Harper’s Ferry Under Fire Activity

Preparation:

Copy the family information sheets (pages 4-8). You will need one or two copies of each page.

Copy the letter (page 3). You will need one page for each group.

Directions:

Divide the class into groups of 4 or 5 students. Give each group a different family information sheet. The students should discuss the family’s circumstances and decide if they believe the family left or remained in Harper’s Ferry during the war. Students should then complete the letter as a group. (15-20 minutes)

Let each group share their conclusions and explain their reasoning (10 minutes)

Share what the families actually did from answer sheet (page 2)

Allow students to reflect on the activity by answering the following questions:

Did you make the same choice as the family you studied? Why do you think they made the decision that they did?

**Under Fire Kit (Should We Stay or Should We Go?)
Harper’s Ferry Family Fates**

**Roeder Family**

Frederick Roeder, father of the Roeder Family, was killed on July 4, 1861, by a Union sniper by the river. Though for the Union himself, he was mistaken for a rebel by a soldier on the opposite side of the river.

May Roeder, the eldest daughter at 18, was left in charge of her six younger siblings, and along with her fiancé, John Kern, chose to leave Harpers Ferry at various times throughout the war. Mary and her family continued to support the Union cause, however, and through the war offered food and their home for medical storage to the United States Christian Commission, a soldier’s relief organization. The Roeders returned to Harpers Ferry after the war.

**Wilson Family**

The Wilson family left Harpers Ferry at the beginning of the war. They went to Springfield, Massachusetts, site of the United States’ second armory. Here the sons worked until the end of the war. Following the war, some of the Wilsons returned to Harpers Ferry while other remained in the North. In 1900, the census reveals that other members of the Wilson family returned to Harpers Ferry, nearly 40 years after the war had caused them to leave.

**Stipes Family**

Cornelia Stipes and her three daughters remained in Harpers Ferry for the course of the war, running a successful boarding house where soldiers and civilians alike often sought comforts of home. Resourceful in her business endeavors, Mrs. Stipes’ boarding house thrived throughout the war, keeping food on her table and her family from starving. In the words of one of her boarders, James Taylor, a war correspondent and artist, Mrs. Stipes “keeps the wolf from the door.”

**Gilbert Family**

The Gilbert Family stayed in Harpers Ferry through the entire war. In 1863, the Emancipation Proclamation freed Isaac, and he supported his family by working for the U.S. Quartermaster and civilian express company. After the war, the family bought a house on High Street in 1869, and the Gilbert children became part of the first generation of African-Americans to legally attend school.

**Marmion Family**

Dr. Marmion, his wife Lydia, and seven of their fourteen children decided to stay in Harpers Ferry during the war. Dr. Marmion was the only physician to remain in town through the war. The war threatened the Marmion family with hunger, homelessness, disease and death, but they survived. Years after the war, Annie Marmion, between the ages 8 and 12 during the war, wrote her memoirs of her experiences in war-torn Harpers Ferry. She remained a citizen of the town for the remainder of her life.

13 September 186-

Dear \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_,

With the suggestion of violence we have thus far experienced here in Harpers Ferry, we have been forced to decide whether we should leave our home and seek safety elsewhere. Harpers Ferry has become a dangerous place to live because \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

If we choose to stay in Harpers Ferry while the war continues, three of the dangers, consequences, or hardships we might be forced to endure are \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

Our family has decided to \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Harpers Ferry for the duration of the war. We decided to do this because \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
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Yours faithfully,

**Should We Stay or Should We Go?**

**The Gilbert Family**

You are the Gilbert family. The Gilbert family includes Isaac, Sarah, and their three small children. Isaac works as a laborer and Sarah as a domestic. Isaac is a slave. Susan Harding owns Isaac and allows Gilbert to keep the money he earns except for a small annual amount that he pays to her. Although illegal, this allows Isaac to purchase his family’s freedom. Gilbert could not by his family, so he asked the town mayor, Fontaine Beckham, to buy them for him. Beckham agreed to buy Isaac’s family and hold their papers until Gilbert had enough money to buy his own freedom. During John Brown’s raid, Beckham was shot and killed. His will gave Sarah and the children their freedom. Isaac’s owner now allows him to live with his wife and children. Should you stay or should you leave? Why is this a good choice? What are the consequences of your decision?

