

# Powder Monkeys and the American Civil War



NATIONAL MUSEUM *of the*  
UNITED STATES NAVY



Boys as young as 10 used to work on board **vessels** in battle. These boys were known as powder boys or powder monkeys. In this activity packet, we will look at the roles of powder monkeys and view the American Civil War through the eyes of these young men.

Contact the National Museum of the U.S. Navy for Field Trip and School Visit opportunities!

\*This packet is intended for elementary schools to be used in groups of three or fewer and/or individually.

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### **For Teachers: Core Standards**

#### **DC:**

SS 5.5 -Students summarize the causes and consequences of the Civil War.

**5.** Describe the experience of the war on the battlefield and home front. (M, S)

**1.** Students use context primary and secondary sources, such as maps, charts, graphs, photographs, works of art, and technical charts.

#### **DC/Maryland**

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.3

Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.

#### **VA:**

USI.9 The student will apply social science skills to understand the causes, major events, and effects of the Civil War by

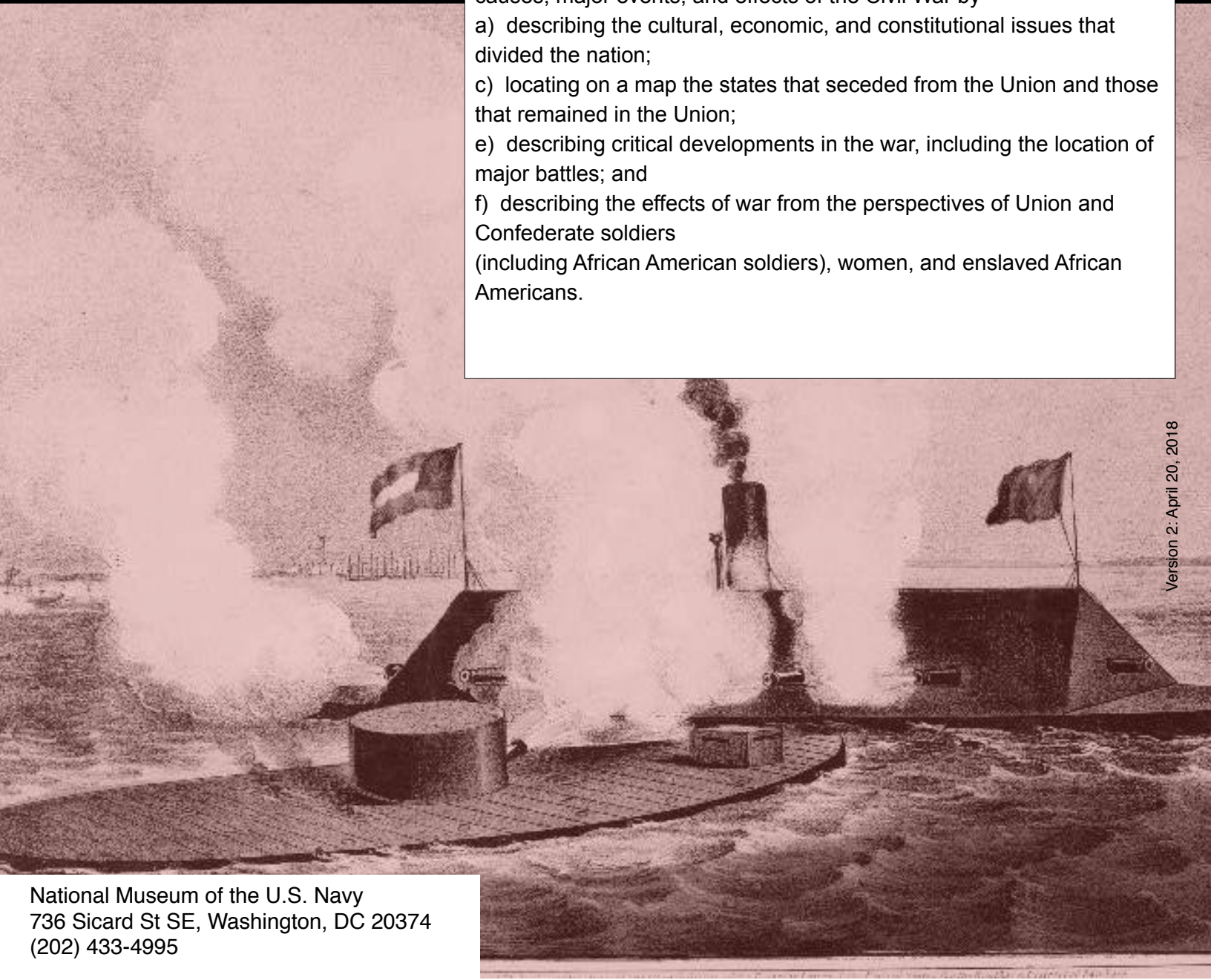
a) describing the cultural, economic, and constitutional issues that divided the nation;

c) locating on a map the states that seceded from the Union and those that remained in the Union;

e) describing critical developments in the war, including the location of major battles; and

f) describing the effects of war from the perspectives of Union and Confederate soldiers

(including African American soldiers), women, and enslaved African Americans.



