

# 1.5

## **Native American Influences on U.S. Government**

### **Standard 1.5: Native American Influences on U.S. Government**

*Analyze the evidence for arguments that the principles of the system of government of the United States were influenced by the governments of Native Peoples. (Massachusetts Curriculum Framework for History and Social Studies) [8.T1.5]*

*As native populations migrated and settled across the vast expanse of North America over time, they developed distinct and increasingly complex societies by adapting to and transforming their diverse environments. [AP U.S. History Key Concept 1.1]*

*The American Revolution's democratic and republican ideals inspired new experiments with different forms of government. [AP U.S. History Key Concept 3.2]*

**FOCUS QUESTION: [Did any Native American Group Influence the Men who Drafted the United States Governing Documents?](#) (TeachingHistory.org., 2018)**



["Massachusetts Bay Colony seal granted by King Charles I in 1629"](#) | Public Domain

The seal featured an Indian holding an arrow pointed down in a gesture of peace, and the words "Come over and help us," emphasizing the missionary and commercial intentions of the original colonists

[The First Americans](#) had lived in North America for 50,000 years before their initial encounters with European explorers and colonists. These indigenous peoples adapted cultures and lifestyles to the geographic and environmental conditions where they lived. You can

read a brief [Overview of the First Americans](#) from Digital History.

The achievements of First American peoples are impressive, but not well-known. Just east of present-day St. Louis, Missouri, the pre-contact First American city of **Cahokia** had a population of more than 10,000, with at least 20,000 to 30,000 more in outlying towns and farming settlements that spread for fifty miles in every direction. Its Grand Plaza was the size of 35 football fields, the largest public space ever created north of Mexico. At its center was a packed clay pyramid that reached 100 feet high. Cahokia is now the largest archaeological site in the United States. [Back to the City of the Sun: An Augmented Reality Project](#) offers more ways to learn about the Cahokia Mounds.

**Etzanao** was located in modern-day Kansas, south of Wichita, near the Oklahoma border (learn more: [Archaeologists Explore a Rural Field in Kansas, and a Lost City Emerges](#)). There is more information on these native settlements on the *resourcesforhistoryteachers* wiki page [Cahokia and Etzanao, Pre-Contact Native American Cities](#).

Population figures for how many First Americans lived in North America in 1492 vary widely. [Teaching Tolerance](#) puts the figure at 500 tribes totaling about 22 million people. Shortly after the arrival of Europeans, disease and violence took the lives of an enormous number of indigenous people. Twenty million, 95% of the indigenous population, died - many from the smallpox infection to which natives had no immunity. Today, Native Americans number just over 2 million or 1% of the U. S. population. Nearly 4 out of 5 (78%) live off-reservations and 72% live in cities or suburbs ([The Guardian](#), September 4, 2017).



[Yavapai-Apache logo](#) by Yavapai-Apache Nation | Public Domain

The relationship between Native peoples and European settlers was complex, contentious, and sometimes collaborative (Calloway, 2018). Tribes and settlers fought over access to land and resources, but also created military alliances and conducted trade. The website [Raid on Deerfield: The Many Stories of 1704](#) shows the multiple dimensions of native/settler contacts.

Today, Native Americans still live with a legacy of inadequate resources and services and continuing social and economic discrimination. In its ["Broken Promises" report](#), the U.S. Commission of Civil Rights (2018) recounted the history as follows:

"In exchange for the surrender and reduction of tribal lands and removal and resettlement of approximately

one-fifth of Native American tribes from their original lands, the United States signed 375 treaties, passed laws, and instituted policies that shape and define the special government-to-government relationship between federal and tribal governments. Yet the U.S. government forced many Native Americans to give up their culture and, throughout the history of this relationship, has not provided adequate assistance to support Native American interconnected infrastructure, self-governance, housing, education, health, and economic development needs" ([para. 1](#)).

How did native peoples influence the writers of the U.S. Constitution, and in so doing, shape the governmental institutions of the new republic? In exploring this question, the modules for this topic examine Native influences on government against a broader background of native/settler relations and conflicts.

