

---

*Civilian Life in the Civil War at Bristoe Station, Virginia*  
**Teacher's Guide**

---



**Reporting Category:** Civil War and Postwar Eras

**Topic:** Reconstruction; Reshaping the Nation 1877 to the early 1900s.

**Primary SOLs:** VS.7, USI.9, Skills USII

**Materials:** Interactive Video, Discussion Questions and Activities below.

**Directions:**

Students will watch an educational video that provides a brief background of the Civil War events that took place at Bristoe Station. The video will be tied into the questions and documents that are a part of this worksheet and lesson.

**Context:**

**Bristoe Station in the Civil War**

Bristoe Station was a small railroad stop in Prince William County, Virginia. In the 1860s, the Civil War turned this quiet farming community into a place of constant danger. Both Union and Confederate armies passed through, fought battles nearby, and used local homes and farms for supplies, shelter, and even hospitals.

For civilians like the Davis family, war was not far away—it was right outside their doors. Their farms, fences, animals, and even their homes were often taken or destroyed by soldiers from both sides. Civilians had to make hard choices: stay and risk danger or leave everything behind.

**Exercise** (can be used as a separate worksheet or as discussion questions for the classroom):

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

*Watch the accompanying video telling the story of Bristoe Station in the Civil War and read the following primary sources and stories. Answer the following questions on the worksheet.*

### **Destruction of Bristoe Station**

#### Primary Sources:

"The country about here is the most desolate of any I ever saw ... Ruins of dwellings and churches, fenceless fields, once beautiful meadows trodden down ... all tell the same sad, sickening tale."—Anonymous Union soldier, 1862

"Our Brigade destroyed one mile and a quarter of the railroad. ... The process is a simple one. The rails were first piled up, then the wood work was taken up; the sleepers and cross-ties were put in piles and the rails laid across them, the ends projecting over the sides. Fire was then kindled under each pile; when the wood work would be consumed, the rails would be burned to a red heat in the middle and the weight of the projecting ends would cause them to bend, destroying them for further use."—Confederate Captain William Seymour, 1863

"As we came back we tore up and burnt the ties and bent the rails of the railroad back to the Rappahannock, destroying it completely ... We are at a deserted house and I have very comfortable quarters in a large upper room with fireplace. This was an old place; a fine family mansion well furnished, but when the Yanks were here last they broke up the furniture, tore up and carried off the books, smashed the books and made a general desolation."—Confederate Engineer Jedediah Hotchkiss, 1863

"The railroad in this country is a complete wreck—bridges, culverts, ties, and many rails destroyed completely. The enemy's infantry worked hard on the road several days since. The destruction is thorough."—Union General Wesley Merritt, 1863

"Never have I witnessed so sad a picture as Prince William County now presents. 'Tis desolation made desolate indeed. As far as the eye can reach on every side, all is one vast barren wilderness—not a fence—not one acre cultivated—not a living object visible; and but for here and there a standing chimney, or the ruins of what was once a handsome and happy home; one would imagine that man was never here, and that the country was an entirely new one and without any virtue save its vast extent."—Confederate Major Walter Taylor, 1863

"The Station was dismantled and destroyed, and only a pile of ruins, marked the location of what had once been a hotel, while all the other buildings which had at

one time clustered around these had disappeared entirely. A few scattered graves, with rude wooden headboards, here and there, showed where lay some of those who had fallen in the fight, but the last resting places of many, both of Federals and Confederates, were unmarked and scarcely distinguishable.”—Union soldier from Maine, 1864



*This image was taken near Bristoe Station after Confederate troops destroyed the railroad there in 1863 (described above).*

## **The Story of Thomas Davis**

Thomas K. Davis, the former sheriff of Prince William County who lived at Bristoe Station, supported the Union, which made him a target for Confederate troops. They destroyed his fences, burned his store, and even fired bullets at him to try to force him into their army.

Just before the First Battle of Bull Run, all the men in the state militia were called up. Confederate officers wanted Davis and other local people to gather together and be ready to serve. But many of the men, including Davis, supported the United States and wanted it to stay together, not be split apart.

If they refused to show up at the meeting place, their lives could be in danger. So they went. Davis told the others with him that the law said they could only keep us a few days. And most importantly, he told them: don't volunteer. If they didn't sign up, the Confederate officers couldn't force the men to fight for the Confederacy.

The officers never gave Davis and the others guns or bullets because they didn't trust them and knew they supported the Union. Davis believed General Beauregard only called him and the others out so he could keep an eye on them—he didn't want anyone sneaking off to give information to the Union Army.

Not one of the men volunteered.

Later on, Davis found other ways to help the Union. He had once been the sheriff, so he knew a lot of people, and he used that to secretly help Union supporters who had been arrested.

Then, when the Confederate soldiers left the area in 1862 and the Union Army came in, he acted quickly. Some Confederate soldiers were hiding nearby, and with a few other Union men, he captured them. He even took their stacked-up guns and marched them to jail! That day, he helped bring in about twenty prisoners—some he caught myself, others he reported to the Union cavalry, who came and took them away.

One of Mr. Davis' children remembered soldiers of both armies used the family's fences for firewood as well as took cattle, horses, and food. The family ran from their house during one of the battles fought at Bristoe Station and their home became a hospital for wounded soldiers. In September 1863, the family left Bristoe Station and fled to Washington, DC.

By the end of the war, every one of their buildings was gone. They were either destroyed by battle or were torn down and the materials used by soldiers.

**Short Answer Questions:**

1. Why did both Union and Confederate soldiers take supplies from civilians?

---

---

---

---

2. If you had to leave your home because of war, what would you take with you?

---

---

---

---

3. How do you think the Davis family felt when armies came to their home?

---

---

---

---

**Primary Source Detective:**

Reread the primary sources on pg. 2. On your worksheet, highlight or underline evidence of destruction that the Civil War brought to Bristoe Station.

**Civilian Choices:**

Present students with “What would you do?” cards based on real events at Bristoe Station:

- Soldiers ask for your family’s only cow. Do you give it to them or hide it?
- A battle is about to happen around your house. Do you stay in your house and find shelter or try to leave?
- Your Union friends are in jail. Do you help them and risk trouble?

Have the students explain their choices to the class.

**Life Then & Now:**

Write a short paragraph comparing life for civilians at Bristoe Station during the Civil War to your life today. What is different? What is the same?

**Additional Resources:**

- 1. The Home Front: The Civil War in Four Minutes (video)**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uhZKdFoN9fk>
- 2. Bristoe Station: Crossroads of Conflict (video)**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-zAZTfwz9DE>
- 3. "Total War": The Civil War's Effect on the Home Front (article)**  
<https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/total-war-civil-wars-effect-home-front>
- 4. "Sketch of the battle of Bristoe, Wednesday, Oct. 14, 1863" (map)**  
<https://www.loc.gov/resource/g3884b.cwh00165/?r=0.295,0.171,0.5,0.318,0>