

THE CIVIL WAR

10 Things You Should Know (and probably don't)

by Edward L. Ayers
in Richmond, Virginia

You probably know that the Civil War began in April 1861 at Fort Sumter in South Carolina. Maybe you can even name the key leaders, battles, and

→ Words to Know

- **Confederacy** (n): the 11 Southern states that seceded from the U.S. in 1860 and 1861
- **ratification** (n): formal approval
- **Reconstruction** (n): the period after the Civil War, from 1865 to 1877, when the federal government worked to reintegrate Southern states
- **secessionists** (n): Southerners who wanted their states to withdraw from the U.S.

issues for both the Union and the **Confederacy**. But there's much about this grim time in America's history that isn't widely known.

The causes of the conflict—chiefly a clash between Northern and Southern states over slavery—are no mystery. By the mid-19th century, many Americans saw war as inevitable. Others assumed until the last minute that it could be avoided.

The election of Abraham Lincoln as President in 1860 lit the fuse of the long-delayed conflict. With the victory of this little-known Illinois lawyer who opposed the expansion of slavery, Southern **secessionists** acted on their threat to leave the Union. War soon followed, taking twists and turns no one foresaw.

Here are 10 things about the Civil War that surprised people at the time—and still surprise people today.

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS-SELECTED CIVIL WAR PHOTOGRAPHS, 1861-1865





Confederate soldiers near Charleston, South Carolina, aim their guns at Fort Sumter, where the first shots of the war were fired in April 1861.

A NATION DIVIDED 1861-1865

★ Union capital

★ Confederate capital

Free state that remained in the Union

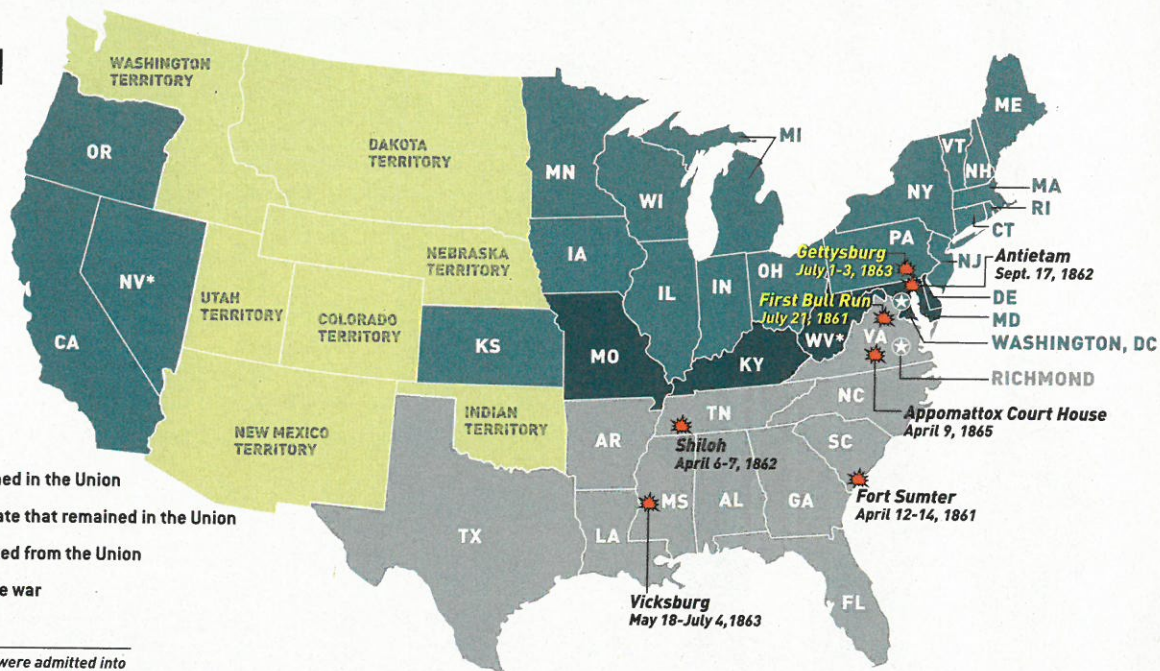
Border state: slave state that remained in the Union

Slave state that seceded from the Union

U.S. territory during the war

Key battle site

* West Virginia and Nevada were admitted into the Union during the Civil War.



1 Not all the Southern states seceded at once.

With Lincoln's election on November 6, 1860, South Carolina had had enough. On December 20, the state repealed its **ratification** of the U.S. Constitution and left the Union. By Lincoln's inauguration, in March 1861, six other states had followed suit.