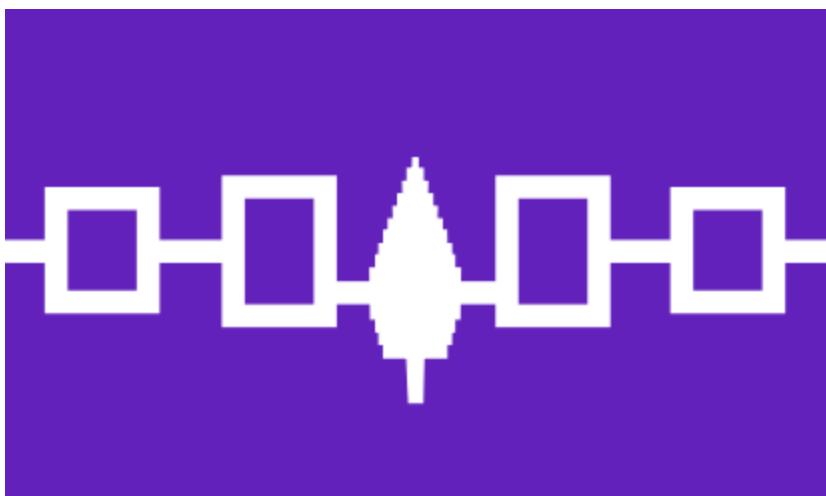
For background, read [Native American Governments in Today's Curriculum](#), an older article that offers an overview of governmental structures of the League of the Iroquois, the Muscogee Nation, the Lakota Nation, and the Pueblo peoples.

## Modules for this Standard Include:

1. [INVESTIGATE: The Iroquois Confederacy and the Great Law of Peace](#)
  - o [MEDIA LITERACY CONNECTIONS: Representations of Native Americans in Film, Local History Publications, and School Mascots](#)
2. [UNCOVER: The Peskeompskut-Wissatinnewag Massacre OR the Battle of Great Falls](#)
3. [ENGAGE: How Should Communities Decide Whether to Restore Native American Names for Places?](#)

## 1.INVESTIGATE: The Iroquois Confederacy and the Great Law of Peace

**The Iroquois Confederacy** refers to a group of indigenous tribes living in northeastern North America that had a participatory democracy government with executive, legislative, and judicial branches. **The Great Law of Peace** was the constitution of the Iroquois Confederacy. Here is the text of [The Constitution of the Iroquois Confederacy](#) and its 117 articles.



["Flag of the Iroquois Confederacy"](#).  
Public Domain

The framework of government in the Iroquois Confederacy is said to have inspired Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, Benjamin Franklin and other founders as they wrote the Constitution. The founders adopted the Iroquois nation's symbol, the bald eagle, as the new nation's national symbol.

Some historians credit the Iroquois chief **Canasatego** with influencing Benjamin Franklin's thinking about government (Franklin included references to the Iroquois Confederacy in his writing). Canasatego shared how the Great Law of Peace, the Iroquois Confederacy's unwritten constitution, included rules of democratic self-government including the rights and responsibilities of each member tribe, and in so doing, stressed the importance of a unified, representative government. Other historians are unsure of these connections, citing the lack of definitive historical evidence. [Iroquois and the Founding Fathers](#) from TeachingHistory.org presents both sides of this historical debate.

You can learn more at [Iroquois Democracy & the U.S. Constitution](#), a website with learning plans from Portland State University.

In 1988, the United States Senate passed a resolution acknowledging the contributions of the Iroquois Confederacy ([Text of Senate Resolution on the Contributions of the Iroquois Confederacy](#)). However, none of the constitutions of the 13 colonies included First Americans' rights and Native Americans did not gain citizenship until 1924.

In addition to influencing the founders, feminist scholar Sally Roesch Wagner (2001) contended that the social and political organization of indigenous societies impacted the thinking of early women suffragists including Lucy Stone, Lucretia Mott, Susan B. Anthony, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. In Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) society, women were included in tribal leadership, could hold political office, controlled property, had spiritual authority within the community, and children belonged to the mother's clan. The women's rights advocates who wrote the Declaration of Sentiments were inspired by native women to argue for a more co-equal status for women in American society. You can access an overview of this idea from [The Impact of Haudenosaunee Culture on the Early Suffragettes](#).

## **Native American Civil Rights**

Importantly, many history and civics classes in K-12 schools fail to mention the efforts of indigenous Americans to achieve equal rights under the Constitution. They were the last racial group to gain the right to vote. [Native American Activism: 1960s to Present](#) from the Zinn Education Project focuses on events including the 1969 Alcatraz Island occupation, the 1970 occupation of Mount Rushmore, and the [1973 occupation of Wounded Knee](#). These are just a few of many events that happened in the 20th century to show their impact on civil rights legislation as well as the impact protest has on governmental change. There is more historical information at our wiki page for the