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **The Gilbert Family** |  |  |
| **Name** | **Family Role** | **Age** |
| Isaac Gilbert | Father | 50 |
| Sarah | Mother | 36 |
| John | Son | 6 |
| Helen | Daughter | 5 |
| Isaac | Son | 2 |

**Should We Stay or Should We Go?**

**The Wilson Family**

You are the Wilson family. Maria Wilson is a 47-year-old widow whose husband, James, a gun-maker at the Armory, died in 1856. She has six children; three boys and three girls between the ages of 8 and 23. Her sons, Norval, William, and Emanuel, work in the National Armory and are gun-makers. The sons learned the trade of gun-making from their father. The family moved to Harpers Ferry (Bolivar) sometime in the 1840s. Should you stay or should you leave? Why is this a good choice? What are the consequences of your decision?

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **The Wilson Family** |  |  |
| **Name** | **Family Role** | **Age** |
| Maria Wilson | Mother | 47 |
| Norval | Son | 23 |
| Ann | Daughter | 22 |
| William | Son | 20 |
| Emanuel | Son | 18 |
| Mary | Daughter | 11 |
| Sarah | Daughter | 8 |

**Should We Stay or Should We Go?**

**The Roeder Family**

You are the Roeder family. Frederick and Marie Roeder emigrated from Saxony, Germany, to Harpers Ferry. They are bakers and confectioners, known for their cakes and candy. They have a large family of seven children. Although they were not very wealthy when they came to America, they now have a nice home and two successful businesses. Frederick Roeder is an active member of the Harpers Ferry community and is believed to be a Unionist and sympathetic to the Republican Party. Frederick’s wife, Marie, died just before the war began. Frederick is now a single parent in a country at war. Should you stay or should you leave? Why is this a good choice? What are the consequences of your decision?

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| **The Roeder Family** |  |  |
| **Name** | **Family Role** | **Age** |
| Frederick Roeder | Father | 50 |
| Mary | Daughter | 17 |
| Matilda | Daughter | 15 |
| Augustus | Son | 13 |
| James | Son | 11 |
| Emma | Daughter | 8 |
| Albert | Son | 3 |
| Julia | Daughter | 1 |

**Should We Stay or Should We Go?**

**The Stipes Family**

You are the Stipes family. Cornelia Stipes lives with her three teenage daughters. Her husband died many years ago and her one son was killed when he tried to jump on a moving train. She had to find a way of supporting a boarding house, one of the few occupations to women in those days. The family has many relatives living in Harpers Ferry. Should you stay or should you leave? Why is this a good choice? What are the consequences of your decision?

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| **The Stipes Family** |  |  |
| **Name** | **Family Role** | **Age** |
| Cornelia Stipes | Mother | 43 |
| Anna | Daughter | 20 |
| Martha | Daughter | 18 |
| Medora | Daughter | 15 |

**Should We Stay or Should We Go?**

**The Marmion Family**

You are the Marmion family. Nicholas Marmion is a prominent Harpers Ferry physician. He and his wife Lydia Hall Marmion have fourteen children, seven of whom are living at home at the time of the Civil War. Dr. Marmion came from Ireland. His wife, Lydia Hall, is the daughter of the famous inventor, John Hall. The Hall family came from Maine. The Marmion family owns considerable property in the local area. Marmion’s best friend is the local Catholic priest, Father Costello, who decided to stay and take care of those who cannot leave. Should you stay or should you leave? Why is this a good choice? What are the consequences of your decision?

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| **The Marmion Family** |  |  |
| **Name** | **Family Role** | **Age** |
| Nicholas Marmion | Father | 69 |
| Lydia | Mother | 42 |
| Robert | Son | 18 |
| George | Son | 16 |
| Mary | Daughter | 13 |
| Isabel | Daughter | 10 |
| Annie | Daughter | 9 |
| Nicholas | Son | 6 |
| Rosalie | Daughter | 3 |