

Quiz: RI.7.6

Read the passage. Then answer the question.

“The Curious Life and Times of William Walker”

- 1 The history of the United States is full of stories of adventurous men and women who headed out into the wilderness of the American West to make a name for themselves in the crucible of American expansion. These stories are so common and such an integral part of American history that they have shaped our understanding of how this country was formed. We accept the narrative that wild-eyed settlers and cowboys physically tamed a harsh land and set it on the road to becoming what the United States is today.
- 2 For some reason, people seem to forget that this expansion occurred in a much wider space than just the American West. American adventurers weren't simply west of the Mississippi River, they were also heading south into Mexico, Cuba, and Central America. These overseas adventurers earned a special name: filibusterers. The word comes to English from a Dutch word that essentially means “pirate.” And this is a mostly appropriate name, because what filibusterers did closely resembles grand piracy. These men used small private armies to invade countries for material gain.
- 3 Possibly the most famous of all the filibusterers was a Tennessee man named William Walker. Walker is a fascinating figure not just because he had so much success as a filibusterer but also because his life is so full of strangeness and controversy. Little is known about his early life, but what we do know shows him to have been a smart young man full of potential. His first move in life was to pursue a medical career through study both in the United States and in Europe. After studying medicine in Paris for a year, he spent another year traveling around Europe and learning a number of languages.
- 4 His pursuit of a medical career, however, ended quickly once he returned to the United States. He changed his mind and decided to begin a career in law. To do this, he decided to make another big move, this time down to the bustling southern port city of New Orleans. But life as a lawyer was not to his liking, and he soon turned to newspaper journalism. He became an editor and part owner of a small newspaper called the *New Orleans Crescent*. Here the story gets very interesting in light of his later adventures. He wrote a number of editorial pieces condemning filibustering in Cuba and even the very popular Mexican-American War.
- 5 His time in New Orleans also acquainted him with a woman who may have changed his life in unpredictable ways. Her name was Helen Martin, and she was young, well-educated, and had a good family. Historians aren't quite sure of the exact relationship between these two. Some have speculated that Walker may have known Martin in Nashville and then followed her down to New Orleans. Others think they met in New Orleans, but aren't sure if they had a romantic relationship or not. These facts almost don't matter, because it is clear that Walker was quite attached to her. And when she died in 1849 during an outbreak of yellow fever in New Orleans, Walker's normally quiet and cautious character seems to have changed into one of reckless disregard for his own safety.