## [Native American Civil Rights Movement.](#)

### **Suggested Learning Activities**

- **Design a Video**
  - Explore the [Native American Influences in U.S. History and Culture Quiz](#), from *Teaching Tolerance*
  - Then, create a social media video that highlights the 3-5 most surprising things you learned.
- **State Your View:** How did Native American Government Shape the U.S. Constitution?
  - [How the Iroquois Great Law of Peace Shaped U.S. Democracy](#), Native Voices, PBS.
  - [Iroquois Constitution: A Forerunner to Colonists' Democratic Principles](#)
- **Analyze a Primary Source**
  - [1994 Constitution of the Wampanoag tribe of Gay Head](#) (Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts)
    - What parallels to the United States Constitution do you notice in this document?
- **Create a Sketchnote:** In what ways have Native Americans influenced life in the United States?
  - [Native American Contributions](#) from United States Department of Agriculture
  - [Native American Contributions](#) from Scholastic
  - [Iroquois and the Founding Fathers](#) from TeachingHistory.org.
  - [Native American Rights Movement](#), [resourcesforhistoryteachers](#) wiki page
- **Compare and contrast the 1973 occupation of [Wounded Knee](#) and the 1961 [Freedom Riders](#) Protest.**
  - Create a list of similarities and differences between these

protests.

- What were they trying to achieve, how did they go about protesting?
- Then, create your own modern protest poster. What will your protest be for? What historical techniques will you use to make your protest successful? (This activity suggested by University of Massachusetts Amherst history major Katelyn Maskell)

## **Media Literacy Connections: Representations of Native Americans in Film, Local History Publications, and School Mascots**

Although November is [National Native American Heritage Month](#), most students learn little about Native peoples or First American cultures in schools.



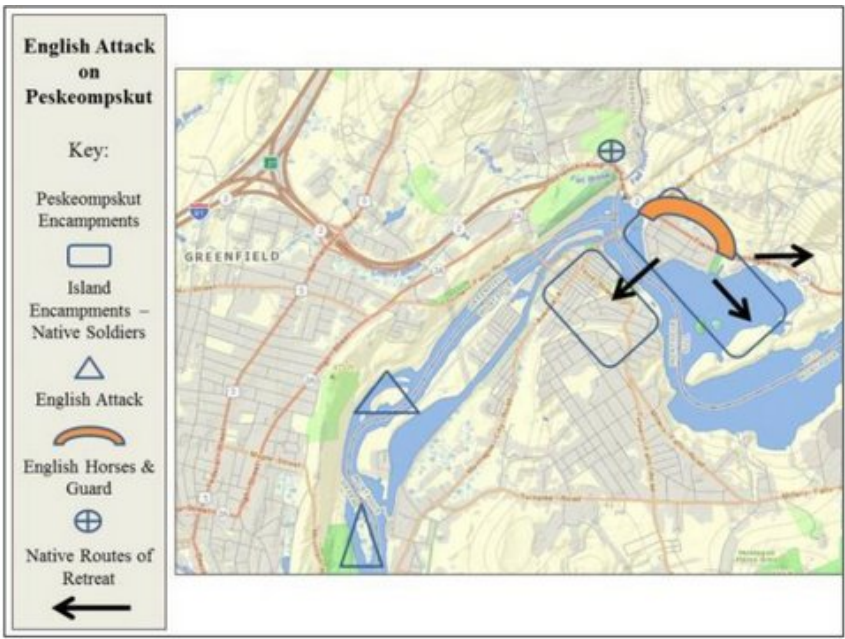
Reverse of the [1 US dollar coin - 2020](#) - series "Native Americans" by United States Mint picture  
Public Domain

The indigenous education organization [IllumiNative](#) reports that most (87%) state level history standards do not address Native history past 1900. Much of what students do learn about Native history comes from the media. These activities ask you to critically consider how Native peoples have been represented in films and in local history publications and how those representations have shaped people's attitudes:

- [Activity 1: Analyze how Native Americans are Portrayed in Movies](#)
- [Activity 2: Design a Film or TV show About Native Americans' Influence on the U.S. Government](#)
- [Activity 3: Research & Redesign the First American](#)

## **2.UNCOVER: The Peskeompskut-Wissatinnewag Massacre or Battle of Great Falls**

**Peskeompskut** is the name for the waterfalls on the Connecticut River between the communities of Turners Falls and Gill, Massachusetts. The Peskeompskut Massacre or the Great Falls Fight was a pivotal event in King Philip's War that unfolded when a colonial militia led a pre-dawn surprise attack of an Indian fishing village on the shores of the river on May 16, 1676. An interactive photograph and summary of the scene entitled [Assault on Peskeompskut](#) is available from the Memorial Hall Museum, Deerfield, Massachusetts.



