Title: Remembering King Philip’s War

Introduction/overview:

In the aftermath of King Philip’s War the Puritans of New England immediately set out to write the history of this traumatic conflict. While the initial tenor of these histories adopted the message of the jeremiad, calling the English to reform their ways or suffer further judgment, over time the ways in which the war was remembered changed significantly. Following the undulations of New England history, New Englanders continued to repurpose this narrative according to their needs. What began as a story of barbarous savages over time became an epic tragedy of native extinction leading right up to the present day when the Indigenous still struggle to be recognized.

In this lesson students will learn to distinguish between the categories of history and memory by examining the way that King Philip’s War has been remembered over time. More specifically, they will analyze five images and explain how these primary sources reveal change over time.

Essential Question(s):

1. What is the difference between history and memory?
2. Is the act of remembering necessarily an ethnocentric endeavor?

Primary Sources with citations:

— The title page of Increase Mather’s *A Brief History of the Warr with the Indians in New-England* (1676)


— The Frontispiece of *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* (1770)


— *Last of the Wampanoags* by G.I. Brown (c. 1850)

— A photograph of the Great Swamp Monument (1906)


Background information/historical context for teachers:

Technically, what became known as King Philip’s War began in 1675. As with many disputes between Native peoples and Euroamericans, however, a long history of land dispossession was at the heart of the conflict. Almost since their arrival in 1620 English colonists had begun to acquire native land and their victory in the Pequot War of the 1630s had only accelerated this process. Over time, these encroachments soured what was an ostensibly peaceful relationship with local native tribes such as the Wampanoags, Nipmucs and Narragansetts. To make matters worse the death of a powerful Wampanoag sachem, Massasoit, in 1661 was followed a year later by the death of his son Wamsutta, also known as Alexander, whom many believed to have been poisoned by the English. One such person was Metacom, also known as Philip, who was Wamsutta’s brother and the one who assumed the Wampanoag sachemship in the wake of his kinsmen’s death. Given the continued efforts of the English to seize native land Metacom did not pursue the relatively cordial relationship his father had maintained with these foreign invaders. The final act that precipitated armed conflict was the execution of three of Metacom’s associates. These men were accused of murdering the Christian Indian John Sassamon under the suspicion that they were avenging Sassamon’s betrayal of information to the English. That same month Pokanokets retaliated with violent force at Swansea in Plymouth.

The war proved to be devastating to both Native and English populations. In a bloodbath that saw the highest casualties per capita of any conflict in American history, forty percent of New England’s Native population was lost as well as five percent of the English presence. To make matters worse, many Native Americans were exiled to Deer Island during the conflict to assuage English fears of attack. In one of the most tragic events of the war many of these same people were sold into slavery. Clearly, the consequences of warfare were disastrous for both sides, but without the benefits of widespread literacy many tribes lacked the ability to create a written record of their side of the conflict. Conversely, many English colonists took their version of the conflict to the presses straightaway and, until recently, their narratives have controlled the dominant discourse on the war. As historian Jill Lepore has noted, the English won the war as much in its retelling as with their guns.

The purpose of this lesson will be to examine the ways in which that retelling has both persisted and changed over time. Through the creative use of texts and symbols the memory of King Philip’s War has frequently been refashioned to meet the requirements of what has been called a “usable past.” In the immediate aftermath of the war, Increase Mather published A Brief History
of the Warr with the Indians in New-England, an ominous jeremiad that interpreted the conflict as God’s judgment on the Puritans, who had fallen away from the purity of their forefathers. Years later the New England colonists found themselves on the brink of a revolution against the British Crown. This time the frontispiece of Mary Rowlandson’s captivity narrative from King Philip’s War was transformed to present Rowlandson as a daughter of the revolution fighting often Native raiders who look suspiciously like British Regulars. By the 1850s the revolution had been fought and won, but now paternalistic New Englanders sought to memorialize what they believed to be the tragic extinction of Native peoples. Hence G.I. Brown’s Last of the Wampanoags portrays Philip fading into obsolescence as the last of his race. With the work of forgetting native presence accomplished by the turn of the century, the “Great Swamp Monument” was erected as a paean to America’s Puritan forefathers that neglects to even acknowledge American Indians at all. Finally, as recent events have demonstrated, Native peoples have not disappeared and continue to lobby for recognition in the public sphere. In particular, the initiative to have a memorial erected at Deer Island, where there is currently a sewage plant operated by the Massachusetts Water Resource Authority (MWRA), shows that the legacy of King Philip’s War is still the subject of public discourse.

Clearly, the relationship between history and memory is complex. This lesson is designed to get students to think critically about that relationship and begin to explore the complicated ways in which humans continually interact with the past by interpreting historical events and crafting resonant narratives.

Annotated Bibliography of secondary sources:


Slavery and public history offers a nice introduction to the idea of historical memory. While the content of the book does not relate directly to Native American studies, the ideas it contains about history and memory are helpful when considering these concepts in a variety of contexts.


Jill Lepore’s now classic treatment of King Philip’s War explores how this conflict uniquely shaped American identity during the colonial period. There is an excellent section on how the war has been remembered over time and Lepore’s work provided much of the inspiration for this lesson.

http://1704.deerfield.history.museum/popups/background.do?shortName=expMetacomsWar
The “Raid on Deerfield” website is a treasure trove of primary source documents, material culture, essays from eminent scholars and much more. It may be used either as a means for teachers to educate themselves about Native American history in the seventeenth century or as an exploratory tool for students in the classroom.


An excellent source for primary source documents related to King Philip’s War, Neal Salisbury’s edition of Mary Rowlandson’s narrative is both informative and engaging. In addition to the documents there is also an introduction that nicely contextualizes both the conflict and the narrative.


The Tomaquag Musuem website offers a plethora of resources related to Native American history that range from lesson plans to current events in the Native American community. This is a superior resource for educating students about the role of Native peoples in American history while also exposing them to the vibrant presence of Native peoples today.