Civil War Fortifications on the Cumberland and Tennessee Rivers

Teachers, please use this as a classroom lesson plan or pre-visit material for class field trip to Fort Donelson NB, Dover, TN

This lesson plan meets National Social Studies Standards

- **Culture**
- **People, Places, & Environment**
- **Power, Authority, & Governance**

TN Social Studies Standards

- **Expansion & Division of the Nation**
- **The Civil War**

National Math Standards, 6-8 and National Standards for Geography, 6-8

Background Information: Fort Donelson (as well as Forts Henry and Heiman) were built on the Cumberland and Tennessee Rivers by the Confederate Army for the defense of the river and territory in Middle Tennessee. Better defensive positions were in Kentucky; however, Confederate commanders sought to respect Kentucky's position of "neutrality" while simultaneously protecting rivers and the few railroads that laterally crisscrossed Tennessee. The rivers were strategically important for both Union and Confederate armies—allowing the movement of men, materiel, and supplies quickly from one area to another. Major river cities included Cairo, Illinois, Louisville, KY, Paducah, KY, Clarksville, TN, and Nashville, TN (site of a large Confederate supply depot).

Soldiers and slaves began working on these forts in the autumn of 1861, eventually adding three miles of earthworks around Fort Donelson and the city of Dover to offer further protection for soldiers. All three forts are earthen, constructed by cutting and stacking large trees, then piling dirt on top of the trees. The fort at Dover was 15-acres in size, with earthen walls 10-12 ft. in height on the outside. Fort Donelson is a star fortification because it has salient and returning angles; the fort does not simply have a square/straight wall or redoubt. The returning/salient angles protect military forces from enfilading or crossing enemy fire (see glossary of terms).

Only Fort Donelson has been protected and preserved by the federal government. Fort Donelson National Battlefield became a national park in 1928. Over 1,300 acres in both Kentucky and Tennessee are now protected by the National Park Service. Fort Henry was flooded by the Tennessee River in the 1940s when the Tennessee Valley Authority built a series of dams on the river. Portions of Fort Heiman are still owned by private individuals or families.

Objectives:

1. To help students identify Forts Henry and Donelson (polygonal shapes, understand Civil War terminology, and locations on a map);
2. To help students understand the importance of the rivers for the Union and Confederate armies; and,
3. To encourage thoughts about historic preservation and protection of the resources.

Supplementary materials: Park map of Forts Henry and Donelson (available at www.nps.gov/fodo), and other historic images of Fort Donelson, see the Tennessee State Library & Archives virtual repository:

https://teva.contentdm.oclc.org/customizations/global/pages/index.html

Method:

1. Ask students to review park information and park brochure on the website (www.nps.gov/fodo) to become familiar with the historic forts and their locations. *Please use the park map for the math activities listed below.*
2. Review vocabulary terms: abatis, batteries, breastwork or earthwork, rifle pits, revetment, star fortification, redoubt, enfilade or enfilading fire, salient angle & returning angle. (access this information at http://civilwarfortifications.com or use the vocabulary terms on our website, www.cr.nps.gov/hps/hli/currents/earthworks/glossary.htm)

3. Ask students to read the background material (or teachers might explain the information to students). Answer the following questions:

    1. **How might Confederates have defended the river forts better if the fort(s) were located in Kentucky?**

    2. **Why were the forts built on rivers?**
        - **a. To protect and defend Tennessee from Union invasion?**
        - **b. To protect Kentucky from Union invasion?**
        - **c. To provide work for Tennessee volunteers?**

3. **List the major cities located on the Cumberland and Tennessee Rivers.**

4. **Explain the advantages of an earthen fort. Use details from the background information to explain your answer.**

5. **Using vocabulary terms and diagrams, what type of shape is Fort Donelson? Draw the shape of the fort. Is this shape a polygon? How many sides or angles?**

6. **Fort Donelson is a 15-acre fort. To understand its size and how much area would have to be protected, determine how many football fields would fit inside the fort.**
   1 acre = 4,840 sq. yards, 15 acres X 4,840
   Football field = 120 yds. X 53 ½ yds.

   convert to ft., 120 yds. X 3 ft/yd = 360 ft
   53.3 yds. X 3 ft/yd = 159.9 ft
   Area of football field = 360 X 159.9 = 57564 sq. ft.

7. **How have the fort and its environment changed since the 1860s? If this area had been used as farmland, do you think the fort would still exist? Why or why not?**
   Today, the NPS brochure illustrates the park boundaries in green. It illustrates that the park has 496 acres of forested lands with 62 manicured acres. Make a pie chart to display this information.
   (You'll notice a smaller, lighter shaded green in the lower right corner. The total park acreage is now over 1,300 acres.)

References

http://civilwarfortifications.com

http://www.cr.nps.gov/hps/hli/currents/earthworks/glossary.htm
https://www.archives.gov/research/cartographic/civil-war
https://sos.tn.gov/products/tsla/tennessee-civil-war-gis-interactive-map

https://teva.contentdm.oclc.org/customizations/global/pages/collections/maps/maps.html

Mahan, D.H. *A Complete Treatise on Field Fortification*. New York: Greenwood Press reprint, 1968.

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