

## Veterans Legacy Program Curricular Materials

### World War I Epitaphs

**Grade(s):**

9, 10, 11, or 12

**Time (minutes):**

90 minutes

**Lesson Overview:**

Students will be using primary sources of soldiers that were either killed in action or died during World War I, creating a rough biography of the soldier, doing research on the soldier (where he was from, where did he die, if he died during a battle, which one, what was going on), all culminating in the student writing a biographical epitaph for the soldier.

**Relevant Social Studies Standards:**

SS.912.W.1.1 Use timelines to establish cause and effect relationships of historical events.

SS.912.W.1.3 Interpret and evaluate primary and secondary sources.

SS.912.W.7.2 Describe the changing nature of warfare during World War I.

SS.912.W.7.3 Summarize significant effects of World War I.

SS.912.A.1.1 Describe the importance of historiography, which includes how historical knowledge is obtained and transmitted, when interpreting events in history.

SS.912.A.1.2 Utilize a variety of primary and secondary sources to identify author, historical significance, audience, and authenticity to understand a historical period.

SS.912.A.4.5 Examine causes, course, and consequences of United States involvement in World War I.

LAFS.910.RH.1.1 Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.

LAFS.910.RH.1.2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source, provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

LAFS.910.WHST.3.9 Draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

**Required Materials:**

Computers with Internet connections

Projector to view PowerPoint

Primary source materials of different soldiers:

- [Rufus Ridgdill](#)
- [Luther Pilcher](#)

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- [Clyde Emerson](#)
- [John Watkins](#)
- [Willoughby Marks](#)
- [Samson Dodrill](#)
- [Will Todd](#)
- [Edward De Saussure](#)
- [Tellef Lindland](#)
- [Fred White](#)

\* Note: Additional Biographies are available on the [VLP Website](#).

### **Learning Objectives:**

Students will be taking primary sources and seeing how we can reconstruct a person's life through those documents. What information can a student infer about the soldier's life? What can we learn about the soldier, without having a conversation with the soldier or his family? Students will be learning how a historian takes primary sources and creates a timeline for a person's life in which they can then write a history of that person. Instead of having students write a biography of the soldier, they will be writing a detailed epitaph for the soldier's tombstone. Students will not only have to pull the information from primary sources to see what the soldier did before being drafted, but then what did he do during the war.

### **Special Vocabulary:**

Epitaph

### **Procedure:**

\*\*Note: Students should have already studied or be in the process of studying World War I and the outcome.

1. Introduction
  - a. Show PowerPoint
    - i. PowerPoint has funny epitaphs that are around.
    - ii. After looking at a couple of epitaphs, define what an epitaph is.
      1. Explain that epitaphs can be short and funny, like we just looked at, or they can be long and biographical, which was more common in the 16<sup>th</sup>/17<sup>th</sup> Centuries.
      2. Show a couple examples of the longer epitaphs.
    - iii. Have students pick their favorite fictional character and have them write a funny epitaph for the character. Share them.
2. Pass out copies of the primary sources from the Sampson Dodrill.

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- a. Give one primary source document to a pair of students or table group and have them figure out what the document is and what information they can get about the soldier from the actual document.

**\*\*Note:** There are only so many primary sources available, so if you have a large class, have them start in pairs and then have like documents come together to discuss what they think about the document. Once they have come to a consensus they are prepared to present their findings.

- b. Have students present what they have learned.
  - i. Using your white board, write up a timeline of the soldier's life. I usually try to call on students out of order so they can see how it all falls into place.
- c. Once you have a timeline in place, make sure you have the vital statistics down as well. So ask, do we know the names of his parents? Wife? Kids? Where was he born? Where was he living when he was drafted? Did he try to get out of the draft? Why? By asking the students

additional questions they see the person behind the paperwork and hopefully they realize that you can get quite a bit of information from a draft register or a census record.

3. Next step is to write an epitaph for the sample. Here's a possible one for you to use:
- 4.

PVT 1 Sampson Dodrill  
Born August 8, 1888  
Died September 28, 1918

Here is lies Sampson

A devoted son to John and Rebecca

A devoted brother to four younger brothers

He was a man that was born in West Virginia

But lived his life as a farmer and fruit picker in Florida

When he was drafted to the Great War

With much bravery, he fought honorably for the United States in France in the 314<sup>th</sup> Regiment

He died with honor on the battlefield of Meuse-Argonne

While he gave his life for his country, his sacrifice helped bring the war to close during this last main battle of the war.

May he rest in peace.

5. Now is the time to pass out the remaining primary sources available for use.
  - a. Have students create a timeline of the soldier's life
  - b. Then encourage students look up the specific battle information on the Internet.
  - c. Then have them write an epitaph for this soldier.

Note: I would use this as a pair activity. For an Honors or AP class, I would have the students working by themselves. Also, there are biographies available for use if you have students that need additional support.

6. Have students write their epitaphs on a plain white piece of paper, like it would show up in the cemetery. Students will also present their epitaphs to the class.



**U.S. Department  
of Veterans Affairs**

National Cemetery  
Administration



**Department  
of History**

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7. Extension activity – do a poll and see where did their soldiers die? Were most in the same battle? What did they learn about the battles?