



Privateers in the War of 1812 Lesson

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STANDARDS:

US History Standards

Era 4 – Expansion and Reform (1801-1861)

- Standard 1A: The student understands the international background and consequences of the Louisiana Purchase, the War of 1812, and the Monroe Doctrine.

LESSON:

The War of 1812 was fought on three fronts: in the Atlantic Ocean, on the United States-Canadian border, and in the American South and Gulf Coast. In the Atlantic Ocean, American and British warships, along with privateers, attacked merchant ships from the opposing side.

Study the role of privateers in the War of 1812. Find information and stories about American and British privateers in published histories. Questions to guide discussion include:

- Why did the British and United States governments need to use privateers in their war efforts?
- Who were privateers? How did they become associated with the war?
- What duties did privateers perform during the war?
- What did privateers have to gain by helping? Was their compensation fair?
- How did the privateers affect the outcome of the war?
- How did the Atlantic Ocean front in the War of 1812 affect the other war fronts?

Study the War of 1812 Prize Cases, Southern District Court, NY on Fold3.com. These records detail the legality of capture of British vessels during the War of 1812 by US Navy vessels and American privateers. They also detail the distribution of the ship and its cargo.

Divide students into groups to research a variety of the War of 1812 Prize Cases. Each group should be given a year of cases to search from 1812 to 1816. Groups should record information about:

- Ships Captured
- Who captured the ship
- Cargo aboard captured ship
- Stories of how enemy vessels were captured

As a class, discuss the commonalities amongst the prize cases:

- What goods were being transferred on ships to and from the United States during the 1810s?
- What types of ships were most likely to be captured?
- Why was it important to the United States government to capture these ships?

- Who received the cargo after the ship was captured? Was this fair? Why or why not?
- What differences existed between the cases early in the war and the cases occurring late in the war?
- What privateers were most effective in capturing enemy vessels?
- Why was the United States court system used to determine how cargo was distributed?