



HOWELL COBB'S TRANSITION FROM UNIONIST TO SECESSIONIST

A LESSON PLAN FOR SECONDARY HISTORY TEACHERS

By Miriam Ledford-Lyle

Howell Cobb was T.R.R. Cobb's older, and arguably, far more famous brother. A Southern Democrat, he served in a variety of political roles: Governor of Georgia, five-term member of United States House of Representatives, Speaker of the House, and Secretary of the Treasury under President James Buchanan. Initially an ardent Unionist, Cobb changed his position to a Secessionist after Abraham Lincoln was elected, at which point he became one of the founding members of the Confederate States of America.

This lesson plan focuses on this change and addresses the reasons for Cobb's rather profound shift in political allegiance.

HOWELL COBB'S TRANSITION: Learning Goals and Guiding Historical Questions

Overall Learning Goal:

Students will analyze selected documents and draw conclusions regarding what factors may have contributed to Howell Cobb transitioning from a Unionist to a Secessionist.

List of Specific Questions Students will Address by Engaging in the Lesson:

- What factors contributed to Howell Cobb transitioning from a Unionist to a Secessionist?
- How do we know?
- What accounts convey that story?
- How reliable do we think they are?

LIST OF MATERIALS (provided at the end of the Lesson)

- Teacher created Lesson Resource Packet

Investigating the Past, Learning American History: A Research-Based Approach to Lesson Design

The approach and design of this lesson plan is rooted in several decades of research on how students learn history. It has been customary for history teachers to tell students the story of the past as a means of getting them to reproduce what they hear. However, research consistently presents evidence that such an approach seldom succeeds. Simply put, students seem to quickly forget what they hear.

In studying how students learn history more deeply, researchers have found that students are far more likely to understand the past and therefore reproduce their understandings later if they have authentic opportunities to investigate the past themselves (i.e., to do history). As a result, history teachers who structure lessons around questions, accounts (firsthand and secondary), and investigations into those accounts as a means of answering the questions posed are far more likely to help students attain strong understandings of the past.

This lesson is designed to draw from the research by structuring its sequencing in an investigative way. It poses crucial questions for students to address, invites them to dig into the accounts that might help provide answers to those questions, draw evidence from them, and make claims about what the past means and what happened back then. Such claims represent students' growing understandings of history. By "doing history" themselves, students come to understand it much more deeply and are prone then to remember what they learn.

Lesson Sequence



Lesson Time Frame: three 90-minute blocked periods

CLASS SESSION 1

- Review Causes of the Civil War
- Review historical thinking (this is mid-way through the course, so they should be very familiar with this concept/process because we have caused a practice of it)
- Explain the Investigation Packet: as a whole class complete Cs 1&2 together.
- Assign groups (group students homogeneously by analysis difficulty of documents so that one group member doesn't entirely dominate the analysis)
- Students take approximately 45 minutes to closely read and analyze the documents in the packet
- Move about the room and help students with questions regarding the documents
- Briefly review the historical context of each document and ask if students need additional clarification
- Explain portion of packet to be completed today.
- Students will remain in the same small groups throughout the class period today. BUT each portion of the "Organizing/Writing the Essay" section of the packet (pages 10-13) will start with an explanation/reminder (they should have done some of this type of work previously during the class, but I would anticipate this is the first time that they would be writing an essay as their assessment portion)

CLASS SESSION 2

- Grouping: Explain organizing the essay around "contributing factors to Howell Cobb's transition from Unionist to Secessionist"
- Grouping – In small groups from yesterday students will brainstorm how they would organize their essay by "grouping" the documents into factors. Groups will then report out their idea/ideas of grouping, so students will realize (hopefully!) that there is no one right answer to the question.
- Thesis: Remind students of the components for thesis
- Students will work in groups to brainstorm thesis statements and then turn in a "group thesis" before leaving class. I will read them and provide feedback the next day, so that students feel comfortable with their thesis. I will post thesis statements that are well done on the class website for students to access as they write their "own" thesis statements at home that night as they record them in their packets.
- Missing Voice: Remind students of missing voices/perspectives
- In groups students generate missing perspectives and record in packet
- POV: Remind students of necessity of reliability and remind students to analyze WHY someone may likely to say what they are saying depending on their audience, social class, perceived gain, etc...OR WHY they may think in a particular way.
- Answer any lingering questions about the essay

CLASS SESSION 3

- After students complete the initial document analysis (see the packet), invite them to
 - assess the reliability of the documents and analyze voices/perspectives that may not be included in the documents,
 - organize an essay structure,
 - write an in-class essay in which they answer the question: What factors contributed to Howell Cobb transitioning from a Unionist to a Secessionist?