Congress had looked for ways to pacify the South. Days before Lincoln was sworn in, it passed a proposed 13th Amendment to the Constitution that would have permanently protected slavery from government control. But when Confederate guns fired their first shots at Fort Sumter on April 12, the proposed amendment was as good as dead. In the end, the 13th Amendment that the U.S. did add to the Constitution, in 1865, abolished slavery.

When war broke out, the eight other slave states debated what to do. But when Lincoln called for troops to quell the rebellion, four

of them (including Virginia, the largest) voted to join the Confederacy. The others—the “border states” of Maryland, Delaware, Kentucky, and Missouri—remained in the Union.

2 Some Americans had mixed loyalties to North and South.

The Confederacy's most important leaders had held major roles in the Union before the war. Jefferson Davis was a U.S. Senator from Mississippi before becoming President of the Confederacy. President Lincoln offered Robert E. Lee command of Union forces shortly before Lee declared his loyalty to his home state of Virginia and took command of the Confederate army. Many officers on both sides, including Lee, had gone to West Point, the top military academy in the U.S.

3 Very little about the war played out as expected.

Once war came, Northerners and Southerners thought that it would

be short. But the first battle of Bull Run in Virginia, in July 1861, was a shock—especially for the defeated Union soldiers who had expected to win quickly and go home.

The war was far more violent than many people had anticipated. On September 17, 1862, a battle near Antietam Creek in Maryland left more than 23,000 troops dead, wounded, or missing. Americans were horrified by photographs of body-strewn fields. Antietam remains the single bloodiest day in U.S. history.

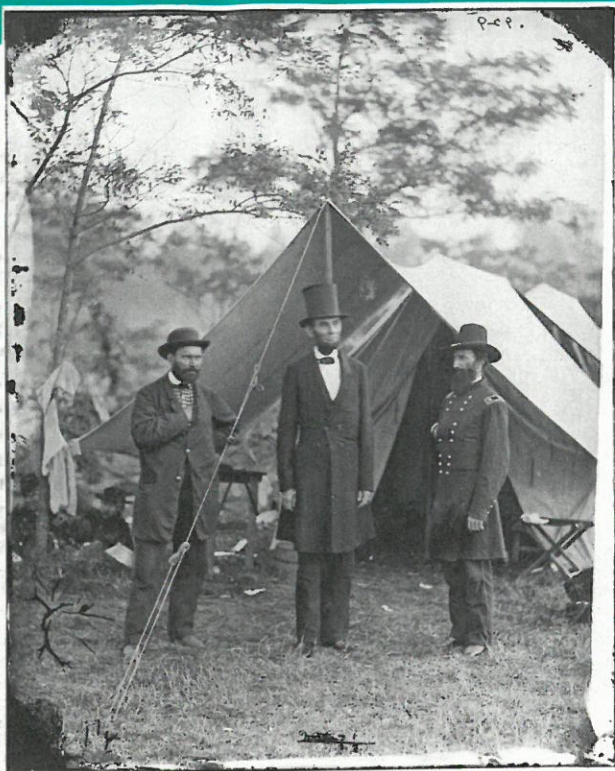
Clashes between armies often took place at unexpected times and places. No one had planned to fight at Gettysburg, in many respects the war's most important battle. It was simply the place where Union forces happened to confront the Confederate troops that had invaded Pennsylvania.

People on both sides often predicted that victory was just around the corner—not foreseeing that the conflict would last four long years.

MAP: JIM MCMAHON/HARPAN

Left: President Lincoln (center) at Antietam, site of the bloodiest battle on U.S. soil, in September 1862.

Below: Black soldiers at Port Hudson, Louisiana. Black regiments fought mostly on the Union side during the war.



4 Emancipation began as soon as the war started.

At first, President Lincoln argued that freeing the slaves was not the primary goal of the war—preserving the Union was. But tens of thousands of slaves freed themselves as soon as they could by making their way to the Union side. Among the first to do so were three men—Shepard Mallory, Frank Baker, and James Townsend—who rowed a boat across the harbor near Hampton, Virginia, in May 1861 and sought the protection of Union forces. Thereafter, slaves rushed to gain freedom behind Union lines.

Lincoln came to realize that slavery had to be abolished to ensure a Union victory. The millions of slaves working on plantations enabled the South to put nearly all of its able-bodied white men on the battlefield. Antislavery leaders like Frederick Douglass, a noted black writer, also argued that the war must confront the issue of slavery to justify all the

suffering and death it was causing.

Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, issued in January 1863, freed very few slaves at first. The proclamation applied only to the 11 states that had seceded, not to the border states or areas in the South then under federal control. The document's real power was symbolic, as it set the nation on the path to abolishing slavery completely.

