

THE MEANING OF UNION: USING CIVIL WAR IMAGES

A CIVIL WAR GOVERNORS OF KENTUCKY TEACHING THEME

CONTEXT

Historians identify individual citizens' thoughts and feelings about the Civil War through analyzing letters, diaries, books, newspapers and images. They look for key words that help explain the motivation for individuals to support and sustain their side of this internal conflict. References to the Revolutionary War or words such as “Freedom,” “Union,” and “Liberty” helped Civil War-era people look back to their past to understand events in their present—much like we do by studying history today.

Sometimes, those same ideas are conveyed visually as well as or instead of in writing. The documents linked below contain images, logos, or government seals in the letterhead that demonstrate devotion to the Union through patriotic imagery during the Civil War.

PRIMARY SOURCES

- [Benjamin F. Blankenship to James F. Robinson](#)
- [James Williams to James F. Robinson](#)
- [Mary Ann Burns to James F. Robinson](#)
- [John Maris to James F. Robinson](#)

BIG-PICTURE QUESTIONS

- How do the letterheads convey meaning in their symbols, colors, or text? Do the meanings change from source to source?
- What do the letterheads tell you about the about the individuals writing the letters?
- Why do you think color letterheads often were considered a luxury item?

SECONDARY LITERATURE

- Gary W. Gallagher. *The Union War*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011.
- David M. Henkin. *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006..

ACTIVITIES

Image Examination and Discussion.

Examine the primary sources to prepare for a class discussion. Students should have 5 to 8 minutes to examine and mark up the documents. The discussion can be full class or students can split into groups and each one discuss a different document. Allow about 10 minutes at the end of class for students to ask questions or to bring in final thoughts. Be sure to connect this to the larger theme of identity, preservation, and restoration of the Union. Although each document differs, all of them represent levels of individual commitment to the Union.

Group Discussion Questions:

- A. What do you see first?
- B. What colors are in the image?
- C. Why during a time of war and rationing would someone elect to use color images in their letters?
- D. How does this image make you feel?
- E. What is the time frame for this image?
 - i. Now that we have established that this image is a product of the Civil War, do you think this is from the beginning or end of the war? Why?
- F. Why during a time of war would someone choose to have this image on their letter?
- G. Is anything missing from this image? How do you know?
- H. What do the letterheads tell you about the about the individuals writing the letters?

If the students have computer access have them access the original document associated with the image via the URL at the bottom of each image. Use the following questions to guide students through the document:

- i. Does the image match the content of the letter?
- ii. Why do pictures often evoke more of a response than words do?
- iii. Now that you understand the context of the image, does this change your perception of it?