## What are “Powder Monkeys”?

American naval battles in the 19th century relied on the bravery of Powder Monkeys, or Powder Boys. These boys worked long hours and lived under hard conditions on United States Navy **vessels**. The Navy hired boys aged 10-14 because of their size. Smaller boys could move quickly and easily throughout the ship, carrying **gun powder** from the Powder Room on the lowest level of the ship (**the hold**) to the guns and cannons during battle. Leather bags were used to carry the powder, and the boys would carry two at a time. These boys would even carry the powder barefoot to run faster! Even harder, they had to run through the ship while the enemy fired cannons at them and without running into the other Sailors onboard.

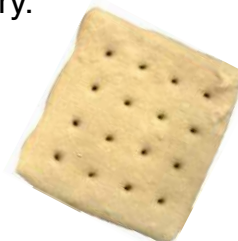
Powder Monkeys served at the lowest military rank on the ship and were paid roughly \$6/month for their work. That is about \$140/month today! When the ship was not at battle, powder boys helped with laundry, scrubbed decks, cooked in the **galley**, and helped with the livestock on board. At night, the boys would not sleep with the rest of the crew. While every member of the crew on board slept in hammocks, the hammocks of the powder monkeys were on a lower level of the vessel. Hammocks were taken down every morning and moved to the edge of the ship to protect it from attacks!

## Wait, livestock were on board the ship?



That's right! Fresh food was hard to keep on ships for long periods of time. Most of the time, Sailors would have to eat hard biscuits called hardtack. Sailors would often have to soak the biscuit in coffee or water because they were too hard to eat. Many times, the hardtack was so old that bugs like maggots and weevils would be on them! To keep the sailors healthy and eating fresh food, the Navy would provide chickens, kept in coops on the ship's **stern**. Powder monkeys would often have to care for these chickens when the ship was not fighting. Chickens could provide fresh eggs for the crew daily, keeping sailors from getting sick or hungry.

Little bugs like weevils (seen here) and maggots would be on old hard tack that sailors had to eat!



## Notable Powder Monkeys in the Civil War

### James Machon:

James worked as a “boy” onboard the USS *Brooklyn*\* during the Civil War. The USS *Brooklyn* worked with 17 other ships to **blockade** and take control of Fort Morgan near Mobile, Alabama. Confederate ships worked hard to defend control of this very important fort. In fact, the CSS *Tennessee*\* rammed into the USS *Brooklyn*, launching a strong attack on the ship and crew aboard. Cannons and firearms shot at the *Brooklyn* killed numerous crew members on deck who were working the cannons. James Machon, 16 years old, continued to restock the firearms with gun powder, even after cannons from the *Tennessee* destroyed areas of the gun deck. Because of his bravery, the CSS *Tennessee* surrendered to the United States.



### Oscar Peck and George Hollat:

Peck and Hollat both served on the USS *Varuna* during the Battle of Fort Jackson and St. Phillip. U.S. forces were attempting to take control of New Orleans, the largest city in the Confederacy. The CSS *Governor Moore* rammed into the USS *Varuna* twice and, with another blow from CSS *Stonewall Jackson*, began to sink. Oscar Peck and George Hollat, along with several other crew members, continued to fire at Confederate ships, badly damaging them, while the USS *Varuna* was sinking. Both Peck and Hollat earned the Medal of Honor for their bravery.

