

Teaching American History Project

April 1865: Edward Washburn Whitaker and the Surrender at Appomattox by Kathy Bryce

Grade – 8

Length of class period – 45 minutes (One to two classes, depending on whether students have prior knowledge of Whitaker.)

Inquiry – Who was Edward Whitaker?

What was his role in the surrender at Appomattox Courthouse?

Objectives – After reading Whitaker’s letter to Chamberlain, students will infer probable reasons for writing the letter.

Students will examine Whitaker’s role in the surrender at Appomattox and will discuss reasons why his role has been “forgotten” by historians.

Students will evaluate evidence to support Whitaker’s account of the surrender.

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>

Transcription of letter written by Edward Whitaker to Joshua Chamberlain, dated April 29, 1901. The letter to Chamberlain is included in the collection of Whitaker’s letters to his sister, housed at the Babcock Library, Ashford, CT.

Article entitled “Ashford Man Key To Lee Surrender” from the July 25, 1961 *Hartford Times*. This newspaper column is included in the collection of letters housed at the Babcock Library.

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.

Teachers may choose to share various written accounts or have students view film excerpts or video accounts of the surrender. There are many to choose from on YouTube.

Distribute the letter Whitaker wrote to Chamberlain in April of 1901 and the newspaper column from 1961. Have students read the materials with a partner and respond to the worksheet questions. Discuss as a group, focusing on why Whitaker does not get more “credit” for his role in the surrender. Students should note possible reasons for Whitaker to write to Chamberlain more than 35 years after Appomattox.

Have students choose a writing assignment. Assign the letter or nonfiction entry as an independent piece.

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 materials.

Written responses to questions about Whitaker’s letter to Chamberlain and the newspaper column.

Written work: letter format, complete sentences, detailed account of events at Appomattox, structure and tone similar to Edward’s letters to his sister.

Written work: nonfiction, textbook-type entry, detailed account of events at Appomattox.

Connecticut Social Studies Framework: Grade Level Expectations –

1.4 Explain how specific individuals and their ideas and beliefs influenced U. S. history.

2.1 Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of a primary source letter and a secondary source newspaper column.

2.2 Analyze the relationship between a primary and secondary source on the same topic.

2.3 Create various forms of written work (letter or nonfiction) to demonstrate an understanding of history and social studies issues.

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



(Letter written by Edward Washburn Whitaker, late Lieut. Colonel of 1st Conn. Cavalry, acting Inspector General and Chief of Staff for Gen. George A. Custer, 3rd Cavalry Division, Army of the Potomac, to General Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain at Portland, Maine, concerning the fact that Chamberlain was the first person to receive the announcement of the unconditional surrender of General Lee's army at Appomattox Court House on April 9, 1865, and giving particulars in regard to the circumstances.)

*819 Mass. Ave., N.E.
Washington, D.C.,
April 29, 1901*

*General J.S. Chamberlain,
Portland, Maine.*

Dear General Chamberlain:

I trust you will excuse my neglect of my promises when I tell you I have been very sick and a long time recruiting my health.

Your esteemed favor of the 26th inst. duly received and contents fully noted.

You were the first person to receive the announcement of the unconditional surrender of General Lee's Army at Appomattox Court House at 9 o'clock, April 9th, 1865, under the following circumstances. General Custer's 3d Cavalry Division had advance of Cavalry Corps, Army of Potomac, and was moving in column of Squadron front under Artillery fire of enemy on our left flank. After passing the artillery as General Custer was about to order a charge, a rebel officer, named Capt. Sims of Gen. Longstreet's staff met us (I was riding by General

Custer's side at head of the column) and said General Lee asks a suspension of hostilities. General Custer (as quick as lightning) said Whitaker take the flag go with this officer to General Lee with my compliments and tell him I can not stop this charge unless he announces an unconditional surrender as I am not sole in command on this field.

Capt. Sims guided me to where he left Generals Lee, Gordon and Longstreet.

I found there only Generals Gordon and Longstreet who explained that they were in

command as General Lee had galloped off to the rear to find General Grant immediately after authorizing a request for a suspension of hostilities.

These Generals both assured me of an absolute surrender and that they were personally satisfied of the result the night before, but that General Lee still had hope of

being able to get through to Lynchburg and with that expectation ordered the charge

by Gordon's command which had been repulsed by infantry. I was suspicious of their good faith as all firing had not stopped and artillery with smoking guns was passing us, and while hesitating about my report to General Custer they very

impatiently begged me to hurry and to first stop that infantry line with the announcement. I consented to do so only stipulating that a rebel officer go with me.

I galloped out to the infantry line and steered for what appeared to be the Commander's flag and announced the surrender of Lee's Army. I understood the officer to be yourself commanding that portion of General Ord's line. I learned later

that it was you as you lectured and described the appearance of the towel in my hand.

The moment the surrender was announced the greatest, loudest cheers I ever heard

went up from right to left along your line.

I left the Confederate officer on your line, he had no message, or any authority to

deliver one, as I simply asked that an officer accompany me, and I at once galloped

across the field to General Custer to whom I repeated the announcement of an

unconditional surrender of the rebel army, and then was repeated that shout of joy all

along the cavalry line. Do not be disturbed by any of the statements of General

Gordon early or late. He dare not confront me with a denial of any of my statements.

