

Florida Memory Classroom: Florida in the Civil War

Activity: The Battle of Natural Bridge – Evaluating Primary Sources

Overview

The Battle of Natural Bridge, the last major skirmish of the American Civil War in Florida, was fought near present-day Woodville, Florida, on March 6, 1865. The Confederate force was made up of trained troops, elderly men, and young volunteers from the nearby Florida Military and Collegiate Institute. The Union troops consisted mostly of African-American soldiers and disaffected Floridians who had cast their lot with the U.S. rather than remain with the Confederacy. The Confederates were ultimately victorious. By driving their Union opponents back to the Gulf of Mexico, they prevented the U.S. from controlling the St. Marks River and Tallahassee.

In this activity, you will read a document written by a Floridian about the Battle of Natural Bridge, and then discuss it with two separate groups of your classmates. The first group will be made up of you and other students who read the same document. In the second group, you and students who read other documents will compare and contrast the information from your readings and evaluate the documents as sources.

Reading primary sources is somewhat different from reading a secondary source like a textbook or monograph. A secondary source is written by an author who has drawn information from lots of sources to create an organized story about a historical event. A primary source is more like the raw material of history. It could be any document created by someone with a very direct connection to the historical event in question, such as a letter, a diary entry, a newspaper article, a photograph, or a government record. The information contained in a primary source may or may not provide all of the information you need or want to know about a historical event. Some primary documents may be more useful than others, for all kinds of reasons. Your task in this assignment is to determine what kind of information you can learn about the Battle of Natural Bridge from your document, and to compare it with the other documents read by your classmates.

Directions

- A. Once you are in your first group and have received your document, read it carefully and answer the following questions.
 1. Who is the person writing this document, and what was their role in the Battle of Natural Bridge?
 2. What kind of information can be gained about the battle from this document? What information is missing?
 3. Describe the author's tone.

4. When was this document written? Why might this make a difference in the usefulness of the document for someone researching the Battle of Natural Bridge?
- B. Once everyone in your group has finished reading the document and answering these questions individually, discuss your findings. If there are any discrepancies, explain your reasoning and adjust your answers as necessary.
- C. Once all of the groups have finished this step, your teacher will re-divide your class into new groups, each containing at least one student who has read each document. In the new group, share the basics about your document, including the author, his or her role in the Battle of Natural Bridge, tone, when the document was written, etc. Together, consider the following questions.
1. How are these documents similar, and how are they different?
 2. How reliable are these documents? Are any of them more reliable than the others? Why?
 3. How do these documents work together to tell the story of the Battle of Natural Bridge?