5 Far more men died of disease than in battle.

Measles, mumps, and diarrhea—ailments that are easily treatable or vaccinated against today—were among the biggest killers in the war. Because so little was known about germs then, unsanitary conditions turned army and prison camps into breeding grounds for infection and disease.

More than 600,000 people died in the Civil War—the equivalent of 6 million people today as a share of the population. About two thirds of the deaths resulted from disease.

6 Young people were swept up in the war.

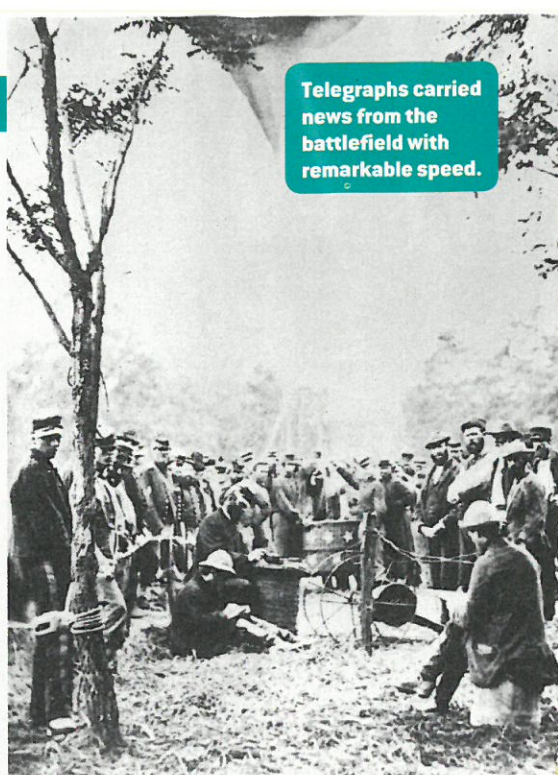
In both the North and the South, girls and boys gathered supplies for the soldiers in the field. Some kids worked in weapons plants and government offices, while others kept farms going after their fathers and older brothers left to fight. In the South, many schools shut down, and food became scarce. Although the legal age to enter the army was 17, boys on both sides managed to get themselves into the conflict. Millions of children were orphaned.

7 As many as 200,000 blacks fought for the Union.

Blacks had wanted to fight early on, but the Union accepted them only when it needed more troops, two years after the war started. African-American soldiers distinguished themselves in one battle after another, even winning the Medal of Honor. Not surprisingly, few blacks fought for the Confederacy, often against their will.



Women like the nurse at this Union hospital served heroically in the war.



Telegraphs carried news from the battlefield with remarkable speed.

8 New technologies played a critical role in the war, yet the conflict was very old-fashioned.

When the Civil War began, the armies made use of a recent development: railroads. Many of the major battles occurred at railroad junctions, through which trains transported supplies to troops.

The telegraph—newer at the time of the Civil War than the Internet is today—carried word of battles at remarkable speeds. By 1864, the Virginia headquarters of Union commander General Ulysses S. Grant had telegraph lines supplying him with the latest news from his troops in Georgia.

Weaponry had also made advances. Rifles with spiral grooves in their barrels could shoot a new inch-long slug at a much greater speed and distance, and with more deadly accuracy, than the musket.

Yet in many places, armies still relied on mules to move supplies. Because food preservation was still fairly primitive, armies traveled with thousands of cattle to feed the troops. Boots were made the same

way for left and right feet, causing soldiers who marched up to 40 miles a day to suffer horrible blisters.

9 Women were involved in every aspect of the war.

Nurses helped save countless lives with their brave service—often under horrifying conditions near battlefields. On both sides, hundreds of women disguised themselves as men and fought. Others served as spies, such as Elizabeth Van Lew of Virginia, who smuggled information to Union commanders in hollowed-out eggs.

10 After the war ended, the conflict continued.

Following Lee's surrender to Grant at Appomattox Court House, Virginia, and Lincoln's assassination in April 1865, the South watched anxiously to see how the U.S. government acted. When they were not severely punished, Southerners pushed to regain as much power over former slaves as possible.

Radical Republicans in Congress responded with **Reconstruction**,

which put Southern states under U.S. military control. In 1868, the 14th Amendment guaranteed citizenship and the equal protection of law to anyone born in the U.S.

In 1870, the 15th Amendment was ratified, ensuring that no male could be refused the right to vote based on his race or prior enslavement. Some black men, including former slaves, were elected to Congress during that time.

But after Reconstruction ended in 1877, Southern states enacted laws denying rights to blacks. Not until the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s did African-Americans gain legal equality—part of the long fight for freedom that began before the Civil War. •

➔ Think About It

1. Which fact about the Civil War surprises you most? Why?
2. Why do you think it took so long to end slavery, and even longer to grant equal rights to African-Americans?

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