Alfred Sinker Joins the Army

Era: Civil War and Reconstruction (1850-1877)

Background:

Alfred Tarleton Sinker was just fifteen years old when he enlisted in the Union army. Born on May 11, 1846 in Flintshire, England, Alfred immigrated to America with his parents, Edward and Sarah Sinker, at the age of four. The family settled in Indianapolis, Indiana, where Edward entered the manufacturing business.

On August 24, 1861, fifteen-year old Alfred left his Indianapolis home and made his way to Cincinnati, Ohio, where he lied about his age and enlisted in the 5th Independent Battery of Ohio Light Artillery on September 2. Alfred's regiment was soon sent to the St. Louis Arsenal. Edward Sinker, meanwhile, discovered his son's whereabouts and came to St. Louis to petition for a writ of habeas corpus in Federal court. Federal law prohibited the enlistment of boys under eighteen without the permission of their parent or guardian. Judge Samuel Treat found the evidence convincing, and issued a writ of habeas corpus to the commander of the St. Louis Arsenal. Alfred was discharged without delay on September 10.

Alfred's desire to serve in the military seems to have been fulfilled: an Alfred T. Sinker appears on the rolls of the 132nd Indiana Infantry, which was mustered into service on May 18, 1864 (just days after Alfred turned eighteen). He survived the war, married, and had children. In 1901, Alfred applied for a disability pension, claiming incapacity due to cerebral hemorrhages and an old stab wound near the base of his spine. He claimed to have served as a commissary sergeant in the 30th Indiana Infantry as well as the 5th Independent Battery. Alfred's claim was abandoned after the Pension Office failed to find any evidence of service in the 30th Indiana Infantry. Perhaps his memory of his second regiment's ordinal number betrayed him: yet, could he have served in the 30th Infantry as well, perhaps under a false name? In his pension application, Alfred stated that a Dr. Bodman of Indianapolis had been the 30th Infantry's surgeon. Sure enough, one Elam Bodman of Indianapolis enlisted in the 30th Indiana Infantry as an assistant surgeon on March 20, 1863. The mystery awaits further investigation.

Alfred Sinker died at the age of fifty-eight in Giffords, New York in 1904.

Suggested Teaching Activities:

1. GOVERNMENT/CIVICS (9-12): Contract law. Ask students to examine the following issues: How does Habeas Corpus relate to underage enlistment? How does Sinker's father relate contract law to this situation? ("owes service and labor" to father) What could the military have done during the Civil War to ensure that no underage person enlisted?

2. GOVERNMENT/CIVICS/HISTORY (7-12): The right of Habeas Corpus allows those imprisoned to challenge their imprisonment. Sinker's father's petition for Habeas Corpus was not controversial and was granted immediately. This right, however, can be suspended under the Constitution during wartime. Both Lincoln and Jefferson Davis suspended Habeas Corpus during the Civil War. Research the history of these suspensions. Read responses by critics as well defenders of the suspensions. Write a letter to the editor of a Civil War era newspaper from the point of either a critic or a defender of one or both of these men for their actions.

3. HISTORY (5-12): What Ifs. Research the history of Sinker's unit after he left it, read Sinker's 3-page biography, and research Sinker's family in Census records (by 1880 he had a wife and kids). Develop five what if questions. Then use the information gathered to develop possible answers to those questions.

4. LANGUAGE ARTS (5-12): Read Sinker's 3-page biography, then read the opening of *Red Badge of Courage* to determine the reasons for Fleming to enlist. Brainstorm possible reasons Alfred would want to run away and enlist. Write an imaginary goodbye letter from Alfred to his father. Then write an imaginary letter from Alfred's father to his son in reaction to the goodbye letter.

5. HISTORY/ECONOMICS (7-12): Alfred's pension was denied because no record of his service could be found. Research the topic of Civil War pensions. How much would he have received as a private? How much as a commissary sergeant? What if he had been an officer? What would the equivalent had been in today's dollars?

Standards Correlations:

National History Standards. US 5-12.
• Era 5 Civil War and Reconstruction (1850-1877)
• Standard 2.B. The student understands the social experience of the war on the battlefield and homefront.

National Standards for Civics and Government
5-8 Content Standards
• III.E. What is the place of law in the American constitutional system?
9-12 Content Standards
• III.D. What is the place of law in the American constitutional system?

Kansas Curricular Standards for History
Grade 5
• 4.4.4. The student uses information including primary sources to debate a problem or a historical issue.
• 4.4.5. The student observes and draws conclusions.
• 4.4.6. The student uses research skills to interpret an historical person or event in history and notes the sources of information.
Grade 6
• 4.4. The student engages in historical thinking skills.
Grade 7
• 1.1. The student understands the rule of law as it applies to individuals; family; school; local; state and national governments.
• 4.2. The student understands individuals, groups, ideas, events and developments during Kansas territory and the Civil War (1854-1865).
• 4.7. The student engages in historical thinking skills.
Grade 8
• 4.2. The student uses a working knowledge and understanding of individuals, groups, ideas, developments, and the causes and effect of the Civil War.
• 4.4. The student engages in historical thinking skills.
High School
• 1.1.1. The student evaluates the purpose and function of law.
• 5.5.2. The student develops historical questions on a specific topic in United States history and analyzes the evidence in primary source documents to speculate on the answers.

