



Lesson Plan

The Battle of Lexington

None dared ignore the importance of the Missouri River. It was a valuable artery of commerce and strategically divided the state. The federal government moved to hold the river by stationing troops at various locations along its course. Lexington, a principal western city in the state with a strong southern heritage, was one of these points.

On Sept. 12, 1861, Maj. Gen. Sterling Price arrived with advanced portions of his army. A sharp skirmish was fought in the city cemetery and cannon fire exchanged. The size of Price's army, the Missouri State Guard, was approximately 15,000. Awaiting him were approximately 3,500 men commanded by Col. James Mulligan of the Illinois Irish Brigade. His troops had been preparing for the conflict by building a complex maze of pits and double row trenches. Mulligan received orders to hold Lexington at all hazards. Although he knew that Price had superior numbers and ammunition, Mulligan was confident he would receive requested reinforcements. To General Price's ultimatum for surrender Mulligan responded, "If you want us, you must take us."

Sniper fire, intermittent cannon fire and light skirmishes characterized the next few days. With the arrival of Price's main supply wagons and the withdrawal of the Federal forces to their main entrenchments, both armies poised for action on Sept. 18, 1861.

Sterling Price extended his large force to surround the Union forces depriving them of spring water and much needed supplies on the steamboat Clara Bell. It was on this first day that the Oliver Anderson's house became a focal point of the battle. On the second day, Mulligan's much anticipated reinforcements arrived north of Lexington but were turned away by a contingent of Price's army. Inside the Union entrenchments, conditions deteriorated, wells were dry and supplies scarce.

On Sept. 20, a line of hemp bales appeared. By midday, the line had advanced within a few yards of the Union breastworks. The final outcome was inevitable and at three o'clock the Federal troops surrendered.

The lesson about the Battle of Lexington is based on written histories and eyewitness reports by soldiers and citizens. Materials for students include battle maps, eyewitness reports and xeroxed photographs. The lesson could be used in teaching units on the Civil War and to strengthen skills of observation, analysis, problem solving and gain empathetic understanding of several historical figures.

Objectives for Students

- To explain why Lexington was the focal point for conflict.
- To analyze the military tactics used during the battle.
- To gain an empathetic understanding of the "common soldier."
- To analyze the repercussions of the battle to both the north and south.

Setting the Stage

Explain to the students that the Battle of Lexington was an early Civil War battle fought before either side controlled the state of Missouri. Local militias were forming throughout the state and in Lexington, Union troops arrived and set up headquarters in the Masonic College. From here, Federals could control the Missouri River. It was Price's intention to take control of Lexington to free movement along the river and allow loyal southerners, north of the river, to join his forces.

It is also necessary to review the importance of Lexington. Described as the most important port west of St. Louis, it also was a thoroughfare for the Oregon and Santa Fe trails. With all the commerce, the town became the site of one of Missouri's State Banks. Price knew that there was money which had been allocated to the war effort in the state bank. He wanted to retrieve the money before the Federals confiscated the cash.

Review with the students the chronology of events. For example, the troops engaged each other in early September but did not commence the Battle of Lexington until Sept. 18, 1861. Prior to Sept. 18, the opposing sides fired intermittently at one another with Price eventually pushing Mulligan's troops into their main fortifications surrounding the Masonic College.

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Although the origin of the idea remains a mystery, a brilliant battlefield tactic greeted the Union forces Sept. 20. Price's men emptied the riverfront warehouses and area farms of various sized hemp bales and arranged them in a long line. This line, described as an immense breastwork, moved slowly forward until it was only 100 feet from the Union fortifications in some areas. The final outcome was inevitable and the surrender followed.

Review with the students the attack of the Anderson House. In late summer of 1861, the house was declared a Federal post hospital. During the battle, the house was engulfed in shooting and attacked. Angered by the attack of a hospital, Mulligan ordered a counter-charge. Inside the house, trapped southerners ran to the second floor. A young Federal soldier, George Palmer, led the pursuit taking five prisoners. As they were led down the stairs, confused Union soldiers on the first floor shot at the southerners. Three were killed while another, W.H. Manser, jumped over the landing of the stairs and escaped. In 1896, George Palmer was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for bravery. The Federal troops were in possession of the house for a brief hour until a southern attack forced their withdrawal.

Explain that the southern victory jubilation was short-lived with retreat to Arkansas on Sept. 30. The success of Sterling Price at Lexington did raise the morale of the southern soldier and provided weapons and needed supplies. The victory enhanced Price's reputation and the ranks of his army swelled. However, faced with uncertain support of the state government and a large Federal army cutting his troops off from the south, Price was forced to retreat.

The defeat for the Union forced the resignation of John Fremont, the commander of the western theater and demand from Abraham Lincoln for the recapture of Lexington. This followed two weeks later.

Locating the Site

Provide the students with copies of the attached maps to complete the following exercises:

- A. Ask the students to locate the Missouri River on map #1. Have them speculate on why the river was so important during the Civil War. Show the students how the river divides Missouri.

Ask the following questions:

- How would you cross the river?
- Where would or could you cross the river? Explain that Lexington had a ferry to transport people across the river and was a major port on the Missouri River.
- What attributes did Lexington possess that both the north and south needed?

Determining the Facts

- A. Provide the students with the battle map (map #2).

Ask the following questions:

- How would you describe Mulligan's position?
- How would you describe Price's position?
- How would you describe the battle?

- B. Provide the students with quote #1.

Ask the following questions:

- What do you think was the most important strategy employed by Sterling Price?
- Do you think the use of hemp bales influenced the battle outcome?

Putting it all Together

- A. Provide the students with quotes and xeroxes of photographs of George Palmer, W.H. Mansur, Susan McCausland. Select students to portray these characters.

After they have read the quotes ask the students the following questions:

- How would you feel if you were George Palmer?
- How would you feel if you were W.H. Mansur?
- How would you feel if you were Susan McCausland?

B. Have the students read the quote from Joseph Wilson.

Ask the following questions

- What happened to the Union soldiers?
- What was the significance of the Battle of Lexington nationally?
- What was the significance of the Battle of Lexington for the state of Missouri?
- What was the significance of the Battle of Lexington for the city of Lexington?
- What was the significance of the Battle of Lexington for the citizens of Lexington?

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