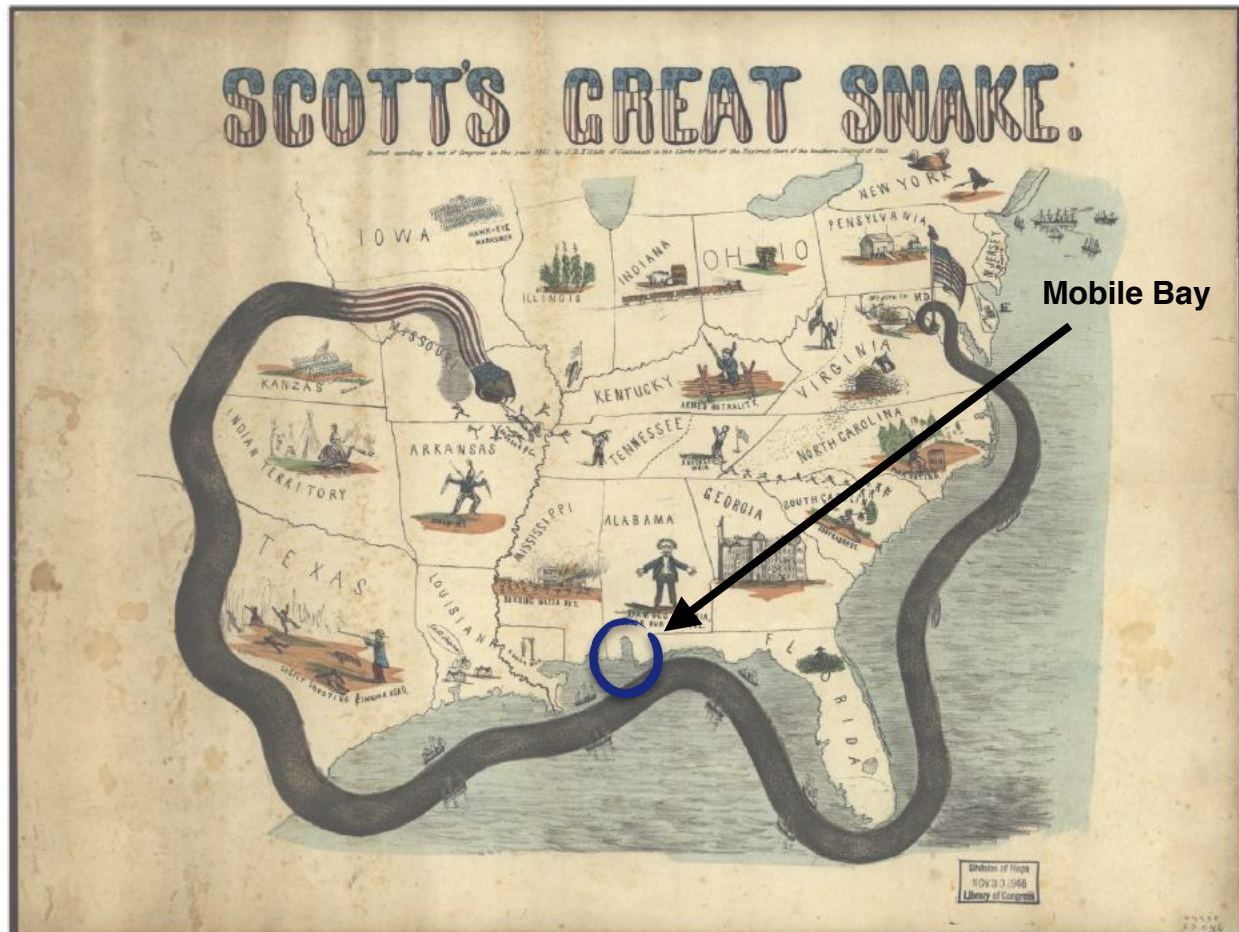


James, Oscar, and George all earned the Medal of Honor during **blockades**. The Confederate States could not make many guns or other weapons, so they would trade with crops and cotton. Other countries would sell them supplies, so the U.S. blockaded all important trading ports to keep the Confederacy from getting supplies. Let's learn about blockades!

\*USS stands for “United States Ship” and is used for any ship paid for and used by the United States Navy.

\*CSS stands for Confederate States Ship

## Blockades- The Anaconda Plan



General Winfield Scott of the U.S. Navy decided to **blockade** the Confederacy in order to win the American Civil War. People started calling it the “Anaconda Plan” because, like a snake, the Navy wanted to squeeze the Confederacy of its supplies.

### How did the United States blockade the South?

The United States used up to 500 ships to patrol the coast of the Confederacy from Virginia to Florida and the Gulf Coast from Florida to Texas. They focused on major ports like New Orleans and Mobile, Alabama. James, Oscar, and George (the Powder Monkeys we listed) all participated in this blockade.

