Northern Racism and the New York City Draft Riot

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Grade Level: Middle/High
Duration of lesson: 1-2 periods

Overview:

School textbooks usually give students an overview of Southern racial attitudes during the Civil War era, but rarely do they explore the complex racial relations of the North in the same period. History tells us that abolitionists formed only a tiny minority of the Northern population, and in fact there were Whites who owned slaves in the Northern states during the Civil War. This lesson on the New York City Draft Riots of 1863 introduces students to Northern views and fears at the time. Many workers in New York did not wish to serve in a war that would free African-Americans. For, once free, those former slaves would compete with them for jobs in the North at lower wages. So in July of 1863, a mob, angered by the conscription provisions (which favored the rich over the poor), descended upon the newly opened draft offices, destroyed over a million dollars-worth of property, and killed eleven African Americans. Clearly, the Union was not unified by Lincoln's wartime policies. Using the source materials, students will learn how to connect social, economic, and political forces in order to explain the past. They will also discover the variety of class-based opinions during the war, which made Lincoln's hold on power more tenuous than commonly thought.

Related National History Standards:
Content Standards:
Era 5: Civil War and Reconstruction (1585-1763)
    Standard 2: The course and character of the Civil War and its effects on the American people

Historical Thinking Standards:
Standard 2: Historical Comprehension
    A. Reconstruct the literal meaning of a historical passage.
    B. Identify the central question(s) the historical narrative addresses.
    D. Evidence historical perspectives.
Standard 3: Historical Analysis and Interpretation
    B. Compare and contrast differing sets of ideas, values, personalities, behaviors, and institutions.
    C. Differentiate between historical facts and historical interpretations.
    D. Consider multiple perspectives.
E. Analyze cause-and-effect relationships and multiple causation, including the importance of the individual, the influence of ideas, and the role of chance.

Lesson Objectives

- Students will analyze primary source illustrations and personal accounts of the New York City Draft riots
- Students will draw conclusions about the existence and power of Northern racism toward African Americans

Topic Background

George Templeton Strong began Monday, July 13, 1863, as any normal business day. He had plans to visit the Sanitary Commission Office and endorse various business checks. In his travels through New York City, Mr. Strong acquired news of a growing disturbance in the upper part of the city. Monday progressed as the disturbance grew into an angry mob of “perhaps five hundred, certainly less than one thousand of the lowest Irish day laborers.”

This mob ignited an event in Nation’s history known as the New York City Draft Riots of 1863. These riots occurred in the middle of July in 1863. During these riots, the city of New York sustained a great amount of death and destruction. The attempt of the federal government to enforce the Conscription Act of 1863 ignited these riots. However, the riots resulted from a larger discontent in the city growing out of four contributing factors. These factors include Irish Catholic white discontent, Confederate/Copperhead sympathy, resentment toward Conscription and federal Republican power, and white lower class racism. This study will focus on the emergence of racism as a motivating factor in the various actions and attacks of the mob in these tumultuous three days. In process, one can view the draft riots as a physical manifestation of a pervasive racism in the North during the Civil War.

During the Civil War, one could not describe New York City as the most enthusiastic supporter of the Republican War effort. In fact, New York City appeared to be the home of a significant population and government opposed to Lincoln and the war effort. New York City was a center of the Democratic Party in the North. The Democratic Party had worked throughout the course of the war to discredit the war policies of the Lincoln administration. As a result, any effort to enforce a law that would extend the influence and power of the federal government into the lives of New Yorkers would encounter a large amount of opposition. The Conscription Act of 1863 commanded the dubious role of

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following three other major federal laws. These laws included the income tax, legal tender, and the Emancipation Proclamation. As a result, the Conscription Act of 1863 appeared as another major step toward the complete centralization of power for Lincoln’s government.  