Note:

Tell students that you will not "grade" the analysis packet as you see the initial analysis as the learning (formative) process, although you will collect them and provide feedback. The reason that you have the students write the essay during class is so you can help them if they get frustrated or stuck.

Students will be allowed to complete the essay on their own time if they do not finish the essay during the allotted time (90 mins). For students who do not meet the standards outlined in the rubric, will ask that they revise their essay prior to a grade assignment.

Assessing Historical Understanding

Show students the following Essay Rubric so that they understand how they will be scored and on the basis of what criteria. This should improve the quality of their essays.

Essay Rubric: (3 Categories; Maximum 7 points—Minimum 0 points)

Addressing the Prompt

- 2 points – Addresses all elements of the essay prompt (includes at least 2 contributing factors to Cobb's transition from Unionist to Secessionist – may be any factor supported by the evidence)
- 1 point – Addresses only one contributing factor to Cobb's transition from Unionist to Secessionist
- 0 points – Does not address the prompt

Use of Evidence

- 3 points – Claims at least 2 contributing factors for Cobb's transition from Unionist to Secessionist and supports each claim with AT LEAST 2 documents
- 2 points – Claims contributing factors, but only uses the accounts to support one of the claims (often merely summarizes docs)
- 1 point – Makes claims, but does not use the documents as support (generally summarizes docs)
- 0 points – Neither makes a claim, nor draws on the documents as supporting evidence

Historical Context

- 2 points – constructs an interpretation that remains faithful to the context of the period
- 1 point – Constructs an interpretation that is only partially faithful to the context of the period
- 0 points – makes claims and judgments that are not rooted in the appropriate historical time period

LESSON RESOURCES PACKET for Students

Section I: The Historical Question

Question:

What factors contributed to Howell Cobb's decision to transition from a Unionist to a Secessionist and back other southerners in seceding from the United States?

Hints on Addressing the Question:

- What is the question asking you to do? (What's the verb in the question? Restate the verb in your own words.)
- How many factors would you suppose is necessary to include?
- What is a Unionist? What is a Secessionist?
- What does it mean to secede from the United States?

Section II: Examining the Evidence

From your knowledge about the Civil War and the secession of the Confederate States of America, what prior knowledge would you consider important to help you understand this question?

Now, onto examining the evidence from the past ...

NOTE:
For each document reading and analysis that follows, ask students to apply the SOAPS-TONE approach, a method for attending to various aspects of text. You can create a scaffolding sheet for each document with the 6 categories and room for students to jot down notes below each category.

SUBJECT: Summarize the document above. WHAT does it/the author say? Is there information that you know from your prior knowledge that can be added?
OCCASION: WHEN was it produced? Can it be connected with a significant historical event?
AUDIENCE: Who was the intended AUDIENCE? Was the document written privately, written to be read or heard by others (who?), an official document for a ruler to read, commissioned painting, etc.
PURPOSE: WHY was this document produced? What was the purpose or motivation of the writer/producer of the document, based on what you can surmise about them?
SPEAKER: WHO produced this document? Discuss the author's gender, age, ethnicity, social status, religion, intellectual or political philosophy, etc. (You won't know ALL this information, but give as much detail as possible.)
VOICE: WHAT is the tone/voice of the document like? Is it filled with any apparent emotion? (ex: anger, disdain, satire, admiration, etc.)

Document #1 Source: Howell Cobb to his wife, Mary Ann Cobb (Washington City, May 10, 1846)

It is now settled that we are at war with Mexico, and on tomorrow the President is to send in to Congress a war message ... I confess I do not feel so warlike myself. I prefer a foe man worthy of my steel. However I will do my duty in both cases honestly and fearlessly, and trust the result to God and my country.

