For most teachers, the prospect of a student research day in the computer lab is enticing—and not only because we get a break. Despite the potential technical and logistical challenges, we understand that student-centered learning can invigorate a dragging unit, open new directions of inquiry, and allow for individualism within a regimented Advanced Placement (AP) curriculum. Student Web-based research on the Civil War holds great promise. The increasing digitization of archives and historical collections makes previously inaccessible sources available to even the most casually interested Civil War buff. The Internet truly can bridge geographic and socio-economic differences, allowing students in South Dakota to investigate mobilization of a Virginia militia with the same ease as students in Richmond within walking distance of the Library of Virginia.

Yet left to their own devices, what typically happens when students begin their “research?” They sit in front of their computers, visit Google, type in “causes of the civil war” (without the quotation marks), and then stare blankly at the list of 37,000,000 hits spit out in .21 seconds. They click on the very first hit, usually sponsored by a for-profit organization whose website marks), and then stare blankly at the list of 37,000,000 hits spit out in .21 seconds. They click on the very first hit, usually sponsored by a for-profit organization whose website, photos, essays (both scholarly and student-written, available for a price)—many of them reflecting the bias of bloggers who seem unable to disentangle their own reverence for their ancestors from actual historical experiences. Some sites feature primary documents, often excerpted, without providing adequate information to allow readers to analyze for themselves how reliable or typical those sources are. And today’s students are ill-equipped to assess these sites’ usefulness for an academic reconstruction of soldiers’ and civilians’ experiences in mobilizing for the Civil War. Despite their technological sophistication, students tend to be limited at locating and evaluating Internet sites. The young person’s approach to Internet research has a post-modern tinge—if it’s on Wikipedia, and someone believes that it’s true, then why isn’t it?

If we, as educators, recognize one of the perils of teaching with the Internet as an overflow of information, with its easy availability of unverified evidence, then we need to do more for our students by providing classroom models for identifying and evaluating reliable sources. Luckily, the resources exist to help both us and our students, as the Internet now abounds with reliable primary-source collections, many of which have an image of the actual document or provide a transcription of nineteenth-century handwriting. Some sites even provide innovative lesson plans to accompany their collections. This article offers a guide to some of the best of these sites.

Starting Points

Even before venturing out into cyberspace, teachers would do well to contemplate the many meanings of the term “mobilization.” Are we interested in the physical movement of troops and citizens? Or the processes that put guns into their hands and uniforms onto their bodies? Or are we interested in a more complicated question about the motivations of soldiers and citizens to join together, bound by common goals and principles, to achieve a singular purpose? Are we interested, too, in why some people avoided, either actively or passively, such mobilization? Narrowing and refining our lesson’s main objective makes Internet research of primary documents not only more efficient but also more meaningful.

Once we pinpoint our goals, we can then begin identifying which Internet sources best suit our lesson plans. Many teachers will then turn to more familiar websites such as the American Memory Project...
produced by the Library of Congress, which has digitized collections of primary sources on numerous topics ranging from Performing Arts to Sports and Recreation. The site has a wealth of textual sources, including audio files of songs that Civil War–era bands might have performed and rich visual materials. But the value in the site for historians comes primarily from its extensive holdings on American history and its organization of the Library of Congress materials. A teacher can search the collections by choosing state standards. A search of New York state eleventh grade curriculum standards, for instance, yields sixty-two classroom material suggestions, with four primary source sets, nine lesson plans, fourteen activities, and links to other classroom collections. The sheer volume of sources can be overwhelming when assembling a lesson plan; students and teachers alike are daunting when a search under the heading “war, military” yields thirty collections, twelve of which seem related to Civil War mobilization. But the American Memory Project makes a great starting point.

State universities are a good place to start looking for more specialized sites. The University of Kansas, for example, has a digitized collection of documents related to territorial Kansas, which might help students start to explore how mobilization took on regional twists. The benefit to such academic sites is that they have done much of the legwork that students find daunting. By sifting and organizing, these institutions have grouped sources topically, which helps students to develop theses or arguments centered around primary sources. Such sites also lend their academic good names to these endeavors, guaranteeing a certain level of reliability to the sites that they endorse.

