For soldiers and civilians embroiled in the Civil War, music was a near-constant companion. Soldiers awoke to the call of bugles and went to sleep to the beat of drum taps. On the home front, citizens sang ballads in their homes and songs at political rallies, joining their voices in chorus to reaffirm the purpose behind the terrible bloodshed. Music, including patriotic anthems and sentimental ballads, helped motivate people to continue fighting while also soothing the emotional wounds of loss. The many photographs of musicians that were taken during the conflict and the songs - and memories of songs - that linger in the public memory even today attest to the importance of music to those caught up in the Civil War.

Between 1861 and 1865, soldiers left their homes and traversed the country to fight in the Civil War, bringing with them songs, rhythms, and, in some cases, instruments. Confederate general Robert E. Lee claimed, “I don’t think we could have an army without music,” but Union and Confederate leaders alike recognized the unique ability of music to create a sense of belonging and purpose. Both Union and Confederate armies employed professional bands composed mainly of brass instruments such as the saxhorn and bugle. Early in the war, the Union army required two musicians for each company and a band for each regiment, although it soon reassigned most of those personnel to combat roles.

Drummers and buglers played invaluable roles in military communications, carrying officers’ orders...
across vast, noisy battlefields. At the same time, both armies’ ranks included many amateur musicians, and countless soldiers sang. Before battle, Union soldiers might sing “John Brown’s Body,” in honor of the abolitionist who died fighting against slavery, or “Tramp, Tramp, Tramp,” or “Marching through Georgia.” Confederate camps were filled with the tune of “Dixie,” an ode to life in the South before slavery broke the union apart. Once the fighting ceased, the mood of the music changed, and soldiers in camp might hum hymns or songs of home.

For people not directly engaged in conflict, music could bridge the distance between war and life on the home front. Citizens attended rallies where regimental bands played patriotic tunes, and songs of the battlefield became popular in civilian life as well. At the same time, gentle ballads aimed to soothe the fears of families worried for the sons who’d taken their home songs away with them to a grim and distant war.

Howe, Julia W. “Battle Hymn of the Republic.”
https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200000858/
Suggestions for Teachers

Divide the class into groups and assign each group one song from the set. Ask the students what they think the song is trying to convey. Who would sing this type of song? How did the creators of this song want the singer to feel? How did they want the audience to feel? If desired, apply these same processes and questions to select visual images.

Identify songs from the set that might have been sung by Civil War soldiers and compare them with songs that people at home might have sung. What do these songs tell us about the relationship between the home front and the battlefield? Ask students to consider the roles women played as mothers, nurses, and more during such a terrifying conflict.

Assign individuals or groups of students to analyze images in the set; some items contain multiple images that may be divided among the groups. Who is represented in the image? How might the songs relate to the people who are depicted here? Support students in thinking about all of images studied and invite them to write a title that reflects something essential about the set.
Additional Resources

The Liljenquist Family Collection of Civil War Photographs
https://www.loc.gov/collections/liljenquist-civil-war-photographs/

Civil War Sheet Music Collection
https://www.loc.gov/collections/civil-war-sheet-music/about-this-collection/

Peace Songs of the Civil War
https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200197667


https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200001128

https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200002388/

https://www.loc.gov/item/2013645701/

https://www.loc.gov/item/2011661674/

https://www.loc.gov/item/2013648631/

https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200000417/

https://www.loc.gov/item/amss.cw100620/
https://www.loc.gov/item/2013645715/

http://www.loc.gov/jukebox/recordings/detail/id/3086

https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.100010360

https://www.loc.gov/item/2017660612/