



Student Activity: Can You Hear Me Now? Voices of Civil War Washington

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For Grades 9-12

Introduction

In this activity, you will explore two events during the Civil War in Washington to understand different points of view on some of the most important questions of the day.

This activity can be used in conjunction with the video *Exploring Civil War Washington Through the Eyes of Mary Henry* (<https://youtu.be/EETFPrfWepk>), or it can be completed independently.

Context

During the Civil War, Washington was a tense place. The nation's capital was surrounded by Maryland and Virginia—states that allowed enslavement. Maryland was one of four border states that allowed enslavement but did not join the Confederacy. Washington itself allowed humans to be held in slavery until April 16, 1862. People who emancipated themselves from enslavement traveled to Washington, essentially as refugees, and joined an already vibrant free Black community in the city. Some Black residents advocated not just for emancipation but for full racial equality. Many whites in Washington feared that allowing Black men to serve as soldiers could lead to low morale in the U.S. Army, and maybe even make the border states decide to join the Confederacy.

Below you'll explore the points of view of two people, and one organization speaking about two of the major events in Civil War Washington: The debate over recruiting Black Americans into the U.S. Army and the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln.

Mary Henry was in her twenties when she lived in Washington during the Civil War. Her father, Joseph Henry, was in charge of the Smithsonian and they lived in the Smithsonian castle building on the Mall. Mary kept a detailed diary in which she described things she saw in Washington during the war.

Bob Logic was the [pseudonym](#) of an unknown correspondent who wrote to a New York-based Black newspaper, the *Anglo-African*, from Washington during 1863 and 1864. His letters described Black life and activism in Washington.

The **Committee of Colored Citizens of Washington** was an organization of prominent Black leaders in the city, such as hotel owner James Wormley, who advocated for equal rights.

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1863: Forming the United States Colored Troops

Context

As soon as fighting began, Black Americans pushed the U.S. government to allow them to serve as soldiers. In 1863, the Lincoln administration agreed. With the Emancipation Proclamation, the U.S. government allowed African American men to join the army, although in separate units known as the United States Colored Troops (USCT). Some people saw arming Black men as soldiers as a radical and dangerous idea and questioned their abilities. Others welcomed what they saw as an overdue change.

Read these two reactions to the formation of the U.S. Colored Troops from Washingtonians Mary Henry and Bob Logic (the nickname of an unknown writer). Then, answer the questions below.

Mary Henry's Point of View

In her diary, Mary wrote down what she thought about allowing Black soldiers in the U.S. Army. She mentions debates in the House of Representatives between congressmen who were for and against this.

“The discussion of the bill for arming of the negroes still continues to create great excitement in the House. Mr. Wickliffe made a long speech yesterday, in which he said one man, named Hunter, had tried the experiment of raising a negro regiment, but had failed.

If the measure, obnoxious to many of the people of the country, were passed, the Government could not endure.

In every point of view, the negro bill was impolitic & uncalled for.

Should it pass, we should, in all probability, lose Maryland, Kentucky & West Virginia, besides running the risk of demoralizing the army now in the field.

He had been told by officers of the army that if black soldiers were enlisted, they would consider it a reflection upon the army & resign.”

Bob Logic's Point of View

In this June 24, 1863, article for the *Anglo-African* newspaper, Bob Logic described recruiting efforts for a regiment of USCT in Washington, and what a parade on Pennsylvania Avenue looked like:

“Since I wrote you last, the 1st Colored Regiment has two more companies added, making now five. They paraded down Pennsylvania avenue the other day, making a handsome display. I was standing by an old officer of the army, and he told me

they marched as good as old veterans. I long to see the regiment full, for I am of the opinion that the 2nd regiment will be raised in much less time than the 1st. [...]

The spirit of recruiting is on the march, as you will see from the following proceedings of a meeting of colored citizens, held in the 19th st. Baptist church on last Friday evening, for the purpose of raising a recruiting fund to aid in filling up the ranks of the 3rd Regiment of D.C. Vols.”

What do you think?

