

The Salisbury Bread Riot

Overview

On the 18th of March, 1863, fifty women - wives and mothers of Confederate soldiers – raided various merchants in Salisbury, NC demanding they be sold goods at fair prices. In this lesson, students will examine primary source documents from what became known as the “Salisbury Bread Riot,” and explore not only this event, but what it highlights about the difficulties faced by those living during the period of America’s Civil War.

Grades

8+

Materials

- Warm Up: What Would You Do & Why?, worksheet attached
- Primary Sources and Primary Source Review Worksheet (attached)
 - *Primary Source 1: News Article*, <http://digital.ncdcr.gov/cdm/ref/collection/p15012coll8/id/11534>
 - *Primary Source 2: Letter from Business Owner to Governor about the Bread Riot*
<http://digital.ncdcr.gov/cdm/ref/collection/p15012coll8/id/11527>
 - *Primary Source 3: Letter from the Riotting Women to the Governor*
<http://digital.ncdcr.gov/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15012coll8/id/11531/rec/1>

Duration

45 minutes

Procedure

Warm-Up: What Would You Do & Why?

1. As a warm up, provide students with the attached worksheet in which they consider the scenario presented and think about how they might handle it. Before students begin working, teachers should ensure that they try and think with historical perspective. Remind them that the year they should pretend it is 1863. Have students take 8-10 minutes to consider the scenario individually, then have them break into small groups to share the potential choices, consequences and decisions they brainstormed. Instruct the groups to see if they can work together to choose the best choice from all of the options they presented to one another, and to be prepared to present that to the entire class in 5 minutes.
2. Once groups have discussed, have a spokesperson from each share their final decision with the entire class. As students present their thoughts, make sure they have considered the realities of 1863 and all potential consequences of their actions.
3. Finally, let students know that the scenario they considered was a historical reality in Salisbury 1863, and that it ended in what became known as the “Salisbury Bread Riot.”

Primary Source Exploration

4. Tell students that they are going to become historians themselves and learn about what took place during the Salisbury Bread Riot by examining three primary sources. Hand out the attached three primary sources as well as the accompanying worksheet. Either individually or in partners, have students review each source and answer the accompanying questions. After around 25+ minutes (or once all students have finished), review their findings and further discuss as a class:
 - How does document 1, the news article excerpt, present the event? Does the article take any particular side?

- How would you describe the business owner’s letter to the governor? Was it fair? Why or why not?
- What do you think Michael Brown wants?
- What do you think of the women’s letter to the governor? What was the purpose of the letter?
- How do the two letters differ?
- How do you think the governor responded to the two letters?
- How would you respond if you were the governor and why?

Bread “Riots” Around the South

5. Finally, summarize the main points of the Salisbury Bread Riot for students by sharing information such as: On the 18th of March, 1863, the streets of Salisbury, North Carolina, were invaded by a group of about 50 determined local women, identified only as wives and mothers of Confederate soldiers. The women believed that local merchants had been profiteering by raising the prices of necessary foods and demanded that the merchants sell these goods at government prices. When the merchants refused the women broke down one shop door with hatchets and threatened other storekeepers. What a local newspaper described as the “Female Raid” netted the women twenty three barrels of flour as well as quantities of molasses, salt, and even twenty dollars in cash.

The Salisbury “Bread Riot,” and a more widely known food riot in Richmond, Virginia, also in 1863, are dramatic evidence of the stresses on local life brought on by the Civil War. Volunteers for the Confederate army from Salisbury and surrounding Rowan County at the beginning of the war were by and large young, unmarried men. In 1862 demand for fresh troops brought about the increasing enlistment of older men with wives and families. In a county such as Rowan, with a large number of small farms, the absence of a husband and father was a serious economic loss. The failure of the county’s attempt to provide for soldiers’ families also contributed to the hardship. The fact that the women involved in the incident were never prosecuted is evidence of the understanding and sympathy of their neighbors. The *Carolina Watchman*, which reported the incident, extended its most scathing criticism not to the women, but to the county commissioners who failed to provide adequate aid for soldiers’ families and who should “go, all blushing with shame for the scene enacted in our streets on Wednesday last.” ([Source](#))

Further discuss:

