

TEACHING AMERICAN HISTORY PROJECT
Lesson Title – War on the Plains: The Battle of Little Bighorn
From Lani Jones

Grade –8

Length of class period –50 minutes

Inquiry – What actions, events and attitudes led to the Battle of Little Big Horn? How did this impact life for the Sioux Indians?

Objectives

1. Students will be able to explain the underlying causes of the Battle of Little Bighorn.
2. Students will predict the effects that reservations had on the Sioux's attitudes towards the Americans using maps and pictures.
3. Students will compare and contrast the Sioux perspective and the American perspective of the Battle of Little Bighorn using evidence from eye-witness accounts.

Materials

- Battle of Little Bighorn PowerPoint
- Carnage at the Battle of Little Bighorn-Perspective 1
- Battle of Little Bighorn-Perspective 2
- Sioux Land Maps
- Sioux Land Maps Handout

Activities

1. Short PowerPoint reviewing the Battle of Little Bighorn and the history of the War on the Plains.
2. Students will look at the maps, which indicate the loss of land the Sioux endured, and also a picture to analyze the American perception of Indians at the time. (10)
3. Students will break into groups to read one of the two perspectives and to answer the questions that are at the bottom of the article. At the end, each group will share their answers to the questions out loud so that the other group can hear the opposite perspective. Make a Venn Diagram on the board for the students to copy down onto a piece of blank paper if we have time. (20-30 minutes)
4. Students take 3-4 minutes to fill out their 3-2-1 charts to close out the lesson.

How will you assess what student learned during this lesson?

1. Students will turn in a 3-2-1 wrap-up at the end of class indicating three things they learned today, two reasons that the Battle of Little Bighorn took place, and one questions they still have about the War on the Plains.
2. Students will answer questions on a worksheet accompanying the sources that indicate their predictions about the effects of reservations/ loss of land on the Sioux Indians.
3. Students will fill in a Venn Diagram comparing and contrasting the perceptions that Chief Red Horse (a Sioux Indian) and George Herndon (a member of the American 7th Calvary) had about the Battle of Little Bighorn.

Connecticut Framework Performance Standards –

- 1.1 Students will demonstrate an understanding of significant events and themes in United States history.
- 1.4 Students will demonstrate an understanding of geographical space and place.
- 2.2 Interpret information from a variety of primary and secondary sources, including electronic media (maps, charts, graphs, images, artifacts, recordings and text)
- 3.2 Analyze and evaluate human action in historical and/or contemporary contexts from alternative points of view

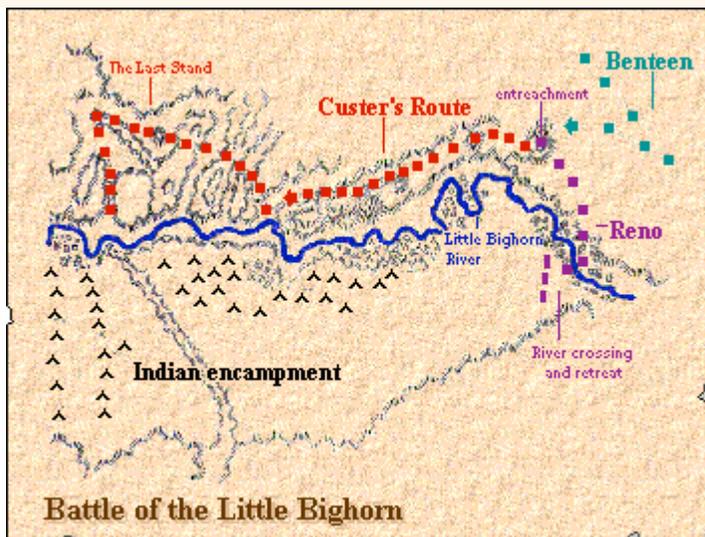
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Date: _____

Carnage at the Little Big Horn

George Herendon served as a scout for the Seventh Cavalry - a civilian under contract with the army and attached to Major Reno's command. Herendon charged across the Little Bighorn River with Reno as the soldiers met an overwhelming force of Sioux streaming from their encampment. After the battle, Herendon told his story to a reporter from the New York Herald:

"Reno took a steady gallop down the creek bottom three miles where it emptied into the Little Horn, and found a natural ford across the Little Horn River. He started to cross, when the scouts came back and called out to him to hold on, that the Sioux were coming in large numbers to meet him. He crossed over, however, formed his companies on the prairie in line of battle, and moved forward at a trot but soon took a gallop.



"He advanced about a mile from the ford to a line of timber on the right and dismounted his men to fight on foot. The horses were sent into the timber, and the men forward on the prairie and advanced toward the Indians. The Indians, mounted on ponies, came across the prairie and opened a heavy fire on the soldiers. After skirmishing for a few minutes Reno fell back to his horses in the timber. The Indians moved to his left and rear, evidently with the intention of cutting him off from the ford.

"Reno ordered his men to mount and move through the timber, but as his men got into the saddle the Sioux, who had advanced in the timber, fired at close range and killed one soldier. Colonel Reno then commanded the men to dismount, and they did so, but he soon ordered them to mount again, and moved out on to the open prairie."

