

Role play: Living through the American Civil War and Reconstruction

Horace Greeley

Born in New Hampshire in 1811 you moved to New York when you were twenty and became a journalist. In 1841 you set up and became editor of the *New York Tribune*. You take a strong moral tone on various issues such as alcohol, gambling, capital punishment and slavery.

Mary Henderson Eastman

You are a best-selling author who became famous with your army officer husband for recording the lives of the North American Indians. You were born in 1818 to an elite planter family in Virginia but since 1849 have lived in Washington. In 1852, you published 'Aunt Phillis's Cabin', your answer to Harriet Beecher Stowe's 'Uncle Tom's Cabin'.

James Battle Avirett

Born in 1835, you've grown up on your family's Avirett-Stephens Plantation in North Carolina which, with 25,000 acres and 125 slaves, is the largest turpentine producer in the state. After attending University you became a church minister in the Episcopal Church in Alabama.

Thomas Johnson

You are a slave owned by the Brent family on their plantation in Virginia. Although there is no formal record of your birth, your mother says that it was in 1836. While still young, your father tried to buy the family's freedom but the Brent family, known for their cruelty, refused.

Salmon Chase

Born in 1808 in New Hampshire, you became a lawyer in Cincinnati where you defended many re-captured slaves, providing them with free legal advice. Elected to the U.S. Senate in 1842 you were seen as the leader of the anti-slavery group. In 1855 you were elected Governor of the state of Ohio.

William Wells Brown

You are a house slave born in 1814 in Lexington, Kentucky. Your father was a white plantation owner but your mother was a black slave. As a house slave you are much better treated than the field workers, being better fed, housed and clothed. As a trusted house slave you have been promised your freedom when your master dies.

Harriet Beecher Stowe

You are the world famous author of the book 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' which you began publishing as a serial in the anti-slavery journal, 'The National Era', in 1851. You were born in Connecticut in 1811, and since 1834 have been married to Calvin Stowe, a clergyman and biblical scholar.

Sallie Ward

You are a southern belle and socialite born in Kentucky in 1827. You are the spoilt daughter of Colonel Robert Johnson Ward, a very wealthy plantation owner, lawyer and Speaker of the Kentucky Assembly. You are known for your extravagance and attendance at lavish society balls.

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Josiah Gorgas

Born in 1818 in Pennsylvania you are a captain in the United States Army. Having served in the north you have now been posted to Virginia where you have married the daughter of the governor of Alabama. Being in charge of ordnance, you have close links to the leading iron and steel companies in the southern states.

Mary Meachum

You are a free negro because although you were born a slave in Kentucky in 1801, your husband who is also an ex-slave, bought your freedom with money he had earned as a carpenter. With your husband you have set up a school for free and enslaved black people.

Dr. Joseph Copes

You are a commission merchant in New Orleans who buys cotton, sugar and other plantation goods for your clients who are usually large manufacturing businesses, often in the northern states of America or England. You spend several months each year travelling around the northern states on business.

Stephen Duncan

Born in Pennsylvania in 1787 you are a major cotton and sugar plantation owner in Mississippi. Your plantations, with over 1,000 slaves, make \$150,000 every year. In the 1830s you co-founded the Mississippi Colonization Society which aimed to relocate (repatriate) free blacks and newly freed slaves to the colony of Liberia in Africa.

Christopher Memminger

Born in Germany, you immigrated to South Carolina in 1807 and became a successful lawyer. You entered state politics becoming head of the finance committee for twenty years. Although leading a commission to counter the attacks of abolitionists, you are seen as a moderate politician.

Stephen Douglas

You are a politician from Illinois nicknamed the 'Little Giant' because although only short, you are a forceful and dominant figure in politics. You are a leading supporter of democracy, and believe in popular sovereignty: that the majority of citizens should decide controversial issues such as slavery and territorial expansion.

Teaching notes

These activities are designed to help students understand how people reacted to the events and issues that played out before and after the American Civil War.

All the characters are real people from the time and could be researched further by students to give them more background information and also allow them to see how they did react to events.

Task suggestions:

1. Give each student a different card and ask them how as their character, they would think about/react to:
 - slavery
 - Nat Turner`s Rebellion
 - the Kansas-Nebraska Act
 - John Brown`s Raid
 - the election of Abraham Lincoln as President
 - the secession of the Confederate States
 - the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863
 - the surrender of the Confederacy
 - the assassination of Abraham Lincoln
 - Reconstruction of the south (military occupation/civil rights legislation)
 - the Black Codes/Ku Klux Klan/White Leagues
 - the end of Reconstruction in 1877.

Students should explain why their character would hold their views.

As this will need some background knowledge, the activity could be used as a consolidation, plenary or revision task at the end of their work on the American Civil War. Alternatively it could be used as an ongoing activity. Students would be given a character card at the start of the unit which they would keep throughout. At appropriate points through the unit they would be asked for their reaction to particular events.

2. Students could work in groups to share their views on the events that surrounded the American Civil War. Discussion points could include:
 - What factors affected a character`s attitudes? How important were race, class, gender and age?
 - Was it more difficult to decide on the views of some characters than others? If so, why was this?
 - Did any characters change their views as events unfolded? If so, why was this?