

Port Chicago mutiny.

Instructions for Teachers— Background on the Assignment

The military section of the Bay exhibit at the Oakland Museum of California covers many facets. This lesson goes into depth on only one of those—the Port Chicago Mutiny. This occurred in 1944. 50 African American men were convicted of mutiny after they refused to load ammunition onto ships following a massive explosion that killed over 200 people. The case has been controversial for many years.

The activity provided will give students a short overview of what happened. Then, students are asked to put themselves in the shoes of President Clinton—should he grant a pardon. In reality, only one of the men who was convicted of mutiny asked for a pardon. The others had died and a few were not interested in applying. The act of granting a pardon, however, became symbolic for a verdict of the fairness of the conviction of the men in 1944.

Students are provided with documents, some of which are primary sources and the others are secondary. They are asked to read these documents and decide if they were Clinton, based on these documents and the introductory essay, would they grant the pardon.

Students are not given the outcome of the case, but in fact, Clinton did grant the pardon.

Before the Museum Visit—Teaching Strategies

The most direct way of teaching this assignment is simply to assign the reading, have the students write a response, and then explain that Clinton did grant the pardon.

For students needing more support there are several strategies that could be used. Having students debate the topic before they write will help students understand the issues involved more clearly. In addition, students could be asked to look at each document and determine if someone would use it to either support or reject the idea of a pardon. Once the documents have been categorized it will be easier for students to write their opinion.

As a teacher you have the best sense of what vocabulary students will need defined in order to understand the article and the documents, but that vocabulary may need to be previewed before the writing begins.

Generally, the idea of the assignment is to have students write using the documents as evidence, not simply to give their opinion regardless of the evidence. If you want to make the assignment more complex you can ask students to include a counter-argument as part of the decision that they make.

Museum Visit

Direct student to the Military Landscapes section of the exhibition. Have them examine the images and artifacts on display, particularly the material on Port Chicago. In the museum's Gallery of California History they will find other material on display related to this historical event.

After the Visit

Allow time for students to share their notes and impressions from the museum. Discuss if any of the information in the exhibit deepened their understanding of the issues around the Port Chicago mutiny.

Student worksheet—Should there be a pardon?

In 1999 President Bill Clinton was faced with a decision. Under the Constitution the President has the right to pardon someone convicted of a crime. After a pardon, there can be no appeal. In that year, Freddie Meeks requested such a pardon. Fifty years earlier, Mr. Meeks along with 49 other sailors had been convicted of mutiny at the naval base of Port Chicago California. Put yourself in President Clinton’s shoes and decide what you would do. After you finish reading the facts of the case, write your own decision. Then, you can compare what you decided to the decision by President Clinton.

Historical Background

World War II brought great changes to the Bay Area. Because there were jobs in the shipyards and other military facilities around the Bay, thousands of people migrated to this area including thousands of African Americans. In San Francisco alone the African American population went from 5,000 to 12,000 in just 4 years. This increase in African American population, along with the increase of population from other groups, increased racial tension.

Port Chicago was a naval ammunition base located 30 miles northwest of San Francisco. Below is an account from the Lighthouse Digest of what happened in 1944 that resulted in 50 men convicted of mutiny:

Every commissioned officer was white, typical in the segregated Navy of that time. All the men handling ammunition were black. They were informed that the bombs could not detonate because they had been defused. Protests about the hazardous conditions were made periodically to the Naval upper echelon whose sole reply was a call for greater tonnage to be loaded in record time.

On July 17, 1944, the E.A. Bryan and the Quinalt Victory, tied up at the loading pier, were being loaded by floodlight. The cargo including 650-pound ignitable bombs, the detonator already in place, were deemed especially perilous “hot cargo.” Shortly after 10 PM, a blast blew Joseph Small, later said to be the “ringleader” of the mutiny, out of bed. His barracks collapsed around him. The blast destroyed both ships as well as the base and damaged the small town of Port Chicago, over a mile away. Of 320 men killed, 202 were black ammunition loaders.

A Startling Tragedy

All on the pier and aboard the Bryan and Quinalt Victory, 320 men including 202 black enlisted men were killed and 233 injured. Only 51 bodies were found intact enough to be positively identified. The lone, startling tragedy accounted for more than 15% of all black naval fatalities in the war. Property damage, military and civilian, was said to be in excess of 12 million dollars.

In spite of the enormity of the disaster and the fact that the naval base was rendered a shambles, there was no panic. Survivors organized rescue efforts and aided the injured and doused small fires caused by flaming debris. One group of black seamen and officers fearlessly battled and doused a fire that had begun in a boxcar filled with explosives. If the boxcar had detonated, it could have set off a series of blasts in nearby boxcars and perhaps killed more men.

The explosive power of the blast was equal to five kilotons of TNT, the same magnitude as the atomic bomb that would be dropped on Hiroshima over one year later. Rear Admiral Carleton H. Wright, the commandant of the Twelfth Naval District, applauded the men:

“I am gratified to learn that, as was to be expected, Negro personnel attached to the Naval Magazine Port Chicago performed bravely and efficiently in the emergency as real Navy men, they simply carried on in the crisis attendant on the explosion in accordance with our Service’s highest traditions.”

A Court of Inquiry

A court of inquiry was convened to look into the disaster. Its final outcome was to clear the officers involved of any responsibility and to lay the blame for the explosion on the black enlisted men who had died. Three weeks later, after denying the surviving black seamen 30-day leaves granted to the white survivors, the Navy ordered 328 of the surviving ammunition loaders to work on another ship under the same unsafe conditions found at Port Chicago.