The United States Government saw the Conscription Act of 1863 as a necessity. Since the beginning of the war, volunteer numbers in the North had declined steadily through 1863. The United States government needed some way to replenish their ranks. Enacted on March 3, 1863, the Draft called on all men between the ages of 20 and 45 to enroll for the draft. This was not a mass mobilization of all the eligible men. It was a process of selective service. The draft would randomly select eligible men to serve in the army. However, the various provisions of the draft ignited the most protest. On one hand, the act allowed those chosen in the draft an option to escape service. If one could provide a suitable replacement or produce $300 dollars, that person could escape service in the United States Army. In 1863, three hundred dollars amounted to half a year’s salary. As a result, many began to describe the Civil War as “a rich man’s war and a poor man’s fight.” In addition, the law applied only to “citizens” of the United States. Consequently, the law did not subject African Americans to service. In 1862, Lincoln had issued his preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. With that action, Lincoln helped refocus the war as one of preservation of the Union but also the liberation of African slaves. The poor white population of New York City did not want to fight in a war that would liberate a population who could now compete for the jobs in New York or any other Northern City. In the end, many New Yorkers could not find the motivation to volunteer to fight in the war much less accept a forced position in the army.

Despite the growing dissatisfaction with the Conscription Act of 1863, the Federal government continued it plans to enact the draft during July in New York City. The United States government did not plan security for the draft. In the weeks before the draft some officials described the city as “defenseless” and vulnerable to attack. On June 30, 1863 Mayor George Opdyke wrote to Governor Horatio Seymour expressing a warning that “the militia force of this city must be strengthened.” Those troops available in the city had not focused on issues of protection. In the summer of 1863, the city used the troops on the waterfront to unload supplies because the regular dock workers were on strike. This situation worsened on July 3, 1863 as a result of General Robert E. Lee’s invasion of the Pennsylvania and the Battle of Gettysburg. The United States Army demanded that New York City send two companies and artillery for New York’s harbor post to the battle in Pennsylvania. Consequently, New York City

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4 Bernsten, 8.
5 Phillip Shaw Paludan, *A People’s Contest: The Union and Civil War, 1861-1865 2nd Ed.* (University Press of Kansas), 190.
6 Ibid, 200-201.
7 Bernstein, 9.
8 Hauptman, 379.
9 George Opdyke, *Official Documents, Addresses, Etc. of George Opdyke, Mayor of New York, During the Years 1862 and 1863* (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1866), 259
10 Hauptman, 379.
was not prepared for any large scale social or political disturbance that could arise from the Conscription Act of 1863.

On July 11, 1863, the United States Government held the first draft in New York City. The government officials performed the draft without any violence. As a result, the government planned another drawing on Monday July 13, 1863. Many laborers in the city developed the riot scheme on Sunday July 12, 1863. When the government officials attempted to open the draft offices on Monday, the crowd, which had gathered, erupted into violence that would grow and last on the following days and nights. During this time, various groups of the mob cut telegraph lines and wrecked streetcars. In addition, they attacked both public and private property especially the homes and businesses owned by wealthy New Yorkers, leading Republicans, and African Americans.\(^{11}\) Initially, the crowd targeted “$300" men and government officials. Eventually, the crowd’s main victim became African Americans in the city “for no offence but that of Nigritude.”\(^{12}\) By the end of the Draft Riots, the mob caused unprecedented destruction, death, and injury, including 119 people killed, 300 people wounded or injured. Many of these people include those killed or injured while rioting themselves. In terms of property, the mob destroyed more than $1.5 million. The most disturbing number relates to African Americans. During the riots, the mob murdered at least 11 African American while attacking and injuring numerous others.\(^{13}\)

