

# Coal Creek Labor Saga

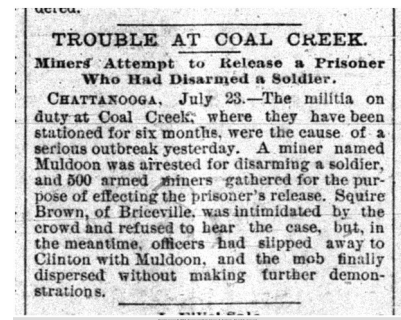
Lesson plans for primary sources at the Tennessee State Library & Archives

**Author:** Kristy Sproles, Sullivan Central High School

**Grade Level:** High School History

**Date Created:** April 2016, standards updated 2019

Visit <http://sos.tn.gov/tsla/education> for additional lesson plans.



## Introduction:

On July 13, 1891 three hundred miners who worked in the towns of Briceville and Coal Creek in Anderson County, Tennessee marched to the Tennessee Coal Mining Company's stockade outside Briceville. The stockade housed 40 convicted criminals who had been leased to the company by the state to work as convict laborers. These convict laborers were placed in jobs previously held by local miners. The miners took control of the convicts, marched them to Coal Creek and boarded them on a train bound for Knoxville. This incident began a year-long rebellion aimed at convincing the state to end the convict-lease program that began in 1866.

## Guiding Question(s):

- What do primary sources such as telegrams and letters tell us about the Coal Creek Labor Saga?
- What was the convict lease program and how did it impact life for the coal miners in Tennessee?
- Were the actions of the miners, the State of Tennessee, and the Tennessee state militia justified?

**Learning Objectives:** In the course of the lesson, students will be able to

- Make inferences from a text and cite specific textual evidence
- Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research
- Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words

## Curriculum Standards:

**US.11** Explain the rise of the labor movement, union tactics (e.g., strikes), the role of leaders (e.g., Eugene Debs and Samuel Gompers), the unjust use of prison labor (e.g., Coal Creek labor saga), and the responses of management and government. (C, E, H, P, T)

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## Curriculum Standards (Continued)

### Common Core Grades 11-12 ELA Standards:

- Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
- Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.
- Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
- Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

### Materials Needed:

- Access to TSLA website
- Copies of the [primary sources](#) from the Coal Creek Labor Saga collection on the Library & Archives Education Outreach Website
- Copies or access to the background information on Coal Creek Labor Saga
- Copies of the National Archive's [Worksheet for Analysis of a Written Document](#) (page 1 only)
- Internet access for watching background information video(s)

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### Background:

“[Coal Miner’s War](#)” Source: [Tennessee 4 Me](#)

“[Convict Lease Wars](#)” Author: James B. Jones, Jr.

Source Location: [Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture](#)

### [Revolution in the Mines: Coal Creek War](#)

A National History Day Project

Creator: Maranda & Elisa Vandergriff

## Lesson Activities:

**Introductory Activity:** Students will need background information before completing the class activity.

The teacher can read the included background information to the class or make copies for students to read silently to themselves. The teacher may also choose to show one of following videos:

[Fraterville Mine Explosion](#) (approximately 5 minutes)

[Coal Creek Labor Saga](#) (approximately 9 minutes)

[Revolution in the Mines: Coal Creek War](#) A National History Day Project

Creator: Maranda & Elisa Vandergriff

## Activity 1:

The teacher will divide the class into 3 groups: the miners, the State of TN/militia, and the citizens of Tennessee. Each group will be given copies of ALL of the primary sources on the TSLA website which includes items such as telegrams, newspaper articles, letters, and government proclamations. Students are to use the [Worksheet for Analysis of a Written Document](#) (page 1 only) to analyze each of the documents. The group leader may decide the best way to divide up the work amongst the group. The teacher should anticipate that this part of the instruction should last approximately 20-30 minutes.

After all of the sources have been analyzed and discussed among group members, the miners and the State of TN/militia groups are to prepare a 5 minute argument trying to each convince the citizens of Tennessee that they acted appropriately in the Coal Creek Labor Saga. They must present 3 pieces of evidence from the TSLA primary sources to prove their point. While the two groups are preparing their statements, the citizens of Tennessee group should be discussing and writing about their current point of view concerning the activities of the miners and the State of TN/militia. The teacher should allow 10 minutes for this activity.

With the citizens of Tennessee group members acting as a jury, the miners and the State of TN/militia groups must present their arguments to the class while referencing the primary sources as evidence. The teacher may decide to allow rebuttals or a question/answer session before the citizens of Tennessee members vote. The teacher should allow the jury members to share how and why they voted. The teacher should certainly lead a class discussion on the advantages and disadvantages of the convict lease program for each group and the possibility of other courses of action that the miners could have used to secure their jobs.

Coal Creek - Tenn.  
July 22nd 1892.

We the undersigned Committee of Citizens of Coal Creek, Anderson Co. - Tenn. Acting in the name of the Peace & Dignity of our common Country, demand of the Militia now at Coal Creek that they turn over to the Civil officer of our Country James H. Hildreth, who is now in custody of said Militia, and we pledge ourselves that we will see to it that he is kept safely in custody until he shall have been tried by the Civil Courts of our country.

Signed,  
G. W. Black  
J. M. Linn  
Dr. J. Warwick  
Maria Lloyd  
Capt. J. G. Stover  
Dr. M. Sadler  
J. H. McFerrin,  
A. M. Riggs.

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## Assessment:

Students are to pretend that they are either serving in the state militia or working as a coal miner. The student is to write a letter home explaining the situation. The student should share their opinion of the situation and offer suggestions to end the Coal Creek Labor Saga. In writing the letter, the student must demonstrate an understanding of the convict lease program in TN, the coal miners' need for employment, and the role that the militia played in the Coal Creek Labor Saga.

## Extending the Lesson:

### Assessment and Enrichment Options:

- Students exchange the assessment letters with the opposite side (miner to a militia) and then write a response letter back to student.
- Students draw a map to their letter labeling the locations such as Anderson County, Rocky Top, Coal Creek, Brieville, Brushy Mountain State Prison, Knoxville, Nashville, Chattanooga, other coal mine strikes in TN, etc.
- Write a letter to the editor of a Tennessee newspaper either defending the convict lease program or supporting the miners in the Coal Creek Labor Saga.
- Write a response letter back to the [Citizens of Coal Creek](#) concerning the fate of James Muldoon.