**Figure 17 English Attack on Peskeompskut Encampment.**

Figure 17: Technical Report - Battle of Great Falls / Wissatinnewag-Peskeompskut (May 19, 1676), U. S. Department of the Interior National Park Service American Battlefield Protection Program <https://edtechbooks.org/-wKzH>

Different writers have described the event differently, as a massacre or a battle. Regardless of how it is described, it is clear that hundreds of English soldiers and native people were involved and that many women and children were killed in the raid on the village. In 2018, the town of Montague, Massachusetts received a grant from the National Park Service to survey the battlefield and apply for recognition in the National Register of Historic Places. But what really happened on that day?

## Suggested Learning Activities

- **Analyze Two Competing Histories and Then Write Your Own History**
  - [Technical Report: Battle of Great Falls/Wissatinnewag-Peskeompskut](#), American Battlefield Protection Program, National Park Service (February 2016)
  - [Remembering & Reconnecting: Nipmucs and the Massacre at Great Falls](#), Chaubunagungamuug Nipmuck Historic Preservation Office (October 2015)

## Online Resources for the Peskeompskut-Wissatinnewag Massacre

- [Our Beloved Kin: Remapping a New History of King Philip's War](#) website by Lisa Brooks
- Explore *resourcesforhistoryteachers* wiki page for [English Settlers and Native Peoples](#)
- [Native Land Map](#), an interactive exploration of native peoples in the Americas

## 3.ENGAGE: How Should Communities Decide Whether to Restore Native American Names for Places?

Native American names for places are everywhere in this country. 27 states have Native American origins for their names: there is Alaska from the Aleut word "Alyeska," Massachusetts from the Algonquian language meaning "at or about the great hill," and North and South Dakota from the Sioux word for "friend" to name just three ([The United States of Indigenous Names](#), Indian Country Today, September 2018, para. 9). The names of towns, rivers, mountains, lakes, and other locations in every state have indigenous origins. Wikipedia

maintains an ongoing listing of [Place Names of Native American Origin in the U.S.](#)

However, not all names convey positive images and meanings. The U.S. Interior Department reported in 2022 that there are 660 place names that use "squaw," a racist slur term directed at Native American women. Other place names have wording that Native people find offensive or degrading, similar to the use of offensive terms of imagery by [school mascots or professional sports teams](#).

Given the long history of exploitation and oppression of Native peoples, there are ongoing local, state, and national efforts to restore Native American names to places as a way to present truthful history and show respect for all peoples and cultures. In 2015, President Barack Obama issued an executive order to change the name of Alaska's Mount McKinley (named for the nation's 25th President William McKinley) to Denali, the mountain's name in the indigenous Athabasian language. Native tribes and political leaders in the state supported the change while officials in Ohio (McKinley's home state) as well as then presidential candidate Donald Trump opposed it.

The controversy over the Mount McKinley to Denali change demonstrates the complex political, historical, and social dynamics surrounding the naming and potential renaming of places. Who do you think should decide what names stay and what names change: Local people? Elected politicians? Governmental agencies? Native tribal groups? Or other groups?

### **The Case of Jeffrey Amherst and the Smallpox Blankets**

The complexities of place names and indigenous history is illustrated by the case of Jeffrey Amherst and the smallpox blankets. **Jeffrey Amherst** was a British army general during the French and Indian War and then royal governor of Virginia (although he refused to live there) in the decades before the American Revolution. The Town of

Amherst, Massachusetts, founded in 1759, is named after him. Amherst College, founded in 1821, is named after the town. There are also towns named Amherst in Wisconsin, Virginia, Texas, Tennessee, South Dakota, Ohio, North Carolina, New York, New Hampshire, Nebraska, Montana, Minnesota, Maine and Colorado.



Portrait of Jeffrey Amherst  
"Amherst" | Public Domain

Jeffrey Amherst is a very controversial historical figure. Throughout his life, he displayed overt hatred and racism toward native people. Historians charge him with suggesting—or actually providing—smallpox-infected blankets to American Indians in the Ohio Valley of North America. In a 1763 letter he wrote, “You will do well to try to inoculate the Indians by means of blankets, as well as to try



every other method that can serve to extirpate this execrable race” (quoted in Berg, 2019).

In 2016, Amherst College dropped “Lord Jeff” as its athletic team and school mascot. More recently, there have been calls from citizens to rename the town of Amherst itself. The case of Jeffrey Amherst raises questions about how to evaluate the reputations of famous people in history, especially those who engaged in undemocratic and discriminatory actions toward other people, by including them in the name of a town.