Some university libraries post lists of reliable (and free) electronic collections of primary sources. The University of California at Berkeley, for example, maintains a comprehensive list of such sources with a short description of each collection. Berkeley also suggests online journalistic sources, such as an article from Harper’s Weekly, that might pair well with a drier document, such as a Congressional order. Though Harper’s Weekly is a subscription source, many secondary school libraries have subscriptions through commonly-held research databases.

The University of Tennessee maintains The American Civil War homepage, which has links to virtually every Civil War site from Civil War Talk Radio to Jewish Civil War veterans’ sites. Many are commercial (which the site acknowledges), but the sheer volume of sites should prompt imaginative projects sure to engage any student’s interest. The websites give students somewhere to start Internet research when the number of “hits” seems overwhelming. The “laundry lists,” while not overstuffed with lesson ideas, at least guide teachers toward sites which might offer further instructional advice. Such lists suggest what these scholars think is good history. Teachers have to model a thoughtful selection of documents that will lead to best classroom practices.

Beyond the Laundry List

The Secession Era Editorials Project at Furman University takes a more focused approach and examines the role of the press in wartime mobilization. This site’s creators have chosen four seminal events in the years leading to the war that made Americans start to consider taking sides: “Bleeding Kansas,” Preston Brooks’s caning of Charles Sumner, the Dred Scott decision, and John Brown’s raid. For each event, the site provides a rich store of fully searchable newspaper editorials. Not only are these editorials valuable primary sources, but the search tool might be used to allow teachers to integrate literacy strategies into their history lessons, comparing language, diction, and lexile levels with modern editorials about current conflicts. Drawing real-world connections by searching for, perhaps, modern southern newspaper editorials about the Afghanistan conflict could help examine the tricky notion of what brings people together for a war. The secession crisis events lend perspective to American mindsets on the eve of the Civil War and should help teachers frame the essential questions of what drove Americans to mobilize for war.

Much more narrow in scope but very well constructed and organized is the Valley of the Shadow website, run by the Virginia Center for Digital History (VCDH) at the University of Virginia. The site provides a window into daily lives in the communities of Augusta County, Virginia, and Franklin County, Pennsylvania, during the Civil War era. Its letters, diaries, and especially its archive of newspaper articles, allow students to draw their own conclusions about motivation for fighting the war. The site offers many resources for teachers, including recommended paper topics and model projects that other teachers have used successfully, as well as lesson plans organized around the National History Standards, the Virginia Standards of Learning, and the National Council for the Social Studies themes. These plans have pre-selected documents that relate to one another and include questions to guide readers. For example, one lesson asks students to read articles from the Franklin Repository and Transcript, a Republican paper, and compare them to the Valley Spirit, a Democratic paper. Such comparisons allow students to draw conclusions not only about each party’s stance on the war but also about the use of the press in the war effort.

Students will enjoy the visual-heavy site, as well as the organizational scheme of walking through “rooms” to find documents. To use this site effectively with students, however, teachers will want to brief classes with background information about the two communities themselves. The site offers links to Edward Ayers’s 2003 book, In the Presence.
of Mine Enemies, War in the Heart of America 1859–1863, and to an American Historical Review digital article by Ayers and William G. Thomas that should help teachers looking for more context for these two communities. Also, teachers must address the issue of singularity with this site—is what’s happening in Virginia and Pennsylvania emblematic of the whole war? This example offers teachers a chance to address the larger methodological issue of whether or not one can draw valid historical conclusions from a narrow sample found on one website.

### Analyzing Documents

The Library of Virginia (LOV) website has a subsection called Virginia Memory, which offers collections of primary sources grouped thematically. An exhibit titled “Union or Secession: Virginians Decide” is an excellent example of a teacher-friendly primary source site that provides not only documents but also activities that demand analysis rather than simple recall. A particularly engaging section is called “Callie’s Mailbag,” which models itself after modern social networking sites by taking “posts” in the form of historical documents that Callie then reacts to in her own “status updates.” “Free African Americans During the Civil War,” one of the subheadings within that collection, highlights the challenges that nineteenth-century Americans faced in deciding whether and how to mobilize for war. Teachers can ask students to use the site’s primary documents—such as telegrams, petitions, newspaper articles, and lists of laborers—to consider the constraints and opportunities that free blacks faced as they decided where to place their loyalty and how, if at all, to aid either the Confederate or Union cause.