For some historians, the New York Draft Riot of 1863 was “undoubtedly the most important single event in the history of the free Negroes in New York City.”\(^{14}\) Although the Draft Riot grew out of a variety factors, the mob focused their greatest hatred and wrath on the African American population in New York. During the riot, the mob hunted down black men and women in the streets and murdered them when they caught them.\(^{15}\) There were numerous examples of the carnage that befell the African American population. The mob attacked and killed one young man on the second day while he was attempting to defend his aging mother. The riots also claimed the life of a 3 day old baby when one rioter threw the baby out of a window into the street.\(^{16}\) Without provocation, one man, Charles Johnson, was seized by a group of rioters who slit his throat and threw him in the harbor. Charles Johnson eventually gained consciousness and swam to safety.\(^{17}\) As previously mentioned, the mob killed at least 11 African Americans. That number could have been higher if many African Americans were not able to barely escape with their lives. In the end, the mob’s largest racial act occurred at the Colored Orphan Asylum on the afternoon of the first day. At the Asylum, the mob destroyed all of the furniture, torched the building, and uprooting of all the trees, shrubbery, and fences. It seemed as though the

\(^{11}\) Ibid, 372.
\(^{12}\) Strong, 239.
\(^{13}\) Hauptman, 373.
\(^{15}\) Paludan, 190.
\(^{16}\) Hirsch, 451.
crowd had a “desire to not merely destroy but to wipe clean the tangible evidence of a black presence.” In the end, Bernstein describes the acts of the mob as suggesting “a far more extreme, city-wide campaign to erase the post emancipation black community.”

The Draft Riots did not start solely as a result of the racist attitudes of White citizens in New York City. This was the combination of a variety of factors that had developed over decades of political, social, and economic conflict. However, the actions of the mob during the riot represent something very significant. It represents the existence of a very racist population not only in New York City but throughout the North. This is especially true in the various Democratic strongholds in Northern cities. It is important to realize that racism was a pervasive national problem in the Union as well as the Confederacy.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY


A book of primary sources concerning the New York City draft riot of 1863. Contains first hand accounts of individuals who were the victims of the draft riots in addition to “The Report of the Committee of Merchants for the Relief of Colored People suffering from the Late Riots in the City of New York.”


This book examines the draft riots of July 1863 from the social, political, and economic roots of New York’s discontent. Through this lens, Bernstein attempts to give the riots a national scope and its ramification on the political atmosphere of the North.

Cook, Adrian. The armies of the streets; the New York City draft riots of 1863. Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1974.

Cook spends a majority of his book describing the major points, actions, and events of the New York City Draft Riots. In addition, Cook describes the Draft Riot within the larger scope of riots in New York City, and how they acted as the tool of the various gangs and groups who jockeyed for political, social, and economic power in New York.


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18 Bernstein, 27.
19 Ibid, 5.
Hauptman spends the majority of his article attempting to defend the name and actions of John E. Wool prior to and during the draft riots of New York City. It works for my topic because it gives great information on the military preparedness and social/political atmosphere of the city prior to the riots.


Despite the fact that this is a much older article, it spends a good amount of time describing the draft riots as “undoubtedly the most important single event in the history of the free Negroes in New York City” (448).


As you can tell from the title, these are the official papers of New York City’s mayor during the riots. In these papers, Mayor Opdyke relates his own official account of the events of the Draft Riots of 1863.


Paludan spends a short section of the book summarizing the roots, events, and aftermath of the draft riots of 1863 in New York City.


George Templeton Strong was one of the most influential and visible members of New York City in 1863. He began to write his diary in 1835, and he continued to write the book until his death. As a resident of the city in July, 1863, Strong writes extensively on his reactions and opinions on the riots in his city.

Vocabulary

Conscription: the forced enrollment of specific citizens for military service

Draft: modern day term for Conscription

Oath of intention: promise of a future action (more specifically for the lesson--to become a United States Citizen)

Constitute: to become a member (of the United States military)
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Liable: responsible

Enact: to make and enforce a specific law or statute

Procuration: to obtain (a substitute for the Draft)

Deserter: a member of the military who leaves the military without specific approval from the military

Court-Martial: a trial initiated and performed by the military on an individual who has broken a military rule or law

**Teaching Procedures**

1. Project Resource Sheet #1, “What do you see?” on the overhead as the students enter the room. Ask the students to summarize what they see on the screen. Discuss their reactions to the illustration.

