



Unit: Women

Lesson 3.2: The Sanitary Commission

Aim: To learn about women's fundraising efforts during the Civil War era.

Objective: Students participate in a shared reading about the Sanitary Commission and analyze a political cartoon about women's contributions to the Sanitary Fair.

Materials:

1. Shared reading on overhead transparency
2. *Harper's Weekly* cartoon (multiple copies for groups)
<http://www.brooklynpubliclibrary.org/civilwar/cwdoc068.html>
3. "Reading a Primary Source Document" handout
4. Optional: Sanitary Fair illustrations
<http://www.brooklynpubliclibrary.org/civilwar/cwdoc064.html>,
<http://www.brooklynpubliclibrary.org/civilwar/cwdoc065.html>

Procedure:

1. Introduce the topic with the following questions: Has anyone ever gone to a country fair, World's Fair, or even a school or church fair? What sort of food was available? How much did things cost? What kinds of activities were there?
2. Tell the class that they are about to participate in a shared reading lesson about the Sanitary Commission. Teacher models reading.

A note about shared reading: During a shared reading session, the whole class is on the same "page"—everyone's attention is focused on the same overhead transparency. The teacher models the initial reading in several ways. In addition to simply reading the passage aloud, slowly and clearly, he or she reveals thoughts and reading strategies for the group. Be it visualizing, making connections, or noticing new or interesting vocabulary, these thoughts are shared so that students see and understand what goes on in the mind of a good reader.

3. Class reads aloud together.
4. In pairs, students write several questions about the reading. Share with class or trade with another set of partners and answer.

5. Explain to small groups that they will now receive a copy of a historical political cartoon* about the role of women in the Sanitary Fairs. Groups complete “Reading a Primary Source Document” handout.

* Political cartoons use illustration to express opinions about events and people in the news. Benjamin Franklin is credited with creating the first political cartoon in America. It depicted a severed snake representing the divided colonies with the words “Join, or Die.” The cartoon was printed in newspapers everywhere, inspiring unity as well as contributing to the Revolutionary spirit. During the Civil War era, Thomas Nast’s political cartoons in *Harper’s Weekly* created quite a stir. He was known particularly for his strong opinions about Boss Tweed, a controversial figure in New York history.

A precursor to the Red Cross and USO*, the Sanitary Commission was established in 1861. Though men were paid to head and run the organization, most of its work was accomplished by the tens of thousands of women volunteers who collected food, clothing, and medical supplies for the Union. These women also served as volunteer nurses in army camps and hospitals and raised money through the Sanitary Fairs. These were social events which combined entertainment and education with philanthropy.

The highly successful fair of 1864 featured a two-story restaurant, Knickerbocker Hall, which served green turtle soup for 35 cents a bowl, brook trout for 50 cents a serving, and striped bass for a mere 20 cents. There was also a Hall of Manufacturers, a replica of a colonial New England kitchen, a Museum of Arts, Relics, and Curiosities, and a mirrored optical illusion called The Skating Pond. The mirrors appeared to create an ice pond filled with fashionably dressed skaters. Though the Commission hoped to raise \$100,000, this sensational success brought in \$400,000 before it was over.

*United Service Organizations.

Reading a Primary Source Document

1. Identify the document type. (Newspaper article, letter, map, advertisement, diary entry, photograph, illustration, cartoon, etc.)
2. Identify the date of the document. (When was the document created? How do you know?)
3. Identify the author or creator. (Who created the document? What do you know about him or her?)
4. Identify the audience. (What is the purpose of the document? Who was it written or created for?)
5. List 2-3 things the document tells you about life in Brooklyn or New York City during this period.
6. List 2-3 questions you have about the document. What would you ask its creator if he or she were alive today?