

Lesson Plan: World War I Letters

*This lesson was developed by Maine Historical Society for the Seashore Trolley Museum as a companion curriculum for *Teddy Roosevelt, Millie, and the Elegant Ride* by Jean. M. Flahive (2019). The lesson corresponds with themes and topics covered in Chapters 13-21.*

Objectives:

- Students will practice the skills involved in analyzing primary sources.
- Students will be able to describe what many soldiers faced during World War I.
- Students will be able to describe the impact of the 1918-20 flu pandemic on World War I and people in Maine.

Essential Questions:

1. What was life like for Americans in the armed services during World War I?
2. How did the flu pandemic effect those fighting in World War I and people in Maine?
3. Why are letters written during World War I important primary sources?

Materials:

- computers with internet access for teacher and student use – teachers and students will need to access Maine Memory Network (www.mainememory.net) to examine the documents and posters used in this lesson and may want to access **Additional Recommended Resources** (see below)
- copies of **World War I Letter Rubric** (see below)
- pen/pencil, writing paper, or computer with word processor (for letter composition)
- copy (or copies) of *Teddy Roosevelt, Millie, and the Elegant Ride* by Jean Flahive

Timeframe:

Will vary depending on length of class period, class size, etc.; 1-2 days/class periods recommended.

Procedure:

1. Review with students as needed the **general background on World War I**. The war was fought between **1914-1918** and involved nearly all the most powerful countries of the world. The **conflict was between Germany, Austria-Hungary and their allies (usually collectively referred to as the Central Powers) and Great Britain, France, Russia, the United States, and their allies (usually referred to collectively as the Allies)**. There were many causes behind the war, including complicated, entangling **alliances** between countries, **nationalism** (support for your country and its interests), **imperialism** (extending a

country's power by force), and **militarism** (belief in a strong military to be used aggressively to protect or promote a country's interests). The President of the United States, Woodrow Wilson, vowed that the U.S. would remain neutral, but many Americans were outraged when the British passenger ship the *Lusitania* was sunk by a German submarine on May 7, 1915; 1,195 passengers, including 128 Americans were killed. In 1917 Germany also wrote a secret telegram to Mexico – known today as the Zimmerman Telegram - suggesting that Germany and Mexico work together to attack the United States. In exchange for Mexico's help Germany promised to return land to Mexico that the United States had taken in previous wars. **The United States entered the war in 1917.**

- a. Suggested images to help illustrate WWI from Maine Memory Network:
 - i. [WWI postcard from Clifford Rowe to Lloyd Herrick, Augusta, 1917](#)
 - ii. [World War I soldiers standing at attention, Portland, 1917](#)
 - iii. [Fort Levett military training drills, Cushing Island, ca. 1917](#)
 - iv. [Francis Wilbert Bisbee's cadet training tunic, Orono, ca. 1918](#)
 - v. [Red Cross Volunteers, Portland, ca. 1918](#)

2. Explain that much of the fighting in World War I involved **trench warfare**. Opposing sides in the conflict dug long ditches called trenches which faced each other. These **lines stretched from the Belgian coast to Switzerland and were known as the Western Front**. Life in the trenches was **uncomfortable, dangerous, and grim**. The trenches were often wet, smelly, crawling with infestations of lice and rats, and plagued by overflowing latrines. Every so often, soldiers on the front lines would be instructed to leave their trench and venture into the dangerous **No Man's Land** (the area between the opposing sides' trenches) to try to push back the enemy. It was the first major war where **airplanes, tanks, and submarines were used as weapons**.
3. Ask students to review the letter that Nathan writes home to his family (pp. 139-140); you might read the letter out loud and ask students to follow along. Ask students, ***What are some of the main points that Nathan touches on in the letter?*** (his training, how is the family and farm, illness). ***What kind of picture does he paint of his life in the army?*** (Positive? Negative?)
4. Tell students they will now look at some **letters written by actual U.S. soldiers during WWI, one written by Sumner Cobb, the other by his twin brother Herbert Cobb**. The Cobb brothers were born in Gorham, ME and lived in Portland:
 - a. [Sumner Cobb writes about the Spanish Flu, Louisville, KY, 1918](#)
 - b. [Herbert Cobb's last letter home, France, 1918](#)

You can also show students some surviving images of the Cobb brothers on Maine Memory Network:

- a. [Herbert and Sumner Cobb, ca. 1900](#)
- b. [Herbert Cobb in cadet uniform, ca. 1917](#)

5. Ask students, ***How does their Cobb letter compare with Nathan's? Based on the Cobb letter you read would you say Nathan's letter is a fair fictional representation of what life may have been like for a World War I soldier?***
6. Sumner Cobb's letter mentions the **flu pandemic of 1918**. The pandemic lasted from January 1918 to December 1920 **infecting nearly 500 million and killing between 50 - 100**

million people around the world. By comparison, 21 million people were killed in the war. The disease spread quickly in military camps where soldiers were living in close quarters. This is the same pandemic that kills Nathan in the book. Of the 1,032 Mainers who died during the war, over half died of the flu. Like other Americans, Mainers noticed that the flu seemed to be just as dangerous as the fighting.

- a. Suggested images to help illustrate the flu epidemic from Maine Memory Network:
 - i. [News office storefront, Portland, ca. 1918](#)
 - ii. [Sumner Cobb writes from Camp Taylor, Louisville, Kentucky, 1918](#)

7. Instruct students that they are going to **imagine that they are someone living in Maine in 1918 who has a loved one in the armed services during the war and that they are going to write that person a letter.** If it helps, they can pretend to be Millie writing a response to Nathan's letter, or a they can pretend to be someone in Cobb family writing a response to Sumner or Herbert. Before students begin writing, ask them **brainstorm what they have already learned about World War I, the flu epidemic, life in early 20th century Maine (including the trolley system) that they could talk about in the letter.** Record the list (on the classroom white board or somewhere similar just as visible and accessible) so students can refer back to it as they craft their letter. If students decide to respond to a specific letter, ask them to think about what they could respond to that is addressed in that letter; for example, Nathan asks about the farm, Herbert about rumors of peace.