As the discussion ends, distribute Resource Sheet #1 have the students complete the questions. Following the class’ completion of the worksheet, conduct a discussion on the three questions from the worksheet. The answers to these questions will probably reveal that many students believe that this is happening in the South, and that the African American was either a runaway slave or “criminal.”

Reveal the real location and year of the illustration (the North aka New York City, 1863). Ask the students:

What may have caused this action by the mob? **Relate to the students that it will be their job to discover the source of the violence and if it is racially motivated or random.**

2. Before the students can discover the true motivation for the action depicted in the illustration, you must develop an understanding of conscription with the students. As a result, you will need to distribute Resource Sheet #2, “What really caused this?” Have the students complete the QUADRANT CARD (Part I of the document). If you believe that your students do not have prior knowledge of the word conscription, then fill in DRAFT in the meaningful association section.

Ask the students the following questions:

Where is a draft used in modern society most often? (sports)

If a person is drafted to the Ravens, can they play for the Steelers? (insert any sports team you would like)

Who decides what team a player joins? (the teams)
Following the discussion, allow the students to fill out the remaining two quadrants (synonym and antonym).

3. Read-aloud: Part II (Conscription Act of 1863). Ask the students:

   **According to this paragraph, why do they need to force people into the army?**

   **Has the United States ever had to force people into the army? Why?**

   **Is this fair or unfair? Why?**

4. Have the students read the two excerpts from the Conscription Act of 1863 in pairs and answer the questions. Following the completion, discuss the answers:

   **Who is eligible?** able bodies male citizen f the United States

   **Who is not eligible?** African Americans because they are not citizens

   **What are the two ways that you can get out of joining the army?** 1. provide a substitute, 2. pay 300 dollars

   **After reading the two paragraphs for the rules of the Conscription Act of 1863, create a description of the typical individual who would enter the army through the draft.** white, poor, unskilled labor

5. Have the students return to individual work and have them complete the final question on the back of the “What really caused this?” document. Have the students turn this document into the teacher.

6. After the papers are collected, discuss briefly with the students why white people in the North may attack African Americans as a result of the Conscription act of 1863. Explain to them that a large scale riot occurred during July, 1863 in New York City.

7. Divide the students into groups. Distribute Resource Sheet #3, “Illustrations of the Draft Riots of 1863,” and Resource Sheet #4, “Draft Riot Narrative.” (PLEASE NOTE: the illustrations are not necessarily in an exact chronological order, but they follow the general flow of the riot). Be sure to remind them that they need to include information from all of the illustrations. Remind the groups that they will have to present their narratives.

8. Allow the groups to view the Illustrations and complete Resource Sheet #4. Be sure to continue to walk around the classroom as they complete the narrative. This narrative should be short descriptions of the events which they view in the illustrations presented to them.
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Allow the groups to present their narrative to the class. As they finish, be sure to ask the students why they focused on “whatever” they did.

9. Ask the students to return to their seats. Let the students know that they will learn the truth about the New York City Draft Riots. Hand out Resource Sheet #5, “Massacre of a Negro in Clarkson Street.”

Read the excerpt from Harper’s Weekly about the illustration from the motivation. Ask the students to reflect on how they answered in the motivation and narrative and compare their findings concerning the motivation and the narrative. Review the basic facts about the 1863 New York City Draft Riot.

10. As you discuss the basic facts from the riots, distribute Resource Sheet #6, “Exit Slip.” At the same time, project the political cartoon. Read the caption provided with the cartoon in the left column. Emphasize that this was produced following the draft riot. On their own, have the students analyze the cartoon and develop a new title for the cartoon. Have the students justify their title by completing the Brief Constructed Response.

This assessment should demonstrate a progression of knowledge from their initial interpretation of the motivation illustration to their new knowledge of the riot and reasoning for racial violence to the justification of their new title.

11. Potential extension activities include:

Have the students explore the many sections of www.virtualny.cuny.edu/riots/html. Have the students research the Draft Riots an incident by incident level. Allow the students to develop a new illustration based on the information found on one incident.