- Although we have been focused on the Salisbury, NC events, similar protests were occurring all across the South, from Atlanta, GA to Richmond, VA, as families of soldiers suffered. Why do you think women chose to respond in this way? What are the various ways they chose to advocate for themselves? Were there alternative actions they could have taken?
 - Discuss with students how these women’s families were starving during the Civil War, and the government was not adequately compensating them for their husbands’ service. They were also upset that inflation had caused the price of food to rise until much of it was unaffordable.
 - Consider the year this took place. Does the action of these women surprise you? Why or why not?
 - What does this event teach us about the difficulties faced by those living during the period of America’s Civil War?
 - Based on what you’ve learned about the Salisbury Bread Riot, how would you characterize it? Was it a protest? A riot? Looting or justified actions? Can you think of any other events throughout history to today that this compares to?
 - Was this an effective form of protest? Would it work to help deal with food insecurity today?
 - What determines when actions of desperate people are understandable and/or justified, or illegal and punishable?
6. As a culminating assignment, have students assume the role of the Governor of NC and write a response to the letter received from the women. During a subsequent class, teachers can have students break into

small groups and exchange letters with one another, discussing similarities and differences in their various creative responses.

Name: _____

Warm Up: What Would You Do?

Imagine you are a woman living in **Salisbury, North Carolina in 1863**. You have three young children and your husband is serving in the Confederate army. He has been away for two years and without him to work the small farm you own your family is starving. You have tried begging for help from your male relatives and neighbors, but there are not many of them left home because most men have been conscripted into the Confederate army. Food is outrageously expensive and with the little money you have you cannot buy enough to feed your family.

List at least three choices of actions you would could take, and note the potential consequences of each action. Finally, weigh your choices and made a decision: What would you do and why do you think this is the best option?

1. CHOICE:

CONSEQUENCES:

2. CHOICE:

CONSEQUENCES:

3. CHOICE:

CONSEQUENCES:

FINAL DECISION:

Primary Source 1: Article Excerpt from the CAROLINA WATCHMAN - MARCH 23, 1863

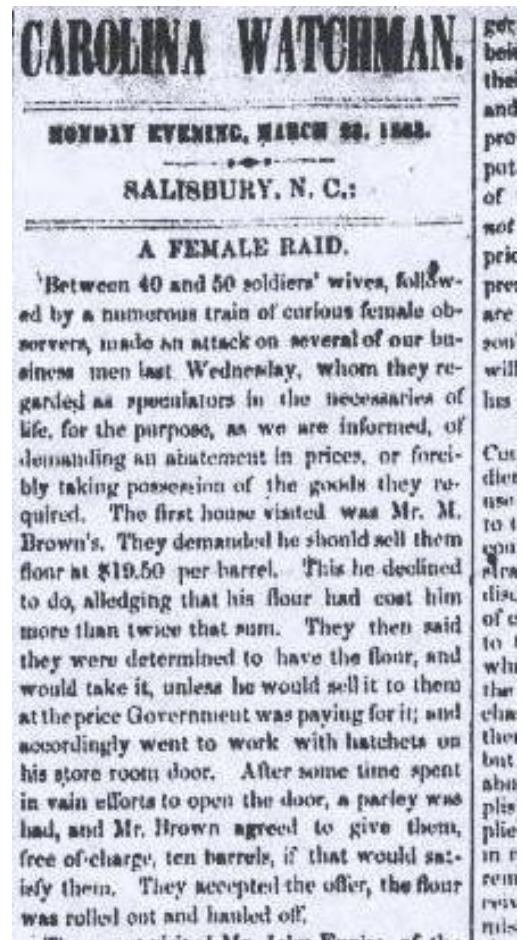
CAROLINA WATCHMAN. MONDAY EVENING, MARCH 23, 1863. SALISBURY, N. C.
A FEMALE RAID.

Between 40 and 50 soldiers wives, followed by a numerous train of curious female observers, made an attack on several of our business men last Wednesday, whom they regarded as speculators in the necessaries of life, for the purpose, as we are informed, of demanding an abatement in prices, or forcibly taking possession of the goods they required.

The first house visited was Mr. M. Brown's. They demanded he should sell them flour at \$19.50 per barrel. This he declined to do, alledging that his flour had cost him more than twice that sum. They then said they were determined to have the flour, and would take it, unless he would sell it to them at the price Government was paying for it; and accordingly went to work with hatchets on his store room door. After some time spent in vain efforts to open the door, a parley was had, and Mr. Brown agreed to give them free of charge, ten barrels, if that would satisfy them. They accepted the offer, the flour was rolled out and hauled off...