Document #2 Source: Howell Cobb to a Committee of Citizens in Charleston, SC (November 4, 1848)

My attention having been called is your circular to the proceedings of your meeting, I have been induced to give it a somewhat critical examination. Whilst I find in that paper much to admire and approve, I must express my unfeigned regret that the able pen which claims its authorship has failed to trace the history of the interesting questions which it discusses in many aspects in which it is our interest as well as our duty to consider it.

No truth is more plainly written in the political history of our country than the one which teaches us of the continued inroads which northern fanaticism has unceasingly attempted upon our peculiar institutions ... a portion of northern people have waged a relentless warfare upon our rights, interests, and feelings ... that it now demands our most serious consideration.

In now setting upon the proper policy to be pursued by the South for the further maintenance of her just and constitutional rights we must institute a more scrutinizing inquiry into the political associations by which we are surrounded ...

The course which the two political parties of the North have pursued towards the South is widely different, and it becomes us as well in reference to the duty we owe to ourselves as to others to mark that difference. It may save us from a false step in an important and delicate duty, and in any contingency can be productive of no harm.

But we approach a territorial test and one which bears upon the point of our investigation. The North threatens to exclude us from the newly acquired territories of New Mexico and California by the enforcement of the Wilmot proviso. How stand the parties at the North upon this issue? Whilst a sufficient number of the Northern democrats both in the Senate and the House of Representatives have been found who in addition to the united Southern vote would defeat this measure so justly odious to us and thereby save the South from this gross aggression upon her rights ... Does this fact speak no language of interest to the South? ... Are friends and foes to be treated alike with indifference and scorn? Do we regard with the same feelings and emotions the men who have invoked all the powers of the General Government for our oppression and those who have with us declared that our peculiar institutions, whether in the states or territories cannot be reached by any legislative act of the United States government?

Document #3 Source: Howell Cobb to his wife, Mary Ann Cobb (Washington City, February 1, 1849)

My Dear Wife ...

I see from the Savannah Republican that the whig papers have unaccountably not war upon me and I am unable to account for my indifference on any other principle than the unlimited approval which my conscience gives to everything I have done ... In the whigs, I have no confidence, from Genl. Taylor down to the lowest lackey of the crew, and as the democrats are now blindly following the erratic call of the madcap South Carolinian, God only knows what is to be the end of what we hardly yet see the beginning.

Document #4 Source: Howell Cobb to John B. Lamar (his wife's brother) (Athens, GA, October 10, 1860)

... Since my return to Athens I have not been able to ascertain with any certainty the state of the public mind throughout my district. I have only spoken so far in this and Jackson counties ... Dougherty has taken the other side and is seeking to rally the whigs with him. His calculation seemed to be that he could hold the Whigs together and carry off a sufficient portion of the democrats, to give him the control of the district, but he will be woefully disappointed. I have no doubt that I could be reelected tomorrow by double the majority I have ever received in the district.

We shall have a most exciting and angry contest in the state, and in some sections a very doubtful one – though I entertain no doubt that we shall have a large majority of the convention...

Document #5 Source: A Scriptural Examination of the Institution of Slavery, written by Howell Cobb (1856)

It is impossible to conceive the amount of mischief abolitionism has done, and is seeking to do ... It invades the sanctuary of law, and strikes the balance from the hand of justice; it tramples upon the Constitution; it repudiates the Bible; it has rendered [sic] asunder the church of the living God; it spurns with everything hold and sacred; it commits murder; it has progressed far in destroying the comity between the States; it now menaces the integrity of the Union itself!