Have the students read the firsthand account of the draft riots by George Opdyke from his Official Documents, Addresses, Etc., George Opdyke, Mayor of the City of New York, During the Years 1862 and 1863. (reference bibliography). From the firsthand account, they will attempt to write a diary entry on the final day of the draft acting as George Opdyke.

Have the students view the draft riot scene from Gangs from New York. Based on their new knowledge, have the students evaluate the historical validity of the movie.

Have the students re-write the Conscription Act of 1863. Ask them to re-write the law in a manner that may prevented the Draft Riots of 1863. Then, reflecting on their current situation, ask them to develop a conscription act for
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the modern war in Iraq or evaluate the effectiveness of the Vietnam War Draft.

**Primary Source Annotation**

Harper’s Weekly Illustrations  
http://blackhistory.harpweek.com :

This site contains the actual stories of this very popular illustrated newspaper of the Civil War. It contains accounts and illustrations of the riots published in the August 1, 1863 edition of the paper.

Virtual New York City  
http://www.virtualny.cuny.edu/riots.html

Created by City University of New York, this site contains a wealth of information concerning New York City and its important historical events. Their New York City Draft Riot section is especially helpful. It contains a variety of information on the draft, a map of the major incidents in the draft, and a day by day interactive timeline of the riot. In addition, many of the images used in the lesson come from this site.

Conscription Act of 1863  
“An act for enrolling and calling out the national Forces, and for other Purposes,” Congressional Record. 37th Cong. 3d. Sess. Ch. 74,75. 1863. March 3, 1893.  
http://www.yale.edu/glc/archive/962.htm

This act is analyzed by students prior to viewing cartoons that depict the aftermath in New York City.
Resource Sheet #1

What Do You See?

Directions: View the following picture (which is also on the overhead) and answer the questions IN COMPLETE SENTENCES.

http://www.vny.cuny.edu/Search/search_res_image.php?id=262

1. What are three actions/ideas that you identified viewing this image?

2. Why do you think that this is happening?

3. In which area of the United States do you think that this is most likely to occur during the Civil War? Why?
Resource Sheet #2

What Really Caused This?

Part I: VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT:

QUADRANT CARD:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WORD</th>
<th>SYNONYM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conscription</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

MEANINGFUL ASSOCIATION | ANTONYM |

Part II: CONSCRIPTION ACT OF 1863:

“An act for enrolling and calling out the national Forces, and for other Purposes,” Congressional Record. 37th Cong. 3d Sess. Ch. 74, 75. 1863. March 3, 1863.

In 1863, the Union Army was in need for soldiers. The Army consisted of volunteers who signed up in 1861. As a result, their three-year commitment to the army was coming to an end. In addition, the number of volunteers had steadily dropped since the beginning of the war. As a result, the United States Government created the Conscription Act of 1863, which would force young men to fight for the Union Army if chosen.

YOUR TASK:

1. Read the excerpts from the Conscription Act of 1863.
2. Answer the questions provided in order to analyze the rules of the draft to see why some people might have thought the draft to be unfair.

2nd Paragraph:

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That all able-bodies male citizens of the United States, and persons of foreign birth who shall have declared on oath their intention to become citizens under and in pursuance of the laws thereof, between the ages of twenty and forty-five years, except as hereinafter excepted, are hereby declared to constitute the national forces, and shall be liable to perform military duty in the service of the United States when called out by the President for that purpose.

1. Who is eligible for the draft?
2. Who is not eligible for the draft?

SEC. 13.

And be it further enacted, That any person drafted and notified to appear as aforesaid, may, on or before the day fixed for his appearance, furnish an acceptable substitute to take his place in the draft; or he may pay to such person as the Secretary of War may authorize to receive it, such sum, not exceeding three hundred dollars, as the Secretary may determine, for the procuration of such substitute; which sum shall be fixed at a uniform rate by a general order made at the time of ordering a draft for any state or territory; and thereupon such person so furnishing the substitute, or paying the money, shall be discharged from further liability under that draft. And any person failing to report after due service of notice, as herein prescribed, without furnishing a substitute, or paying the required sum therefor, shall be deemed a deserter, and shall be arrested by the provost-marshal and sent to the nearest military post for trial by court-martial, unless, upon proper showing that he is not liable to do military duty, the board of enrolment shall relive him from the draft.