"The command headed for the ford, pressed closely by Indians in large numbers, and at every moment the rate of speed was increased, until it became a dead run for the ford. The Sioux, mounted on their swift ponies, dashed up by the side of the soldiers and fired at them, killing both men and horses. Little resistance was offered, and it was complete rout to the ford. I did not see the men at the ford, and do not know what took place further than a good many were killed when the command left the timber.

"Just as I got out, my horse stumbled and fell and I was dismounted, the horse running away after Reno's command. I saw several soldiers who were dismounted, their horses having been killed or run away. There were also some soldiers mounted who had remained behind, I should

think in all as many as thirteen soldiers, and seeing no chance of getting away, I called on them to come into the timber and we would stand off the Indians.

"Three of the soldiers were wounded, and two of them so badly they could not use their arms. The soldiers wanted to go out, but I said no, we can't get to the ford, and besides, we have wounded men and must stand by them. The soldiers still wanted to go, but I told them I was an old frontiersman, understood the Indians, and if they would do as I said I would get them out of the scrape which was no worse than scrapes I had been in before. About half of the men were mounted, and they wanted to keep their horses with them, but I told them to let the horses go and fight on foot.



Custer (3rd from left), his officers and their wives pose before the beginning of the campaign. Many did not return.

"We stayed in the bush about three hours, and I could hear heavy firing below in the river, apparently about two miles distant. I did not know who it was, but knew the Indians were fighting some of our men, and learned afterward it was Custer's command. Nearly all the Indians in the upper part of the valley drew off down the river, and the fight with Custer lasted about one hour, when the heavy firing ceased. When the shooting below began to die away I said to the boys 'come, now is the time to get out.' Most of them did not go, but waited for night. I told them the Indians would come back and we had better be off at once. Eleven of the thirteen said they would go, but two stayed behind.

"I deployed the men as skirmishers and we moved forward on foot toward the river. When we had got nearly to the river we met five Indians on ponies, and they fired on us. I returned the fire and the Indians broke and we then forded the river, the water being heart deep. We finally got over, wounded men and all, and headed for Reno's command which I could see drawn up on the bluffs along the river about a mile off. We reached Reno in safety.

"We had not been with Reno more than fifteen minutes when I saw the Indians coming up the valley from Custer's fight. Reno was then moving his whole command down the ridge toward Custer. The Indians crossed the river below Reno and swarmed up the bluff on all sides. After skirmishing with them Reno went back to his old position which was on one of the highest fronts along the bluffs. It was now about five o'clock, and the fight lasted until it was too dark to see to shoot.

"As soon as it was dark Reno took the packs and saddles off the mules and horses and made breast works of them. He also dragged the dead horses and mules on the line and sheltered the men behind them. Some of the men dug rifle pits with their butcher knives and all slept on their arms.

"At the peep of day the Indians opened a heavy fire and a desperate fight ensued, lasting until 10 o'clock. The Indians charged our position three or four times, coming up close enough to hit our men with stones, which they threw by hand. Captain Benteen saw a large mass of Indians gathered on his front to charge, and ordered his men to charge on foot and scatter them.



The aftermath of the battle

"Benteen led the charge and was upon the Indians before they knew what they were about and killed a great many. They were evidently much surprised at this offensive movement, and I think in desperate fighting Benteen is one of the bravest men I ever saw in a fight. All the time he was going about through the bullets, encouraging the soldiers to stand up to their work and not let the Indians whip them; he went among the horses and pack mules and drove out the men who were skulking there, compelling them to go into the line and do their duty. He never sheltered his own person once during the battle, and I do not see how he escaped being killed. The desperate charging and fighting was over at about one o'clock, but firing was kept up on both sides until late in the afternoon."

References:

Connell, Evan S. *Son of the Morning Star* (1984); *New York Herald* (July 1876); Utley, Robert M. *Cavalier in Buckskin*; *George Armstrong Custer and the Western Frontier* (1988).

Questions:

1. Did the author describe this fight with the Sioux Indians as easy or hard?
2. Were the American soldiers described as brave or cowardly? Use evidence from the account to back up your argument.
3. Were the Indians described as brave or cowardly? Use evidence from the account to back up your argument.

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**The Battle of Little Bighorn
An Eyewitness Account by the Lakota Chief Red Horse
recorded in pictographs and text
at the Cheyenne River Reservation, 1881**

Five springs ago I, with many Sioux Indians, took down and packed up our tipis and moved from Cheyenne river to the Rosebud river, where we camped a few days; then took down and packed up our lodges and moved to the Little Bighorn river and pitched our lodges with the large camp of Sioux.

I was a Sioux chief in the council lodge. My lodge was pitched in the center of the camp. The day of the attack I and four women were a short distance from the camp digging wild turnips. Suddenly one of the women attracted my attention to a cloud of dust rising a short distance from camp. I soon saw that the soldiers were charging the camp. To the camp I and the women ran. When I arrived a person told me to hurry to the council lodge. The soldiers charged so quickly we could not talk (council). We came out of the council lodge and talked in all directions. The Sioux mount horses, take guns, and go fight the soldiers. Women and children mount horses and go, meaning to get out of the way.