The men refused, citing the recent disaster and that the unsafe conditions that caused the first explosion might well be repeated. Two hundred and fifty eight men were marched off to a barge and held under guard for several days. They were ordered by their division officers to fall into two groups—those willing to return to the dangerous work and those who refused. Fifty men refused, and were taken to the brig at Camp Shoemaker. Joe Small, considered the ringleader, was placed in solitary confinement. The fifty were charged with mutiny.

The Decision

After a trial and 80 minutes of deliberation, the court found the fifty men guilty. The case, however, remained controversial.

Assignment

Below are some documents, both primary and secondary. Read them carefully. President Clinton considered the information below in trying to decide if there should be a pardon.

Document One:

African-Americans in the Navy. After World War I, the Navy tried to excluded African-Americans, replacing their ranks with Filipinos. In 1932, the Navy again recruited blacks, but they were limited in numbers and confined to menial tasks, primarily as messmen (kitchen helpers.) There were no black officers.

—American Merchant Marine, usmm.org

Document Two:

Loading went on 24 hours per day. The men moved the ammunition hand-to-hand, on hand trucks or cars, or rolled larger bombs down a ramp from the boxcars...Neither the officers nor the men received any training in handling ammunition. There was tremendous pressure to speed up the loading and officers made bets put the quantity of ammunition their unit would load in an 8 hour shift. The men were speeded up by threats of punishment.

—American Merchant Marine, usmm.org

Document Three:

Testimony from one of the men, Mr. Green, who was convicted of mutiny, during his trial:

“The reason I was afraid to go down and load ammunition, them officers were racing each division to see who put on the most tonnage, and I knowed the way they was handling ammunition, it was liable to go off again. If we didn’t work fast at that time, they wanted to put us in the brig (jail)...That is my reason for not going down there.

—From Robert Allen, *The Port Chicago Mutiny*

Document Four:

From an interview with Meeks, one of the men convicted of mutiny. After the explosion he was part of a group of men assigned to clean up.

“There were bodies under sheets. You couldn’t tell the white from the black... We decided we would not go back to work loading ammunition. We had to do something. So an admiral came out and held a big powwow. He said, ‘those who will work step to the right. Those who won’t, step to the left’. We went to the left.”

—From San Francisco Chronicle, December 24, 1999

Document Five:

Testimony from John H. Dunn, one of the convicted mutineers:

“He had never before handled ammunition because a doctor had said that at 104 pounds he was ‘too light to work on the dock.’ I was afraid of ammunition. I told him I would obey any order except the order to load ammunition.”

—From Robert Allen, *The Port Chicago Mutiny*, page 118

Document Six:

Thurgood Marshall, later the first African-American Supreme Court Justice, was an observer at the trial for the NAACP. He said:

“The men actually don’t know what happened. Had they been given a direct and specific order to load ammunition and they had refused to obey that order then the charge would be legitimate. But they say no direct order to load was issued them. They were asked whether they would load and they replied that they were afraid. They have told me they were willing to go to jail to get a change of duty because of heir terrific fear of explosives, but they had no idea that verbal expression of their fear constituted mutiny.”

—From Robert Allen, *The Port Chicago Mutiny*, page 118

Document Seven:

Public points Thurgood Marshall made about the case. Marshall also wanted to know why other men who refused to load ammunition were not charged, including one hundred men from the First Division (white) who he said refused to work even before August 9 and then were quietly shipped overseas.

Document Eight:

Attorney Coakley represented the prosecution in the case against the fifty mutineers. Below is a summary of some of his arguments.

“The men who balked were later given direct orders to load ammunition and refused to do so. The fifty accused men were those who continued to hold out even after Admiral Wright gave them a final opportunity to back down.”

—From Robert Allen, *The Port Chicago Mutiny*, page 123

Document Nine:

“There is a war on...There was an ammunition ship to be loaded...and fear was no excuse. Under the circumstances I cannot understand how any man in the uniform could be so depraved mentally as to come into a court of law in a time of war and under oath say, ‘I was afraid to handle ammunition.’ A man...who is so depraved as to say that is capable of giving testimony that is false...And what kind of discipline, what kind of morale would we have if men in the United States navy could refuse to obey an order and then get off on the grounds of fear?”

—From Robert Allen, *The Port Chicago Mutiny*, page 123

Document Ten:

Over the years some veterans have said the Port Chicago men had not been subjected to any greater dangers than sailors and soldiers who fought in the war and should have followed orders.

—From William Giaberson of the *New York Times*, 1999

Document Eleven:

After the explosion in 1944 Congress was going to authorize the usual \$5,000 to the families of survivors during wartime. However, Congressman Rankin, from Mississippi, upon learning that most of the survivors' families were Black, insisted that the amount be reduced. The final amount was \$3,000.

—Wikipeda, Port Chicago Mutiny

Document Twelve:

In 1994 after Congress directed the Pentagon to review the Chicago case, the Navy concluded that “the convictions were not tainted by racial prejudice” and declined to expunge the convictions. “*Sailors are required to obey the orders of their superiors even if those orders subject them to life-threatening danger,*” said Defense Secretary William Perry in a 1994 letter to Congress on the Port Chicago case.

The 1994 Navy review did acknowledge that racial prejudice had influenced work assignments in World War II. But the Navy said the mutineers had already been given leniency, they received up to 15 years but served only a maximum of 17 months.

Directions

After having read the documents write your decision. Should President Clinton pardon the men in the Port Chicago Mutiny? Explain not only your decision, but what documents you used to make your decision. How did these documents persuade you? Also, explain why the documents that didn't agree with you did not convince you.