

# Native American Influences on American Government

## Standard 1.5: Native American Influences on American 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. The First American tribes adapted cultures and lifestyles to the geographic and environmental conditions where they lived.

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.

**Etzanoa** 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 Etzanoa, 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.

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.

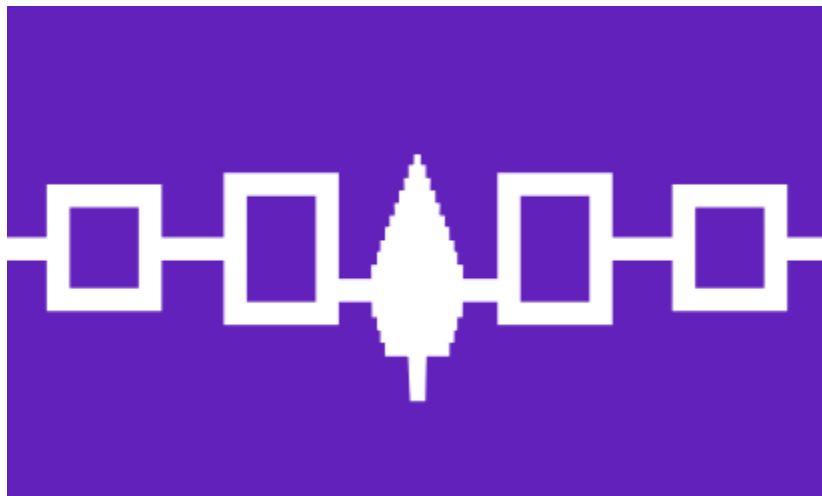
How did native peoples influence the writers of the U.S. Constitution, and in so doing, shape the governmental institutions of the new republic? In exploring this question, the modules for this topic examine Native influences on government against a broader background of native/settler relations and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

### Modules for this Standard Include:

1. [INVESTIGATE: The Iroquois Confederacy and the Great Law of Peace](#)
2. [UNCOVER: The Peskeompskut-Wissatinnewag Massacre OR the Battle of Great Falls](#)
3. [ENGAGE: How to Evaluate a Person's Place in History: Jeffrey Amherst and the Case of the Smallpox Blankets](#)

## 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. He also stressed the importance of a unified, representative government.

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, in none of the constitutions of the 13 colonies were First Americans' rights included and Native Americans did not gain citizenship until 1924.

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](#)).

## Suggested Learning Activities

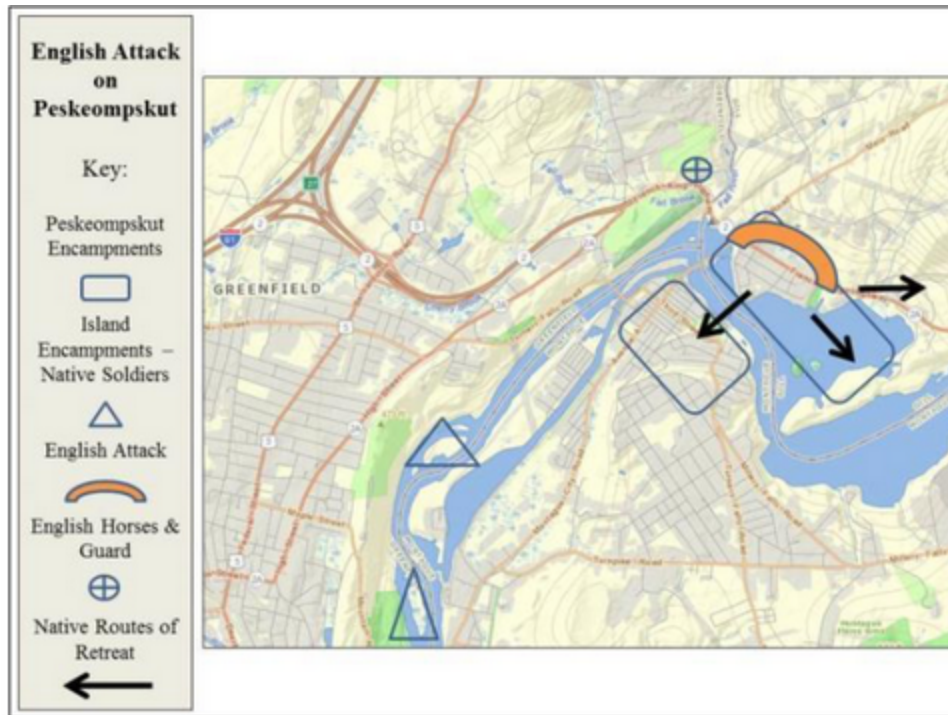
- **Design a Video**
  - Explore the [Native American Influences in U.S. History and Culture Quiz](#), from Teaching Tolerance
  - Then, create a social media video that highlights the 3-5 most surprising things you learned.
- **State Your View:** How did Native American Government Shape the U.S. Constitution?
  - [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