<< *The article goes on to list several other store owners who the women visited and demanding goods from. When the "raid" was complete, the women had obtained twenty three barrels of flour as well as quantities of molasses, salt, and even twenty dollars in cash.* >>

...The next morning was spent in settling the question of division a delicate, and as it proved, a difficult question. There was some disputing, flashing of eyes, and some angry words. It was, however, accomplished, whether satisfactorily to all or no, we cannot say. This movement was aimed as a blow at the practice of speculating in provisions. Whether or not it fell on proper subjects is not for us to determine. Indeed, that is a question which none should presumptuously decide. These proceedings were also caused, in part, by pinching want. It is said there are many families in this town and vicinity who have not tasted meat for weeks, and some times, months together. Of course they have had no butter, molasses, or sugar. Many of them have no gardens and consequently no vegetables of their own raising; and the scarcity and high price of potatoes, peas, beans, &c., render it extremely difficult if at all possible, for them to obtain these articles. What, then, have they to support life? Bread and water! Bread is the only thing with their limited means they could provide for themselves; and at present prices, it is not very easy for even the industrious poor to provide this. They certainly cannot afford to buy flour at \$50 per barrel...



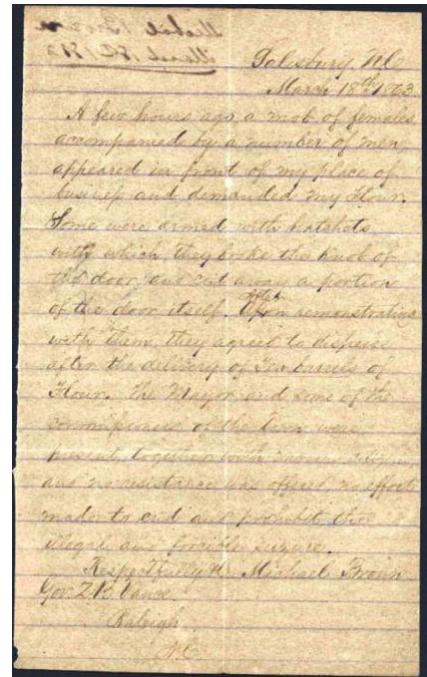
Primary Source 2: Letter from Business Owner to Governor about the Bread Riot

Salisbury, NC March 18th 1863

Gov. Z. B. Vance
Raleigh N. C.

A few hours ago a mob of females accompanied by a number of men appeared in front of my place of business and demanded my Flour. Some were armed with hatchets with which they broke the knob of the door and cut away a portion of the door itself. After upon remonstrating with them they agreed to disperse after the delivery of Ten barrels of Flour. The Mayor and some of the commissioners of the town were present, together with [various citizens] and no resistance was offered, no effort made to end and prohibit the illegal and forcible seizure.

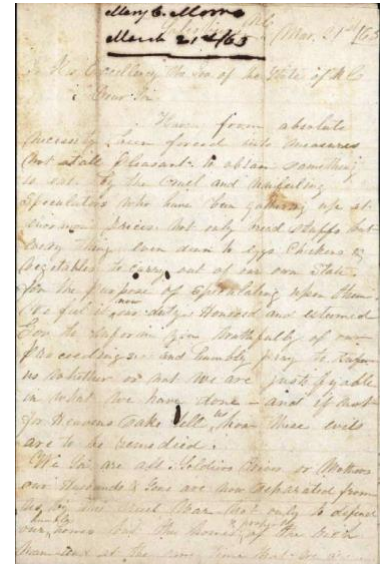
Respectfully C Michael Brown



Primary Source 3: Letter from the Riotting Women to the Governor

Salisbury NC Mar. 21st 1863

To His Excellency the Gov of the State of NC Dear Sir- Having from absolute necessity been forced into measures not at all pleasant to obtain something to eat by the cruel and unfeeling Speculators who have been gathering up at enormous prices, not only bread stuffs but every thing, even down to eggs Chickens & vegetables to carry out of our own State for the purpose of speculating upon them. We feel it /now/ our duty, Honored and esteemed Gov to inform you truthfully of our proceedings and humbly pray to inform us whether or not we are justifiable [sic] in what we have done and if not for Heavens sake tell /us/ how these evils are to be remedied. We Sir are all Soldiers Wives or Mothers our Husbands & Sons are now separated from us by this cruel War not only to defend our /humble/ homes but the homes /& property/ of the rich man- and at the same time that we are



Name: _____

Primary Source Review

Look at the document's image & text. What stands out to you? What does this document appear to be?		
Document 1	Document 2	Document 3
Who wrote it and to whom is it addressed?		
1	2	3
When was it written and from where?		
1	2	3
Summarize this document – what is it about?		
1	2	3
For what purpose did the author(s) write it and what evidence makes you think this?		
1	2	3
Can the information the author shares be trusted? Why or why not?		
1	2	3
What was happening at the time in history when these documents were written?		
What questions do you have about these documents or their content?		