

## Lesson Idea – Charleston Harbor, Fort Sumter, and the Ring of Fire

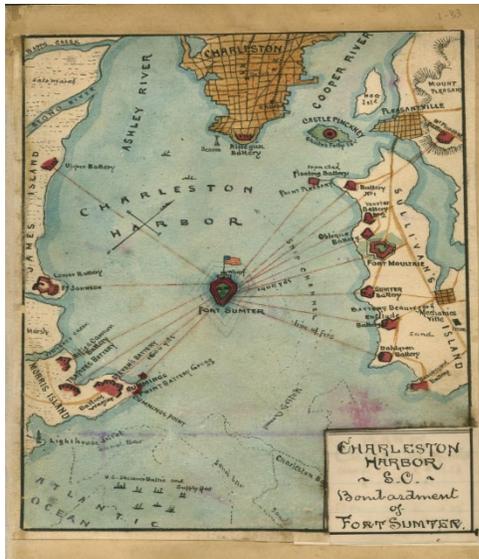
This lesson addresses the following eighth grade Mississippi Social Studies Framework competency and objective:

2. Understand how technology, geography, and social conflict has impacted the development of the United States.
- e. Analyze the causes, key events, and consequences of the Civil War. (DOK 3)

Objectives:

- Students will identify important features of the Charleston Harbor, South Carolina Map (1861).
- Students will interpret a passage from Lincoln’s First Inaugural Address.
- Students will evaluate options for resolving the Sumter Crisis.

Possible grade Levels: 6-12



Hopefully, your students know (or soon will learn) that the first shots of the Civil War were fired at Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor. Confederate guns opened fire on the federal fort on April 12, 1861. The federal garrison, under the command of Major Robert Anderson, was only able to offer feeble resistance before surrendering the next day.

Presenting this bald fact to students is not particularly interesting. So, begin your lesson by asking students this question: **Why did the Civil War begin with the firing on Fort Sumter?**

After students offer speculative answers to this question, provide them with this quotation from President Abraham Lincoln’s First Inaugural Address

[http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th\\_century/lincoln1.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/lincoln1.asp): “The

power confided to me will be used to hold, occupy, and possess the property and places belonging to the Government.”

The importance of this excerpt from Lincoln’s address must be placed in **context**. As the seven southern states seceded from the Union in late 1860 and early 1861, the disposition of Federal property (e.g., forts, arsenals, post offices and hospitals) came into question. Make sure students know the term *seceded* (to leave or withdraw). Next, ask students: **In your opinion, who does this property belong to the seceded state or the federal government?**

Predictably, the states claimed (and often forcibly seized) the property. Likewise, the federal government asserted its sovereignty over the property while refusing to recognize the right of the states to secede. By the time Lincoln was inaugurated on March 4, 1861, only a couple of forts in the South still remained in federal hands—Fort Pickens in Florida and Fort Sumter in South Carolina. These two forts now symbolized the conflict between Federal authority and the state’s right to secede. Similarly, the Confederacy (only recently formed) could not permit a foreign government (as they saw it) to control the harbor of one of its largest and most important port cities.

Once students grasp the conflicting positions and Lincoln’s insistence “to hold, occupy, and possess” federal property, then project the map of Charleston Harbor (circa 1862; <https://www.loc.gov/item/gvhs01.vhs00058/>). Help students sort through the map’s details by asking these questions:

1. **Which two rivers flow into Charleston Harbor? (Ashley River and Cooper River)**
2. **Which islands do you see in and around Charleston Harbor? (Morris Island, James Island, Hog Island, Sullivan’s Island)**
3. **To which ocean does Charleston Harbor connect? (Atlantic Ocean)**
4. **Which battery or fort located on this map is easiest to defend? Why? (Fort Sumter because it is surrounded by water and commands the harbor.)**
5. **How many batteries Confederate could fire on Fort Sumter? (18) Why was this called a “Ring of Fire”? (By early April 1861, Fort Sumter was surrounded by overwhelming force.)**

In December of 1860, Major Robert Anderson realized that the South Carolina government would soon demand the surrender of his garrison located at Fort Moultrie—a dilapidated fort difficult to defend. So, in the early morning hours—the day after Christmas, he and his garrison secretly moved to Fort Sumter. South Carolina responded by demanding that Anderson and his garrison surrender while also refusing to allow supplies into Fort Sumter, which, incidentally, was built on a man-made, granite island. Unless Anderson and his men received provisions, they would eventually be starved into surrender.

Now, ask your students: **If you were President Lincoln, what would you do about the federal garrison at Fort Sumter.** After students have offered their opinions, share with them the actual options at Lincoln’s disposal to resolve the Sumter Crisis:

1. Sell the fort to the South Carolina or the Confederate government.
2. Evacuate the fort.
3. Reinforce and resupply the fort.
4. Resupply the fort with advanced notice to the South Carolina government.
5. Allow the fort to be starved into surrender.

Finally, instruct students to get in triads and select one of the five options above to resolve the crisis. In addition, have them list two advantages of the option they selected. Have students share the option their selected option and reasons. Conclude by informing students that Lincoln selected **Option 4** because this was in keeping with his inaugural address as well as being less provocative than option 3. When the Confederate government fired on Fort Sumter rather than allowing the fort to be resupplied, they appeared to be the aggressors in the conflict—effectively firing on a ship with food intended for hungry soldiers.

Primary Sources Pedagogy:

- Investigate issues of cause and effect, causality, context, and continuity and change
- Draw conclusions about questions and hypotheses
- Examine primary sources closely to form conjectures about their meaning and intent