Missouri Social Studies Grade-Level Expectations.
Grades 5-8
• 1.B. Role of citizens and governments in carrying out constitutional principles.
• 2a.H. Understanding the causes and the consequences of the Civil War.
• 7.A. Using primary and secondary sources.
Grades 9-12
• 7.B. Selecting and analyzing primary/secondary sources.

Nebraska Social Studies/History Standards
Grades 5-8
• 8.1.6. By the end of eighth grade, students will identify and analyze causes, key events, and the effects of the Civil War and Reconstruction.
• 8.4.2. By the end of eighth grade, students will demonstrate skills for historical analysis.
Grades 9-12
• 12.1.3. By the end of twelfth grade, students will analyze the causes and effects of major events of the Civil War and Reconstruction.
• 12.1.13. By the end of twelfth grade, students will develop skills for historical analysis.

Transcription:

Some punctuation has been added; items in brackets have been added for clarification or to replace ditto marks.

[page 1]

United States of America
Eastern District of Missouri
The President of the United States of America,

To Captain Granger, Commanding at the Arsenal of St. Louis, Missouri, and to any other person having the custody of Alfred T. Sinker.

Greeting:

You are hereby commanded that you have forthwith the body of Alfred T. Sinker, now detained and illegally restrained of his liberty by you, as it is said, together with the day and cause of his caption, detention and restraint, by whatsoever name the said Alfred T. Sinker may be held, before me, Samuel Treat, District Judge of the United States of the Eastern District of Missouri, at the Room of the United States District Court for said District, at the Custom House building, in the City of St. Louis, Missouri, in said District, to do, submit to and receive whatsoever shall be considered in that behalf concerning the said Alfred T. Sinker; and that you have then and there this writ.

Witness Samuel Treat, Judge of the District Court of the United States of the Eastern District of Missouri this twelfth day of September, in the year of our Lord, eighteen hundred and sixty-one.

Samuel Treat

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This original writ was served by Me, Robert McDonald, and the body was delivered at once to said McDonald to be taken before the within named Judge, without any formal return being made to the writ.

The prisoner was thereupon discharged and a certificate of his discharge granted.

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United States of America
Eastern District of America

"Habeas Corpus"
under provision of the acts of United States Congress

_____´,_____

The Petition alleges that said Alfred T. Sinker is a minor under sixteen years of age, and was enlisted without the consent of his parent, guardian or master.

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To the Hon. Samuel Treat
Judge of the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Missouri
The petition of Edward T. Sinker would most respectfully represent that he is a citizen of the state of Indiana where he resides—that on or about the 24th day of August, A.D. 1861, his son Alfred T. Sinker left his home and went to the city of Cincinnati, state of Ohio, where he enlisted in the volunteer service of the United States as a soldier in a Military Company at that time commanded by one Captain Hickson Cooper but at the present time commanded by 1st Lieutenant J. H. Hollinchied, said company having been removed from the state of Ohio, is now stationed in the city of St. Louis, Mo at a Military post known as the St. Louis Arsenal owned and occupied by the United States and under the command and control of one Captain Granger and by whom the body of petitioner's son Alfred T. Sinker is now held by virtue of his enlistment and for no other

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cause or reason. Your petitioner further represents that his son is still a minor of tender years, that he is not yet sixteen years of age, and that his enlistment was entirely without the knowledge or consent of his parents or guardians, and that said enlistment according to the laws of the United States is illegal and void. Your petitioner further says that Alfred T. Sinker is his son and child born in lawful wedlock and owes service and labor to him, as his father & natural guardian and to no one else, and that he never had any other guardian but his father.

Your petitioner therefore prays your Honor will issue a writ of Habeas Corpus to the said Captain Granger commanding him to produce the body of Alfred T. Sinker together with the cause of his detention to the end that said cause may be inquired into and that the said Alfred T. Sinker may be discharged.

Edward T. Sinker by his attorney R. S. MacDonald

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United States of America
District of Missouri

Personally appeared before me the undersigned United States Commissioner for Mo District, Edward T. Sinker who being by me duly sworn as his oath states that the foregoing petition and the matters wherein stated and true and correct.

Edward T. Sinker

Subscribed and Sworn to before me
This 12th day of September 1861
Ben O. Stickman, US Commissioner
Missouri District

United States of America
Eastern District of Missouri
The President of the United States of America,

To Captain Granger, commanding at the Arsenal of St. Louis, Missouri, and to any other person having the custody of Alfred T. Sinker, Greeting:

You are hereby commanded that you have forthwith the body of Alfred T. Sinker, now detained and illegally restrained of his liberty by you, as it is said together with the day and cause of his caption, detention, and restraint, by whatsoever name the said Alfred T. Sinker may be held, before me, Samuel Treat, District Judge of the United States of the Eastern District of Missouri, at the room of the United States District Court for said District, at the Custom House building in the city of St. Louis Missouri, in said District, to do, submit to and receive whatsoever shall be considered in that behalf concerning the said Alfred T. Sinker, and that you have then and there this writ.

Witness Samuel Treat, Judge of the District Court of the United States of the Eastern District of Missouri this twelfth day of September, in the year of our Lord, eighteen hundred and sixty-one.

Samuel Treat