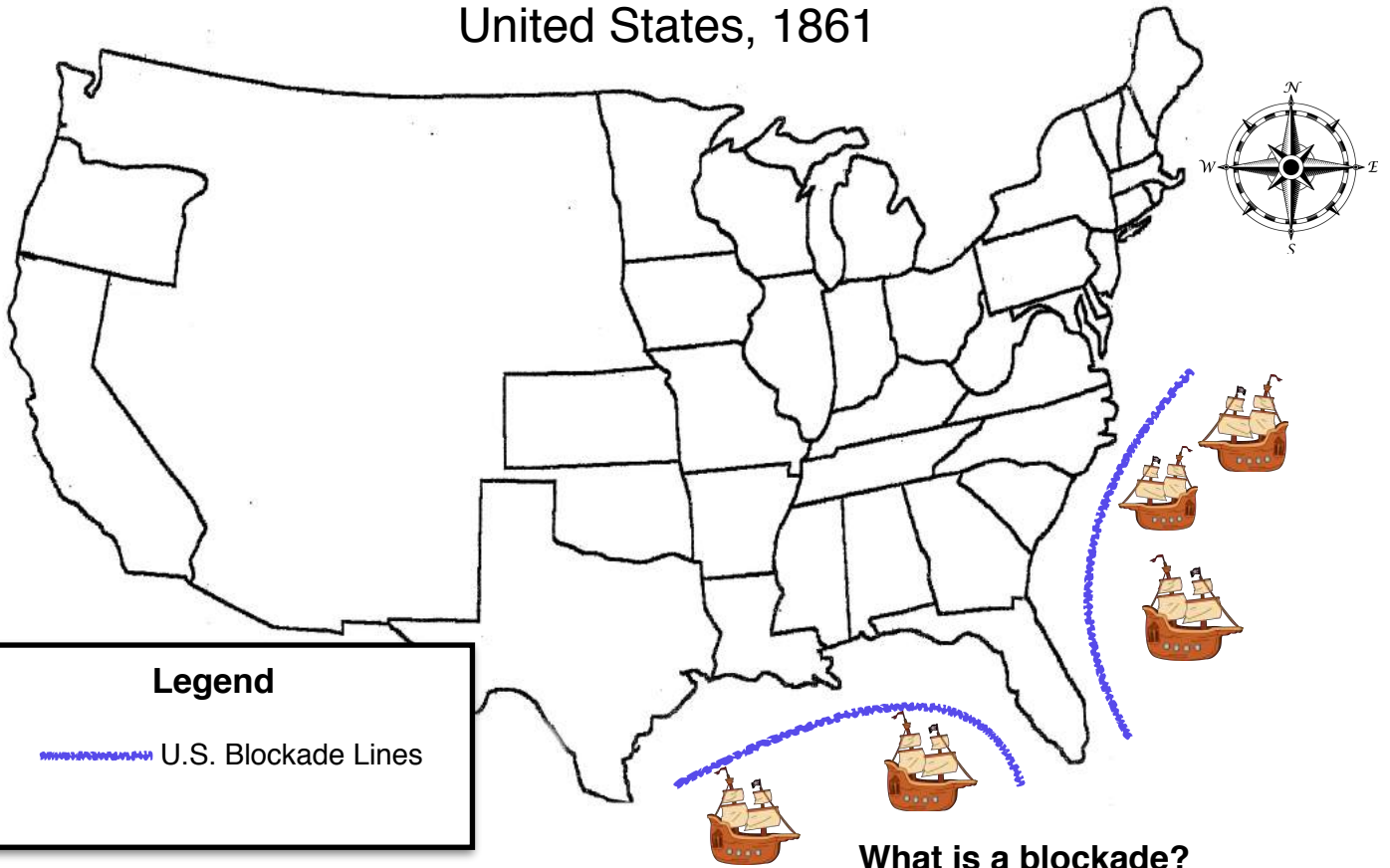
Most Confederate ships made it through the blockade, but by the end of the war, it was clear that this Anaconda Plan helped to end the Civil War.

### Battle of Mobile Bay

The U.S. used a blockade to get control of the Mobile Bay, a part of the Gulf of Mexico. It was here that James, Oscar, and George earned their Medals of Honor. The United States Navy used mainly Ironclad ships while the Confederacy used old fashioned frigates, or sailing, ships. The U.S. Navy beat the Confederacy pretty easily because ironclads were stronger and faster. You’ll learn about ironclads and frigates on page 8.

# Civil War Map Activity- Blockades

United States, 1861



## What is a blockade?

A blockade is when one country uses ships to stop (or block) people or supplies from entering or leaving another country.

1. Color in the United States with one color, and the Confederate States with a different color. Any color you'd like!

2. Why would a blockade help win a war?

- What supplies would an army need to win a war?