Document #6 Source: Howell Cobb, Open Letter to the People of Georgia (December 6, 1860)

... Fellow citizens of Georgia I have endeavored to place before you the facts of the case, in plain and unimpassioned language; and I should feel that I had done injustice to my own convictions, and been unfaithful to you, if I did not in conclusion warn you against the danger of delay and impress upon you the hopelessness of any remedy for these evils short of secession. You have to deal with a shrewd, heartless and unscrupulous enemy, who in their extremity may promise anything, but in the end will do nothing. On the 4th day of March, 1861 the Federal Government will pass into the hands of the Abolitionists. It will then cease to have the slightest claim upon either your confidence or your loyalty; and in my honest judgment, each hour that Georgia remains thereafter a member of the Union will be an hour of degradation, to be followed by certain and speedy ruin. I entertain no doubt either of your right or duty to secede from the Union. Arouse, then, all your manhood for the great work before you, and be prepared on that day to announce an maintain your independence out of the Union, for you will never again have equality and justice in it. Identified with you in honor, and interest, I return to share in whatever destiny the future has in store for our State and ourselves.

Document #7 Source: Howell Cobb to his wife, Mary Ann Cobb (Washington City, December 10, 1860)

My Dear Wife,

As you have already learned through the telegraph, I have resigned my office and am again a private citizen. The President and myself part in the most friendly spirit. We both see and feel the necessity and both regret it should be so ...

Document #8 Source: Howell Cobb to his wife, Mary Ann Cobb (Montgomery, AL, February 5, 1861)

My Dear Wife,

From all I hear there is a general disposition to make me president of the convention. It is thought that my taking that position will exclude me from the Presidency of the Confederacy and some of my friends doubted on that account the policy of my taking it. In this I differed from them and have determined to follow my own judgment. The truth is that the Presidency of the Confederacy is an office I cannot seek and shall feel no disappointment in not getting.

Section III: Paragraph Organization

After reading and discussing the documents and accounts, have student groups complete the following chart for organizing how they would structure their essays. For example, if a group is arguing that Howell Cobb changed from a Unionist to a Secessionist because 1. He wanted to impress his US history teacher and because aliens were invading Georgia and he wanted to help protect Georgia from alien invaders, then that group would have 2 clusters of documents and the documents that they place in each cluster should corroborate one another and should serve as evidence.

Organization Chart Example:

Name of Group	Documents/Explanation

Section IV: The Thesis

OK, so now you've spent considerable time reading, sifting, and analyzing these documents. Can you still remember the HISTORICAL QUESTION? Only when you remember the question you can decide which ideas from the documents are important, and which can ideas a not relevant.

Historical Question:

What factors contributed to Howell Cobb's decision to transition from a Unionist to a Secessionist?

- The task is to write an essay that answers this question, drawing on all the documents read and analyses already done.

Here's a guide to the most common mistakes students make when attempting to write a thesis. Here are some examples of these statements that would NOT be appropriate.

Thesis	Mistake	Example	How to Fix It
	No thesis		Pre-writing organization. Read the question, then plan/outline your response before you begin to write.
	Thesis not related to the Question	There are many people who supported secession in the South. However, some did not agree with secession...	Read the question. Focus on the language of the question: verbs, adjectives, and time frame. Analyze. Describe. Justify. Trace. If the question asks about FACTORS, make sure you confine your response to the factors you find in the accounts!
	Thesis repeats or just paraphrases the question	There were reasons why Howell Cobb changed his mind from a Unionist to a Secessionist.	Try to "argue" your thesis. Could you take an "opposite" position? If not, then the thesis doesn't really say anything. Avoid the "thesis killer" words (many, very, things, a lot, big, large, huge, wonderful etc.).
	Thesis is too vague	Howell Cobb changed his mind because he began to think about secession differently.	(See the box just above. Same fixes apply here.)

OK, so now students, pull together everything you've done: reading & understanding of the documents; historical content knowledge; author's characteristics; etc. Write your thesis statement using the lines below.

MY THESIS

Students: Check the following indicating that your thesis statement performs these tasks.

MY THESIS STATEMENT...

___ Answers the question ___ Makes an argument ___ Serves as my organizational device

Other Resources:

- Primary Source: Howell Cobb, in a newspaper article dated November 1, 1864, appealing to Georgia citizens to stop Sherman's march across Georgia near the conclusion of the Civil War. (Retrieved from <http://georgiainfo.galileo.usg.edu/tuesday/gahistory/11/01/howell-cobb-appealed-to-georgia-citizens>)

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