The Battle of Gettysburg: Analyzing Maps to Choose the “Good Ground”

Overview: In this lesson, students will be analyzing topographical maps of Gettysburg, PA and its surrounding areas to determine the location(s)—the “good ground”—they believe would be best for placing Union troops to win the battle. They will be exposed to the situation that Union soldiers faced on July 1, 1863 (Day 1 of the battle), as well as how to read and interpret a topographical map. After studying and analyzing maps of the battlefield, they will label their own maps with the best locations to place troops in order to gain the advantage over Confederate soldiers, as well as the ground that should be avoided. Finally, they will write a short essay explaining both the ground that they would choose and the ground that they would avoid, providing evidence to justify their analysis. The initial portion of this lesson should be conducted in a computer lab, unless all students have tablet access.

National Geography Standards: Standard 1: How to use maps and other geographic representations, geospatial technologies, and spatial thinking to understand and communicate information. Standard 3: How to analyze the spatial organization of people, places, and environments on Earth’s surface. Standard 15: How physical systems affect human systems.

Oregon Geography Content Standards: Standard 1: Apply geographic skills, concepts, and technologies to gather, display, and analyze spatial information. Social Studies Analysis Standard 4: Analyze characteristics, causes, and consequences of an event, issue, problem or phenomenon.

Connections to Common Core: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.1 Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.3 Analyze in detail a series of events described in a text; determine whether earlier events caused later ones or simply preceded them. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.7 Integrate quantitative or technical analysis (e.g., charts, research data) with qualitative analysis in print or digital text.

Objectives: In completing this exercise, students should be able to:

• Demonstrate comprehension of informational text in writing and in small-group discussion.
• Analyze topographical maps to make an informed decision about where is the best ground to place troops to win the battle of Gettysburg.
• Construct their own maps labeling the best ground to place troops, as well as ground to avoid.
• Provide details from the topographical maps as evidence and produce a short essay justifying their decision for where to place troops, and what areas should be avoided.

Grade Levels: 8th, 9th, or 10th Grade                          Time: 2 to 3 one hour class periods

Materials:

• Maps showing Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Washington, D.C. (Textbook or online)
• Handout: “Day 1 Scenario: The Battle of Gettysburg” (see attachment)
• Handout: Map of Battle of Gettysburg (Better for printing) found at: http://www.shenandoah-studio.com/mapping-history/#!prettyPhoto
• Topographic Map of the Battle of Gettysburg (website only) found at: http://www.topoquest.com/map.php?lat=39.82451&lon=-77.23078&datum=nad27&zoom=16&map=auto&coord=d&mode=pan&size=l
• Days 1, 2, and 3 maps of the Battle of Gettysburg found at: http://www.pbs.org/civilwar/war/map12.html
• (Optional article addition) NY Times article: “Digital Maps are Giving Scholars the Historical Lay of the Land” by Patricia Cohen found at: http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/27/arts/geographic-information-systems-help-scholars-see-history.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0
• (Optional article addition) Civil War Times Magazine article “Were Maps Lee’s Real Enemies at Gettysburg?” by Earl B. McElfresh found at: http://www.historynet.com/were-maps-lees-real-enemy-at-gettysburg.htm
• Handout: “Writing Prompt: Analyzing Maps to Choose the ‘Good Ground’” (see attachment)
• Markers, colored pencils, or crayons for labeling maps
• PC or tablet computer with internet access

Background: This is a lesson that could be taught in an 8th Grade U.S. History course during a historical study of the Civil War. It is also appropriate for a 9th Grade Human Geography course during a study of the relationship and interaction between human and physical geography or a study of analyzing topographical maps. Finally, this lesson could also be incorporated into a 10th Grade Global History course during a historical study of the Civil War. The initial portion of this lesson should probably be conducted in a computer lab, unless all students have tablet access.

Procedures:

• Hand out the “Day 1 Scenario” and review aloud with students. After reading through the scenario, review the locations of Virginia, Washington, D.C., and Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, showing where the Army of Northern Virginia and the Union Army were located just prior to the Battle of Gettysburg.
• On their own, students will briefly study the two maps (links in Materials) of the Battle of Gettysburg online.
• Hand out or view online the “Reading Topographic Maps & Making Calculations.” Students may read the entire handout, or focus only on pages 12 – 16.
• After reviewing the kinds of weapons, equipment, manpower, animal power, and transport that were used in this kind of fighting, give students about five minutes to brainstorm a list of the kind of physical geographic features that would be advantageous in battle.
• Students quickly discuss with their neighbors their list of ideas for what kinds of geographic features would provide advantages in battle.
• Teacher should ask the whole class review questions about the scenario they were given, and what area on the map that the initial confrontation took place in.
• Going back to the topographic maps of the battlefield, students should mentally (don’t mark anything yet) note areas that they believe would provide advantages to the Union, as well as areas that should be avoided. Students should focus on the questions of, “what advantages does the good ground you chose provide?” and, “what disadvantages or obstacles does the bad ground you chose provide?” in studying the maps.
• Students should then form small groups of three to four students (they can form their own groups, or the teacher can choose the groups for them). In their groups, they should discuss the areas on the maps that they made mental notes as being advantageous for placing troops, as well as the areas that they thought should be avoided, and their reasons for thinking that.
• After their discussion, the group should be in agreement about their good and bad locations. Every member of the group should then label and color in their maps, marking the good and bad ground to place troops. Every map in the group should be consistent.
• When every group has completed their maps, the groups should then take about thirty seconds each, rotating from group to group presenting and briefly discussing their maps and the reasons why they chose that ground and comparing their responses to the other groups.
• After comparing with other groups, the teacher can then show the class the three maps for days 1, 2, and 3. The students should compare and analyze where they decided to place troops versus what actually happened during the battle. The teacher should emphasize where the Confederate Army
staged their attacks, where the Union Army placed themselves while they waited for reinforcements to arrive, and the turning of the tide in the battle once the Union reinforcements arrived.

- Hand out the “Writing Prompt: Analyzing Maps to Choose the ‘Good Ground,’” and the students should begin writing.

**Assessment:** During the activity, the teacher will formatively assess students in groups and individually based off of the quality of their ideas on the map and their group discussions, as well as their ideas about what kinds of physical geographic features would be advantageous or a hindrance to success in battle. The summative assessment for this activity is their short essays in which they must clearly explain and justify with evidence where they would and would not place troops.

**Extensions:** Students could read and discuss the two additional articles, “Digital Maps are Giving Scholars the Historical Lay of the Land,” and “Were Maps Lee’s Real Enemies at Gettysburg?” Additionally, the teacher could lead the class on a photographic tour of the battlefield at Gettysburg, so that the students could see with their own eyes how the physical geography actually looked during the battle.