1. Scenario: It is 1863, and you are drafted into the Union Army. What are the two ways that you can get out of joining the army?

2. After reading the two paragraphs for the rules of the Conscription Act of 1863, create a description of the typical individual who would enter the army through the draft.

3. The Conscription Act of 1863 followed the issue of the Emancipation Proclamation of 1862. With these two laws occurring about the same time, explain why the Conscription Act of 1863 would ignite racially motivated violence in Northern Cities like New York. Use specific evidence to support your answer.
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Resource Sheet #3

Illustrations of the Draft Riots of 1863

Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper. August 1, 1863.  
http://www.vny.cuny.edu/Search/search_res_image.php?id=275

Sketches of the Great Riots. E.B Treat. 1877.  
http://www.vny.cuny.edu/Search/search_res_image.php?id=283
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Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper. August 1, 1863.
http://www.vny.cuny.edu/Search/search_res_image.php?id=271

Harper's Weekly. August 1, 1863
http://www.vny.cuny.edu/Search/search_res_image.php?id=257
Educational materials were developed through the Teaching American History in Maryland Program, a partnership between Baltimore County Public Schools and the Center for History Education at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

Sketches of the Great Riots. E.B Treat. 1877.
http://www.vny.cuny.edu/Search/search_res_image.php?id=282

Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper. August 1, 1863
http://www.vny.cuny.edu/Search/search_res_image.php?id=274
Educational materials were developed through the Teaching American History in Maryland Program, a partnership between Baltimore County Public Schools and the Center for History Education at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

New York Illustrated News. August 1, 1863
http://www.vny.cuny.edu/Search/search_res_image.php?id=325
Resource Sheet #4

Draft Riot Narrative

BEFORE VIEWING:
1. What is a narrative?

2. What are some ideas that you would want to include in any narrative?

YOUR TASK:
1. View the four page packet of illustrations created in the month following the Draft Riot of 1863
2. Develop a two-three paragraph narrative describing the riot based on what you see.
Resource Sheet #5

Massacre of a Negro on Clarkson Street

| One of the first victims to the insane fury of the rioters was a negro cartman residing in Carmine Street. A mob of men and boys seized this unfortunate man on Monday evening, and having beaten him until he was in a state of insensibility, dragged him to Clarkson Street, and hung him from a branch of one of the trees that shade the sidewalk by St. John's Cemetery. The fiends did not stop here, however. Procuring long sticks, they tied rags and straw to the ends of them, and with these torches they danced round their victim, setting fire to his clothes, and burning him almost to a cinder. The remains of the wretched negro hung there till near daylight on Tuesday morning, when they were removed by the police. This atrocious murder was perpetrated within ten feet of consecrated ground, where the white headstones of the cemetery are seen gleaming through the wooden railing. |


Basic Facts About the 1863 New York City Draft Riot

1. Lasted 4 days (July 13, 1863 – July 15, 1863)
2. The mob numbered at its largest in the thousands of people
3. 119 people were killed (many of whom actually participate in the riot)
4. 11 African Americans were murdered
5. 300 civilians, soldiers, and police were wounded
6. $1.5 million in property damage
   - New York Tribune building and Brooks Brother’s stores attack
   - Provost marshal’s office and Colored Orphan Asylum burnt to the ground.
Resource Sheet #6

Exit Slip

To the right is a cartoon produced in the August 1, 1863 edition of Harper's Weekly. When it appeared in the magazine it had a very specific title to explain its purpose.

1. Your task to today is to create a new title for this cartoon based on your knowledge of the draft riot and its effect on African Americans.

1. What is your new title for the Harper's Weekly Illustration?

2. Explain why you think that this is an appropriate title for the cartoon. Use information to support your answer (relating to your new knowledge of the draft riot).