major General George Armstrong Custer
- Awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for breaking through the Confederate lines at Reams Station, VA to deliver a message to General Grant on June 19, 1864 (presented in 1898)
- Entered the Confederate lines at Appomattox Court House under a flag of truce; first Union soldier to learn of General Lee's intention to surrender his army; notified commanders in time to arrange for a cease fire and avert an impending assault upon the Confederate lines
- Fought in 82 engagements during the Civil War; wounded at Falling Waters, MD and Five Forks, VA; contracted malaria shortly after Gettysburg, which resulted in a heart condition that disabled him for much of his life
- Appointed Superintendent of the U.S. Capitol Building after the war; later Postmaster of Hartford, CT; insurance agent and patent attorney in Washington, D.C.
- Married Theodosia Davis in 1865; three daughters
- Died on July 30, 1922; buried at Arlington National Cemetery
- Letters written to his sister, Adeline Whitaker James, were donated to the Connecticut State Library in 1934

Name _____
Whitaker Letters: Worksheet 1

Directions: With your partner(s), read Edward Whitaker's first two letters to his sister Adeline. Discuss the following questions together, then respond individually. Be sure to write in complete sentences.

1. What event is Edward referring to: "...they fought 40 hours with shot and shell and no one killed."? When did the Civil War begin? How long after this event did Edward consider enlisting?

2. In his letter of April 16, 1861, how does Edward expect Adeline to react to his enlistment?

3. What does Edward believe will happen if men do not enlist?

4. Edward writes that, "It is a duty that all American citizens owe to their country." Do you agree or disagree with his statement? Tell why.



5th Stall North
(Hartford, Conn.)
3 p.m. Tuesday
April 16, (1861)

Dear Adeline,

Yours of 12 M. came duly at hand. My excuse for not writing of the war was for want of time. We have no time to write long discussions on such matters now, I was in hopes of meeting you for that purpose soon as my mind was fully settled concerning what to do. But events have crowded so fast one after another that its now time to march and I have not even spoken to you about the probability of my joining the Army.

I heard that they were enlisting last at the Courant Office so I got permission and went down, found that they were not enlisting there but that the Editor of the Press was taking names of those who would volunteer to form a company and present our services to the Governor or Government at Washington. Daniel (brother) left his name and I of course left mine but this is not enlisting to go into the army where you may be sent, as the people will be called on soon to do. It is a duty that all American citizens owe to their Country. All over 18 and under 45 may be called on if the war continues long.

It is natural and common that you should wish me to keep still at this time but if the men should all listen to such entreaties from friends and relatives we should have no free government longer. Washington would be taken by the Revolutionists and our President assassinated. Perhaps thousands of troops will discourage them in doing further wrong at last. War is not now what it was in days past – now no Indians, no scalping, no burning – the matter will be settled by the possession of Forts – and by the papers you will see they

fought 40 hours with shot and shell and no one killed. Art and science have done away with the horrors of wars of old times.

Your affectionate Brother

Edward (Age 19)

No one thinks of volunteering in the building but myself.

I must call your attention to the note in this. Say nothing you think will discourage

Hattie. Where is she?

The rain may prevent my going out this afternoon.

Perhaps I will call for you in the office this evening. How is Miss D?

My regards to all, Miss Angin included.

Your brother Edward.

*April 20th 1861. 3 p.m.
Alumni Hall, New Haven Conn.
Headquarters Volunteer Rifle Company A
1st Regiment Conn. State Troops.*

Sister Adeline:-

We have just arrived and I occupy the first quiet moment in writing you. I will give you first an idea of our movements since you saw me. You know we were disappointed about leaving Hartford. We passed a pleasant afternoon with pleasant company but you were missed, I believe you were not out in the evening. I took tea with Daniel, had a good rest all night with D, and were ready in morn in time to march to the Depot at 8 o'clock, all space occupied on either street platform of Fence on the route to and at the Depot.

The Putnam Phalanx was our escort to the train amid the waving of flags and handkerchiefs, the shouts and cheers of over ten thousand citizens who crowded the Depot to us an affectionate good bye, all wishing us well in the good cause. We boarded the train and never saw such a sight as was presented to our view as the train left the excited crowd. D. and myself were on the rear car. Our journey here was short and pleasant. We were greeted at every station with flags, cheers and a many "God Bless You". After leaving the Depot here we marched to across the beautiful green to the court House and from there to the Merchants Hotel for breakfast - from thence broke ranks till 1 o'clock when we were called to the Union House to a sumptuous dinner. We have since drilled some and moved our quarters to this spacious and noted Hall within a few rods of the old Yale College. Here we are to stop while in New Haven waiting for uniforms and further orders from Headquarters. We are all enjoying ourselves well. You cannot expect a long letter from me yet as we are hardly settled down. Our rifles are near worth 30 dollars. I can pick a man with them one mile off.

*Let anyone see this you please only remember it was written in an inconvenient position. .
me hear from you and Hattie both. I cannot write to many now. It is some noisy here, so
good bye for now.*

*Your affectionate Brother
Edward.*

(Address soon)

*Private E. W. Whitaker,
Co. A Ct. State Militia
Alumni Hall
New Haven, Conn.*