1. Compare the viewpoints of Mary Henry and Bob Logic. What do they think of the idea of Black soldiers in the U.S. Army? What evidence can you find in their words that supports your opinion?
2. What concerns did Mary Henry express about recruiting Black soldiers?
3. What did Bob Logic write that might prove to racist people that the USCT would be good soldiers?
4. What do these accounts tell us about the tension around recruitment of the USCT? Why do you think it was so important for the Union to make sure the border states did not join the Confederacy?
5. If Mary Henry and Bob Logic had Instagram handles in 1864, what might their posts say when they saw the USCT marching in Washington?

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1865: Lincoln's Assassination

Context

On April 14, 1865, actor John Wilkes Booth shot President Abraham Lincoln at Ford's Theatre in downtown Washington. Booth, who had long supported the Confederate cause, was enraged by a speech Lincoln gave three nights before. In that speech, Lincoln suggested allowing limited Black voting rights for members of the USCT. Word of Lincoln's assassination and subsequent death spread quickly through the city.

Read these two reactions to the assassination from different Washingtonians, Mary Henry and the Committee of Colored Citizens of Washington. Then, answer the questions below.

Mary Henry's Point of View

Mary Henry wrote two diary entries on the day of Lincoln's death, one in the morning and one in the evening:

April 15, 1865

We were awakened this morning by an announcement which almost made our hearts stand still with consternation. The President was shot last night in the Theater.

When the morning paper was issued, he was still alive, although little or no hopes were entertained of his recovery, but now the tolling bells tell us he has ceased to breath[e]. He is dead.

April 15, 1865 7 P.M.

The sad day of excitement is over.

... The assassins have not yet been arrested, but the evidence is conclusive that Booth—a miserable actor and worthless vagrant, a son of the great tragedian, committed the deed. That is the murder of the President.

... The feeling of resentment at the South as instigating in all probability the murder is deep and I fear will entirely replace the feeling of kindness before entertained for the insurgents.”

View of the Committee of Colored Citizens of Washington

On April 16, 1865, the day after Lincoln's death and the third anniversary of emancipation in D.C., the Committee of Colored Citizens of Washington met at Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church. The Committee passed this resolution, expressing its members' thoughts on Lincoln's assassination.

“Whereas on the 14th of April, 1865, our late President, Abraham Lincoln, was foully assassinated; and, whereas, in him we, the colored people of the District of Columbia have lost an emancipator, benefactor, friend and leader: therefore be it

Resolved, That we, in common with all other loyal citizens of the Republic, have cause to mourn the sudden loss of one whose faithfulness to convictions of duty, and earnest execution of his realizations of the truth whose warm-heartedness, magnanimity, frankness, and honesty have endeared him to our hearts,

Resolved, That we devoutly feel this lamentable event to be a part of the chastening discipline to which the nation is being subjected for its departure from the original principles on which the Government was founded, the self-evident and unyielding truths of the Declaration of Independence, ‘that all men are born free and equal and endowed with the inalienable gift of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.’

Resolved, that we condole with his sorrowing wife and bereaved children in the terrible bereavement; and our sincere prayers shall be to Almighty God to sustain them in their hour of saddening trial.

[...]

Resolved, that the foregoing resolutions be published in the city papers, and a copy be transmitted to the family of our late president.”

Two days later, James Wormley, the chairman of the Committee of Colored Citizens, wrote to George Harrington, the planner of Lincoln’s funeral.

“The chairman of the Committee of Colored Citizens of Washington, who desire to participate in the funeral ceremonies of our late President — and friend, Abraham Lincoln. I have to solicit the favor of being placed in such a position in the line of procession as you may assign. Hoping an immediate answer.”

While we do not know if this group participated in the funeral procession on April 19, 1865, we do know that Black groups did take part.

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What do you think?

1. Compare these perspectives. To what cause does each attribute Lincoln's assassination?
2. Notice the name of the committee. The role of Black Americans in U.S. society after emancipation was yet unresolved. What message does the group's name send about their visions for the future?
3. Both writers are concerned about the future. What is the main cause of their concern?
4. How can we understand their differing concerns in light of what you know about their rights in 1865?

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Your Turn

Think of a recent important world or national news event that you've lived through. Write that event here:

Find two differing points of view on that event in a news source. What can we learn about the event by considering their different points of view?

Now think about the views that two different people might have had of that event. First, outline the two different people. Who are they? What characteristics are important to understanding their points of view?

Now write either a newspaper article or a diary entry from each person's perspective. What is that person concerned about? What does that person think about the event?