8. Allow students time to draft their letter. **As students finish their initial draft, ask them to partner with another student to peer review and edit each other's letters.** When peer reviews are complete, students should begin working a final draft that will be collected and assessed. Instruct students to refer to the **Rubric** (see below) for how the letter will be assessed.

9. When final drafts are complete you can ask if any student would like to share parts of their response. You can also share the **fate of the Cobb brothers.** Herbert and Sumner were actually 2 of 3 brothers who served in the war. Herbert and the third brother, William, both served overseas while Sumner remained stationed stateside in training camps. The letter from Herbert was his last letter home; it was addressed to his mother and is dated October 7, 1918, six days before his death on October 14, and tragically just one month short of the armistice on November 11. Herbert was serving as a Lieutenant in the 103rd U.S. Infantry when he was killed. He died when a shell crashed into the shack where he was sleeping on the front lines in Briulles-sur-Meuse, France. Sumner and William both survived the war.
 - a. Suggested images to help illustrate the story of the Cobb brothers from Maine Memory Network:
 - i. [University of Maine Cadet band, Orono, ca. 1916](#)
 - ii. [William Cobb in uniform, Portland, ca. 1915](#)
 - iii. [William Cobb's ticket home from France, ca. 1919](#)
 - iv. [Certificate of honorable death for Herbert Cobb issued at Washington D.C., 1919](#)
 - v. [Herbert Cobb's gravestone, France, ca. 1919](#)

10. Conclusion: Ask students to consider, ***What do you think letters meant to families/loved ones who were apart during World War I and the flu epidemic? Why are these letters important primary sources today?***

Extension Activities:

1. Have students to create a classroom exhibit about WWI as seen/told through the story of the Cobb brothers using images from Maine Memory Network.
2. The disease of the flu pandemic of 1918-20 is often referred to as the “Spanish flu”; ask students to do some research and see if they can why it was given that name. Hint: the disease is not believed to originated in Spain.

Additional Recommended Resources:

Maine Memory Network articles, exhibits, and slideshows:

[The Spanish Flu](#)

[World War I and the Maine Experience](#)

[The Great War and Armistice Day](#)

[Women, War, and the Homefront](#)

Smithsonian:

[World War I](#)

Library of Congress:

[Primary Source Set - World War I](#)

[World War I: What Are We Fighting For Over There?](#)

The National World War I Museum and Memorial

[Educators & Students](#)

BBC

[World War One](#)

World War I Letter Rubric

Standard	4 – exceeds standard	3 – standard met	2 – approaching standard	1 – does not yet meet standard
Research	Successfully used Maine Memory Network, <i>TR</i> , <i>Millie...</i> text, and other recommended sources to find accurate and appropriate information and navigates within the database easily without assistance.	Successfully used Maine Memory Network, <i>TR</i> , <i>Millie...</i> text, and other recommended sources as needed to find accurate and appropriate information.	Occasionally used most of the appropriate resources to find information.	Did not utilize any appropriate sources to find information.
Content	Information is accurate and clearly relates to the main topic and includes many supporting details and/or examples.	Information is accurate and relates to the main topic, supported with at least 1-2 supporting details/facts and/or examples.	Information is mostly accurate and mostly relates to the main topic. Few details/facts and/or examples are given.	Information is inaccurate and/or has little or nothing to do with the main topic.
Ideas	Ideas were relevant and expressed in a clear and organized fashion. It was easy to figure out what the letter was about.	Ideas were mostly relevant and expressed in a clear manner and organized manner.	Ideas were somewhat organized or irrelevant and/or were not very clear. It took more than one reading to figure out what the letter was about.	The letter seemed to be a collection of unrelated sentences. It was very difficult to figure out what the letter was about.
Spelling, Grammar, Mechanics	Writer makes no errors in spelling, grammar, or mechanics.	Writer makes only 1 or 2 errors in spelling, grammar, or mechanics.	Writer makes several errors in spelling, grammar, or mechanics.	Writer makes many errors in spelling, grammar, or mechanics.

total: _____

Maine Learning Results for Social Studies (2019):

Social Studies, Grades 6-8 – History: Students draw on concepts and processes using primary and secondary sources from history to develop historical perspective and understand issues of continuity and change in the community, Maine, the United States, and world.

- **History 1:** Students understand major eras, major enduring themes, and historic influences in the history of Maine, the United States, and various regions of the world by:
(F1) Explaining that history includes the study of past human experience based on available evidence from a variety of primary and secondary sources; and explaining how history can help one better understand and make informed decisions about the present and future. **(F2)** Identifying major historical eras, major enduring themes, turning points, events, consequences, and people in the history of Maine, the United States, and various regions of the world. **(D1)** Analyzing interpretations of historical events that are based on different perspectives and evidence from primary and secondary sources. **(D2)** Analyzing major historical eras, major enduring themes, turning points, events, consequences, and people in the history of Maine, the United States, and various regions of the world.

Common Core State Standards: English Language Arts Standards » History/Social Studies » Grade 6-8:

Key Ideas and Details:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.1

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.10

By the end of grade 8, read and comprehend history/social studies texts in the grades 6-8 text complexity band independently and proficiently.