How should Jeffrey Amherst be evaluated historically? Is there sufficient evidence to condemn him as an advocate for biological warfare? In what ways does the case of Jeffrey Amherst relate to current debates over Native American mascots and Confederate monuments from the Civil War?

Based on those answers, should towns named Amherst - including Amherst, Massachusetts - change their names based on historical evidence of his actions? Some groups in the local area have proposed renaming the town "Norwottuck" to acknowledge the indigenous peoples who lived there; others have suggested renaming the town for Tubman for Harriet Tubman or Dickinson for Emily Dickinson.

## **Suggested Learning Activities**

- **State Your View:** How should your community decide whether to restore Native American names to places in the town or region?
  - Would you recommend a vote by community members, a policy from the state or federal government, appointing an independent commission, supporting the decision of local tribes, or some other approach?
  - Present your ideas as video or written policy proposal to share with local and school officials

- **Propose an Educational Policy for Your School:** How can Native American peoples and cultures be fairly represented in school mascots or names?
  - [National School Mascots Tracking Database](#), National Congress of American Indians (2021)
  - [2,128 Native American Mascots People Aren't Talking About](#) from *FiveThirtyEight*, September 2014.
  - [Timeline - A Century of Racist Sports Team Names](#), Mother Jones
  - [UnLearning Sports Mascots](#) from FiveColleges in Massachusetts.
  - [Native Americans Blast Redskins Gambit to Defuse Name Controversy with Financial Contributions](#), March 24, 2014.
  
- **Design a First American People's History Poster**
  - Present the history of one of the following events from an indigenous First Americans' perspective:
    - [King Philip's War](#)
    - [The Louisiana Purchase](#)
    - [The Trail of Tears and the Indian Removal Policy](#)
    - [The California and Alaska Gold Rush](#)
    - [The Transcontinental Railroad](#)
    - [DAPL Standing Rock Sioux Uprising](#)

## Online Resources for Teaching First American/Native American History

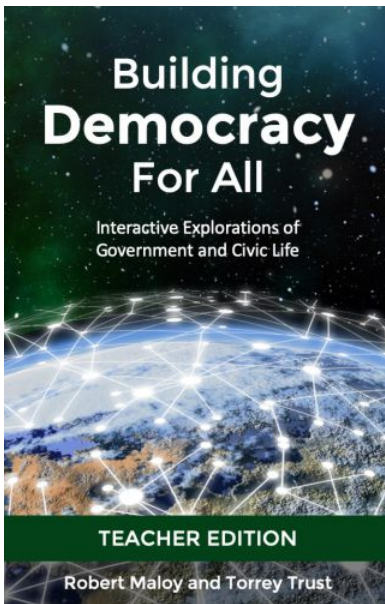
- [Indigenous People in Massachusetts: A Library Guide](#), Robbins Library, Arlington, Massachusetts
- [Lord Jeffrey Amherst and the Smallpox Blankets](#), *resourcesforhistoryteachers* wiki
- [Becoming Visible: A Landscape Analysis of State Efforts to Provide Native American Education for All](#), National Congress

of American Indians (September 2019)

- 87% of state history standards do not mention Native American history after 1900
- 27 states make no mention of a single Native American in their K-12 curriculum
- [Montana State Constitution Article X and Indian Education For All](#), Montana Office of Public Instruction
  - Montana's 1972 constitutional amendment requires teachers to integrate information about Native American cultures and history in all subjects and grades
- [American Indian Perspectives on Thanksgiving](#), National Museum of the American Indian
- [The Other Side of Plymouth Rock](#): River Stories 2020, Nolumbeka Project
- [American Indians in Children's Literature](#), Blog by Debbie Reese of Nambé Pueblo
- Maps:
  - [Native Land Digital Map](#) - Whose Land Do You Live On?
  - [Tribal Nations Map](#) - Pre-contact homelands of hundreds of tribal nations in Canada and the lower 48 states of the United States
  - [Native Reservations Today Map](#)

## Conclusion for Standard 5

Standard 5's **INVESTIGATE** examined how the governmental practices of Native Americans (in particular, The Iroquois Confederacy) may have influenced the thinking of the founders of the United States system of government. **UNCOVER** presented the different historical accounts of what is known as the Peskeompskut-Wissatinnewag Massacre or the Battle of Great Falls. **ENGAGE** used the case of Jeffrey Amherst and the Smallpox Blankets to ask how people today might assess the naming of places.



Maloy, R. W. & Trust, T. (2020). *Building Democracy for All*. EdTech Books. <https://edtechbooks.org/democracy>