Documents are posted in both transcribed and manuscript forms, allowing students to see an image of the original (and to struggle to decipher handwriting) (Figure 2). When it comes to interpreting such sources, the site offers excellent guidance, providing historical background and useful questions ranging from the basic level of Bloom’s taxonomy (“Were they serving in the military?”) to the higher level of questioning that is crucial to meaningful teaching with primary documents (“Why might free blacks volunteer to fight for the Confederacy?”). Such questions help teachers as they push their students to think like historians—to grapple with historical complexity and analysis.

### RAFTing the Civil War

As another strategy to develop higher-level thinking, the LOV site presents students with the following scenario: it is the summer of 1861, and you are a free black Virginian writing to a free black Virginian friend, arguing whether or not it would be better to support the Confederacy or wait to be compelled to serve. This literary assignment is a time-tested way to engage students by requiring the citation of specific evidence and to evaluate their understanding of the documents. But to further engage students with different interests and learning styles, teachers might also use a RAFT, which asks students to consider Role, Audience, Format, and Topic, as they demonstrate textual understanding of a set of documents (Figure 3). The role reflects the writer’s point of view; the audience interprets that point of view; the format offers options for the form student work might take; and the topic restates the essential question of the lesson. I have used RAFTs with all levels of students, from AP to remedial, and have found that

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Audience</th>
<th>Format</th>
<th>Topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White Southerner</td>
<td>Fellow worker in Virginia</td>
<td>Scripted dialogue—record what each person says in screenplay format</td>
<td>Volunteer for the CSA or wait to be called into service?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free black teenager</td>
<td>Minister at church</td>
<td>Poem</td>
<td>Volunteer for the CSA or wait to be called into service?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William Breedlove (free black man asking to serve in CSA)</td>
<td>Free black man</td>
<td>Artistic representation—political cartoon?</td>
<td>Volunteer for the CSA or wait to be called into service?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James Branch (son of the mayor of Petersburg and businessman; wants to use free black labor to benefit Confederacy but not as soldiers)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 3.** In a creative variation on primary documents found on the Library of Virginia site, this table outlines a RAFT (Role, Audience, Format, and Topic) assignment to develop students’ understanding of how Civil War mobilization might have looked to different groups of people within the Confederate South. Suitable for a wide range of ability levels and learning styles, it asks students to assume one of four possible roles and to communicate their perspectives—in a variety of formats—on the question of whether or not they should volunteer for Confederate service. (Courtesy of Anne E. Ward)
the technique gives students the freedom to express themselves and to go beyond what I have covered in class.

In this model, I have not given students a choice of topic. My objective is to assess students’ ability to use the four documents to answer the essential question of the lesson, but I have suggested enough ideas that I hope to encourage some creative expression, and spare myself the tedium of reading seventy-five more-or-less identical student assignments. Using primary sources and higher-level thinking skills forces students to embrace material that may, initially, seem quite foreign and encourages them to interact with the sources in complex and challenging ways. Considering various points of view and the causal relationships of events enables students to make deeper historical connections.

**NARA and DocsTeach**

The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) has also developed an excellent set of tools to help students sharpen their historical thinking skills. The NARA site’s teachers’ resource page offers not only state and regional resources, lesson plans, and activities, but also a “getting started with primary sources in the classroom” guide. It has suggestions for choosing documents based on ability level, matching them to standards, and then guiding students toward proper citation of documents. NARA offers a range of chronologically organized topics, each with suggested lessons and documents, analysis sheets, maps, motion picture clips (when appropriate), and cartoons. Clicking on the Civil War and Reconstruction module leads to four lesson plans, one of which uses the photos of Matthew Brady while another features letters, telegrams, and photographs, illustrating factors that affected the Civil War.