Clothes,

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3. Has something ever been "blocked" from you because you misbehaved? What was it? Dessert,

## Lesson Vocabulary

**Blockade-** When one country uses ships to stop (or block) people or supplies from entering or leaving another country.

**Galley-** The kitchen in a ship or airport.

**Gun Powder-** Explosive powders used to launch bullets or cannonballs from guns and cannons

**Hold (noun)-** A space for carrying cargo. Holds in older ships were below the lowest deck (level) of the ship.

**Stern-** The back of the ship.

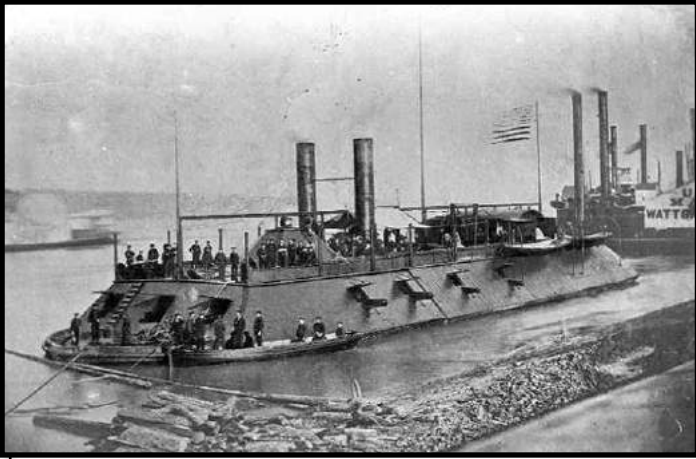
**Vessel-** A ship or large boat.

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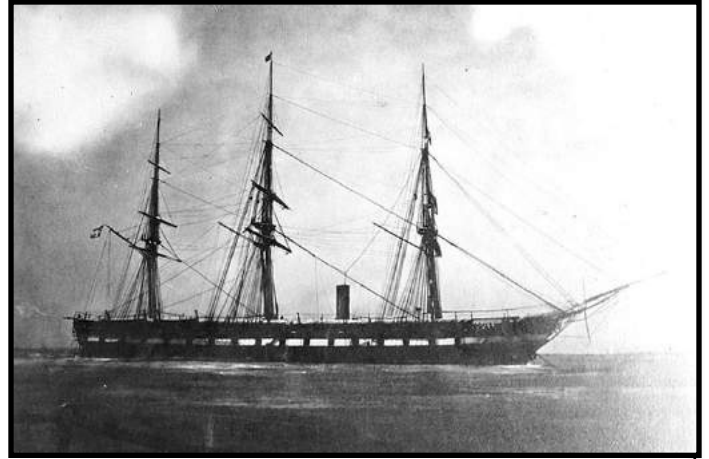
Fill in the following sentences with the vocabulary words you just learned.  
Use context clues to help:

Powder Monkeys carried \_\_\_\_\_ from the \_\_\_\_\_ of the \_\_\_\_\_. Three very brave powder monkeys named James Machon, Oscar Peck, and George Hollat helped the United States \_\_\_\_\_ the Confederacy during the American Civil War. When they were not fighting, powder monkeys would help cook in the \_\_\_\_\_, feed chickens at the \_\_\_\_\_ of the ship, and clean.

## Primary Sources- Compare and Contrast



**Ironclad (Steam Powered)**



**Frigate (Steam and Wind Powered)**

The United States and Confederate Navies used two different types of vessels during battle. A new invention, the Ironclad, was surrounded by iron or steel to protect it from attacks. It also had few windows, making it a dark and difficult place to work. Frigates were traditional wooden vessels that were easier to move. The open air deck made it easier to see the enemy, but it was also easier to destroy a frigate.

**Compare and Contrast these two. What makes them good? What makes them bad? Which would you prefer in battle?**

Good **Ironclad** Bad      Good **Frigate** Bad

Which do you prefer?



## Letter Writing

Dear Sister Abby,

I hope this letter finds you well. It has been a busy few weeks since I came aboard our ship. I miss mother's cooking and sleeping in a real bed, but am getting used to life at sea. My main job is bringing the gunpowder to the cannons during battle, so I have gotten very fast at running between decks. Yesterday, I was asked to climb up the mast to help with the sails. You can see for miles up there! I will write again when something exciting happens.

Your loving brother,  
Isaac

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### Directions

- Read the following letter from a sailor during the Civil War.
- Write your own letter about daily life at sea as if you were one of the three powder monkeys we have learned about: James Machon, Oscar Peck, or George Hollat.
- Use the following words in your writing: **blockade**, **galley**, **gunpowder**, **hold(n)**, **stern**, and **vessel**.