## Online Resources for Native American Contributions to American Government

- [The Great Law of Peace](#), YouTube video
- [The Iroquois Confederacy](#), YouTube video
- [Iroquois Flag](#) information is available from the website of Iroquois men's national lacrosse team
- [Every Vote Counts: Teacher Guide & Lesson Plans](#), National Education Association
- [Iroquois Confederacy Timeline: 1600s to 1973](#)
- [The Six Nations Confederacy during the American Revolution](#), Fort Stanwix National Monument
- [Viral Meme Says Constitution Owes Its Nation of Democracy to the Iroquois](#), *Politifact* (December 2, 2014)

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

**Peskeomskut** is the name for the waterfalls on the Connecticut River between the communities of Turners Falls and Gill, Massachusetts. The Peskeomskut 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 Peskeomskut](#) 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 to Evaluate a Person’s Place in History? 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.

## Suggested Learning Activities

- **State Your View:** How should Jeffrey Amherst be evaluated historically?
  - Is there sufficient evidence to condemn him as an advocate for biological warfare?
  - Should towns named Amherst - including Amherst, Massachusetts - change their names based on historical evidence of his actions?
  - In what ways does the case of Jeffrey Amherst relate to current debates over Native American mascots and Confederate monuments from the Civil War?



Flagstaff, Arizona Sinagua High School JROTC Shoulder Sleeve Insignia.  
The stylized peaks on the scroll symbolize the San Francisco Peaks, one of the highest landmarks in Arizona and sacred to local Native Americans  
["Flagstaff Sinagua HSIJROTCSSI"](#) | Public Domain

- **Propose an Educational Policy:** How can Native Americans be fairly represented in school mascots or names?
  - [These Massachusetts Schools Still Have Native American-themed Nicknames, Mascots, and Logos](#). MassLive (February 16, 2017)
  - [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 People's History Poster**
  - Describe 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](#)

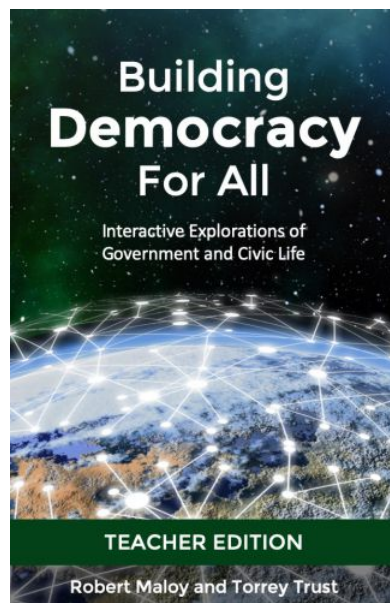


## Online Resources for Teaching Native American History

- [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 reputations of historical figures.



Maloy, R. W. & Trust, T. (2020). *Building Democracy for All*. EdTech Books. Retrieved

from <https://edtechbooks.org/democracy>



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