Even better, NARA has partnered with DocsTeach, a new website that offers over three thousand primary documents with ideas about how to use them in the classroom. Since it was launched in 2010, DocsTeach has grown to offer an online learning community where teachers can collaborate, create portfolios, and post successful classroom activities. But even without registering or engaging in the online collaboration, a teacher can use the DocsTeach site as a valuable resource for teaching with primary documents.

Once in the DocsTeach portals, teachers can choose a chronological period to search for lesson plans and can explore lessons by critical thinking skill, such as Historical Issues—Analysis and Decision Making. The site boasts strong visuals, too, with tools like mind maps, timelines, and weighing the evidence “scales” available for download. These are visual models of the weight of historical evidence that students can manipulate digitally (much more is available to teachers who register, but the free-ware is sufficient for most classrooms). Searching by topic, Bloom’s level, or author is simple.

Looking at the issue of mobilization became much easier for my students with a lesson on recruitment posters. This free-share lesson asks students to read two recruitment posters, consider the language used, and then draw conclusions about the “differences in attitude and perspectives regarding African Americans.” The posters are digitized, magnifiable, and are accompanied by transcriptions, background information, and worksheets.

There are great possibilities for extending the usefulness of DocsTeach for fullest integration into a classroom. For example, the questions with the posters ask for basic knowledge (“who do you think is the intended audience?”) and have the potential to use moving visual stimuli to dig at bigger questions about mobilization during the war. What if students had to create their own recruitment posters for soldiers from a specific city, region, or state? What about blending these recruitment documents with modern military recruitment advertisements or even online ads? Teachers could ask students to bring in a current ad for the U.S. Army, either in print or as an online link, and compare the language from 1861 to the modern lexicon. Or they could require students to respond in a character’s voice to the poster, expressing their reaction to being asked to sacrifice for the war.

**Gilder Lehrman**

Another online collection of primary sources that can help facilitate student-centered learning is found on the website of the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History. Beyond offering intensive summer teacher seminars and hosting lectures and travelling exhibitions, the Gilder Lehrman Institute has a wealth of online sources that can be accessed by eras. The Civil War module offers video podcasts of some of the nation’s most respected Civil War historians, such as Edward Ayers, Eric Foner, and James McPherson. The podcasts vary in length from two to forty-five minutes. For teachers with wired classrooms, even the little snippets could prove to be thought-provoking. Playing the two-minute Ed Ayers clip on the legacy of the war, for instance, could generate an analytical question that students would have to wrestle with throughout the unit. The site also lists related websites, films, books, and teacher development seminars.

Scanned documents in pdf form allow students to read a facsimile of the original source—adding a bit of a “wow” factor—while transcripts, summaries, and background information help to contextualize each document. The site features Seminar Document Projects created by the teachers who participate in the Gilder Lehrman programs. These projects offer a document in digitized form along with questions to guide students’ interpretations of the document. Teachers will need to spend time with this marvelous collection to create engaging lessons. At times, the questions provided are serviceable but tend not to vary beyond requiring a simple answer, rather than pushing students to incorporate higher-level skills like analysis, application, and synthesis.
Conclusion

With any collection of primary sources, the need for teacher planning and thoughtful consideration is a constant theme. There is now a wealth of primary sources online, but they are only tools. With help from teachers, students can profitably put them to work in reconstructing the rich history of Civil War mobilization.

Online resources

American Memory Project: http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html
Territorial Kansas Online, 1854–1861: http://www.territorialkansasonline.org/~imlskto/cgi-bin/index.php
Primary Sources on the Web (University of California, Berkeley): http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/instruct/guides/primarysourcesontheweb.html
American Civil War Homepage: http://sunsite.utk.edu/civil-war/warweb.html
Secession Era Editorials Project: http://history.furman.edu/editorials/see.py
Valley of the Shadow website: http://valley.lib.virginia.edu/
Union or Secession: Virginians Decide: http://www.virginiamemory.com/exhibitions/union_or_secession/
NARA Civil War and Reconstruction: http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/civil-war-reconstruction.html
DocsTeach: http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/civil-war-reconstruction.html
Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History: http://www.gilderlehrman.org/

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