Among the soldiers was an officer who rode a horse with four white feet. [This officer was evidently Capt. French, Seventh Cavalry.] The Sioux have for a long time fought many brave men of different people, but the Sioux say this officer was the bravest man they had ever fought. I don't know whether this was Gen. Custer or not. Many of the Sioux men that I hear talking tell me it was. I saw this officer in the fight many times, but did not see his body. It has been told me that he was killed by a Santee Indian, who took his horse. This officer wore a large-brimmed hat and a deerskin coat. This officer saved the lives of many soldiers by turning his horse and covering the retreat. Sioux say this officer was the bravest man they ever fought. I saw two officers looking alike, both having long yellowish hair.

Before the attack the Sioux were camped on the Rosebud river. Sioux moved down a river running into the Little Bighorn river, crossed the Little Bighorn river, and camped on its west bank.

This day [day of attack] a Sioux man started to go to Red Cloud agency, but when he had gone a short distance from camp he saw a cloud of dust rising and turned back and said he thought a herd of buffalo was coming near the village.

The day was hot. In a short time the soldiers charged the camp. [This was Maj. Reno's battalion of the Seventh Cavalry.] The soldiers came on the trail made by the Sioux camp in moving, and crossed the Little Bighorn river above where the Sioux crossed, and attacked the lodges of the Uncpapas, farthest up the river. The women and children ran down the Little Bighorn river a

short distance into a ravine. The soldiers set fire to the lodges. All the Sioux now charged the soldiers and drove them in confusion across the Little Bighorn river, which was very rapid, and several soldiers were drowned in it. On a hill the soldiers stopped and the Sioux surrounded them. A Sioux man came and said that a different party of Soldiers had all the women and children prisoners. Like a whirlwind the word went around, and the Sioux all heard it and left the soldiers on the hill and went quickly to save the women and children.

Sioux thought the soldiers on the hill [i.e., Reno's battalion] would charge them in rear, but when they did not the Sioux thought the soldiers on the hill were out of cartridges. As soon as we had killed all the soldiers the Sioux all went back to kill the soldiers on the hill. All the Sioux watched around the hill on which were the soldiers until a Sioux man came and said many walking soldiers were coming near. The coming of the walking soldiers was the saving of the soldiers on the hill. Sioux can not fight the walking soldiers [infantry], being afraid of them, so the Sioux hurriedly left.

The soldiers charged the Sioux camp about noon. The soldiers were divided, one party charging right into the camp. After driving these soldiers across the river, the Sioux charged the different soldiers [i.e., Custer's] below, and drive them in confusion; these soldiers became foolish, many throwing away their guns and raising their hands, saying, "Sioux, pity us; take us prisoners." The Sioux did not take a single soldier prisoner, but killed all of them; none were left alive for even a few minutes. These different soldiers discharged their guns but little. I took a gun and two belts off two dead soldiers; out of one belt two cartridges were gone, out of the other five.

The Sioux took the guns and cartridges off the dead soldiers and went to the hill on which the soldiers were, surrounded and fought them with the guns and cartridges of the dead soldiers. Had the soldiers not divided I think they would have killed many Sioux. The different soldiers [i.e., Custer's battalion] that the Sioux killed made five brave stands. Once the Sioux charged right in the midst of the different soldiers and scattered them all, fighting among the soldiers hand to hand.

One band of soldiers was in rear of the Sioux. When this band of soldiers charged, the Sioux fell back, and the Sioux and the soldiers stood facing each other. Then all the Sioux became brave and charged the soldiers. The Sioux went but a short distance before they separated and surrounded the soldiers. I could see the officers riding in front of the soldiers and hear them shooting. Now the Sioux had many killed. The soldiers killed 136 and wounded 160 Sioux. The Sioux killed all these different soldiers in the ravine.

The soldiers charged the Sioux camp farthest up the river. A short time after the different soldiers charged the village below. While the different soldiers and Sioux were fighting together the Sioux chief said, "Sioux men, go watch soldiers on the hill and prevent their joining the different soldiers." The Sioux men took the clothing off the dead and dressed themselves in it. Among the soldiers were white men who were not soldiers. The Sioux dressed in the soldiers' and white men's clothing fought the soldiers on the hill.

The banks of the Little Bighorn river were high, and the Sioux killed many of the soldiers while crossing. The soldiers on the hill dug up the ground, and the soldiers and Sioux fought at long

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Directions: Use the two maps (A and B) to answer the following questions about the Sioux Indian territory and to make good guesses about how and why the territory changed over time.

1. What year was Map A made? What states did Sioux territory occupy?
2. What year was Map B made? What states did Sioux territory occupy?
3. Did Sioux territory increase or decrease between Map A and Map B? Why do you think that this change happened?
4. Based on the maps, do you think the Sioux Indians were happy or upset about this change in their territory? Explain your reasoning.