I furnished him with a copy of my first public statement on this matter, and have twice invited him to compare notes and correct errors in his lecture, and he has never

attempted to dispute me. General Longstreet admits his error in putting General

Custer in my boots, and I suppose we must excuse both him and General Gordon for bad memory "on the details" as the latter puts it in a letter to me "on account of

momentious excitement and responsibility" of the occasion.

He could remember how difficult it was to find a truce when General Lee suggested

it and how by good luck Sims found a white towel in his saddle bag. But this is enough of detail. You now have my statement of the fact that the surrender was first

announced to you in such haste at the "for Gods sake" request of Gordon who was impatient at my hesitation.

Yours very truly,

E. W. Whitaker

General: If you will put this in type writing, I will sign as many copies as you please

to send. I do not want the original, but want you to have a neat copy. This written

in a great hurry.

E. W. Whitaker

Name_____

Worksheet: Whitaker letter
Chamberlain

to

Directions: With your partner(s), read Edward Whitaker's letter to Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain and the newspaper column. Discuss the following questions together, then respond individually. Be sure to write in complete sentences.

1. What information from Whitaker's bio page might explain his opening statement: "...I tell you I have been very sick and a long time recruiting my health."?
2. What was General Chamberlain's role in the surrender at Appomattox?
3. Explain the meaning of "unconditional surrender."
4. Why might Whitaker have been suspicious of the Confederate generals' (Gordon and Longstreet) "good faith"? Why do you suppose Whitaker asked that a rebel officer go with him to see General Lee?
5. What discrepancies does Whitaker seem to be correcting in this letter to



Ashford Man Key

To Lee Surrender

High Times July 25, 1961

A Connecticut soldier in the Civil War was the first to learn from Confederate officers that Lee was prepared to surrender.

An old letter found in a dump in Massachusetts and written by Col. Edward W. Whitaker of Ashford tells the story.

Today that letter is in the Connecticut State Library.

The letter, dated Apr. 29, 1861, was directed to General Chamberlain at Portland, Me.

It was one of a batch of old letters found in the dump and turned over to Hartford book and document collector Arthur F. Winslow, 381 Cornwall St. An ardent collector, Mr. Winslow, now operates a mail order business in rare books and documents.

LT. COLONEL Whitaker was acting inspector-general for Chief of Staff General George Custer on Apr. 9, 1863.

He tells of riding at Custer's side when a Confederate captain rode up with a white flag—a towel tied to a branch.

The captain announced Lee's intention to surrender. General Custer reacted by saying: "Whitaker, take this flag to General Lee with my compliments." Whitaker recalls that Custer told him to inform Lee that "the impending charge cannot be stopped unless the surrender is to be unconditional."

The Confederate officer guided Whitaker back to top-ranking Confederate generals including Gordon and

Longstreet. General Lee had left the scene.

Colonel Whitaker was assured that the surrender would be "absolute." Admitting that he "hesitated," Colonel Whitaker said "I was suspicious of their good faith." He explains that as he rode to the meeting, he passed "artillery moving up."

A CONFEDERATE officer "impatiently asked me to hurry."

Colonel Whitaker rode back. In the letter to General Chamberlain he tells him that "I rode for the command flag and later learned that you were the first I told." After this he rode to report to General Custer.

In this same batch Mr. Winslow found a prize, a 28-page letter to General Chamberlain, while he was Governor of Maine, from Colonel Oates, commander of the Alabama regiment at Gettysburg, while he (Oates) was governor of Alabama.

It shed new light on the historic fighting at Little Round Top during the Battle of Gettysburg.

IN THE LETTER the Confederate colonel told how he and Union General Chamberlain had been the first to recognize the importance of Little Round Top. Union troops reached it first. Colonel Oates recounts five assaults his troops made trying to dislodge the Union forces unsuccessfully.

This letter was written on the Governor's stationery on the day he left office. "I

regret selling it," Mr. Winslow said.

Mr. Winslow, a one-time Weaver High School teacher associated with Hillyer College teaching history and government for 16 years, said that due to the Civil War Centennial the interest in old Civil War materials is greater than ever.

His choicest finds have come from dumps, attics and auctions.

GENERALLY, items with Lincoln's signature or related to Lincoln's career are valuable, some more than others.

Mr. Winslow believes a good background in history is important. Once he recalls seeing a newspaper published in the county adjacent to Lincoln's home in Illinois. In it he found Lincoln's engagement to Mary Todd.

MR. WINSLOW considers Lincoln to have been the greatest politician who ever sat in the White House. He cites numerous letters Lincoln wrote for Illinois friends to get them jobs in government.

More valuable is another letter. A girl wrote to General McClellan asking that her boy friend be given a furlough. She explained that on a recent furlough they had been indiscreet and she wanted him to be home so that the baby would have its father's name. The letter went from McClellan to Secretary of War Stanton to President Lincoln.

Lincoln scrawled across the face of the letter, "By all means let him go. A Lincoln."

BASCOM LIBRARY
BOX 158
ASHFORD, CT 06278

