

CURRICULUM

How Do We Teach With Primary Sources When So Many Voices Are Missing?

Archives often lack records by Native Americans and other groups



By [Sarah Schwartz](#) — August 16, 2019 ⌚ 6 min read



A group of history teachers gathers around archive materials concerning the massacre of the Conestoga as part of a weeklong professional-development program on teaching colonial history held by the Library Company of Philadelphia and the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History.

— Michelle Gustafson for Education Week

Philadelphia

In a quiet room at the historic Library Company of Philadelphia here, a group of middle and high school teachers were studying a massacre.

The teachers, participants in a summer course offered through [the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History](#), were examining primary sources from one consequential event in Pennsylvania's past: an 18th century attack on the Susquehannock Indian tribe by white colonists.

Gathering in small groups around folding tables laden with 250-year-old maps, pamphlets, and images, the teachers thought aloud about what the documents could tell their students—and what questions the pages couldn't answer.

“Even before getting into information—who wrote this?” said Mark Stetina, a local middle school history teacher, pouring over a political cartoon and imagining how he would introduce it to his students. “Then, almost more important is—who's missing?” he said. This question of missing voices was central to the day's workshop, part of a project at the Library Company called Redrawing History. The library has [digitized hundreds of documents about this massacre](#), but almost none are from Native American sources. Now, the organization is working with native artists to create an original graphic novel that attempts to recover some of those voices.

For teachers, the workshop offered a look into the archives and lessons on how to use the forthcoming novel. And it raised a question about teaching history: How do you paint a full picture of the past for your students when some voices have long been silenced?

Teachers look over and discuss the archived historical maps, political cartoons, and propaganda pamphlets related to the Paxton Boys Massacre.

— Michelle Gustafson for Education Week

Since the introduction of the [Common Core State Standards](#) a decade ago, teachers have been encouraged to give primary sources a more prominent place in the classroom. The standards emphasize close analysis of texts across subject areas, which in history and social studies can mean reading these kinds of archival documents. In the years since, both the U.S. Library of

Congress and the National Archives have expanded their digital collections in an effort to make resources available for teachers.

Still, finding primary sources isn't always easy, especially when it comes to historically marginalized voices, said Jenn Androsky, a 10th grade Advanced Placement U.S. History teacher, who traveled from St. Paul, Minn., where she teaches at a Catholic school, for the training.

It's especially difficult to find written records of Native American voices from before the 1800s, she said. Those that are available have often been translated through white colonists. Even so, she said, these sources are essential to teaching history well—and engaging students.

“The nice little progressive American story is boring,” Androsky said. “Once [students] realize it's complicated, it's interesting.”

Beyond the Textbook

The events the teachers were studying in Philadelphia took place in 1763. That year, the Paxton Boys—a group of white colonists from the Pennsylvania backcountry—murdered the entire tribe of Susquehannock Indians, also known as the Conestoga. In targeting this tribe, which had been allied with the Pennsylvania government since the beginning of that century, the Paxton Boys were attempting to send a message to local authorities and the British crown, said Will Fenton, the director of scholarly innovation at the Library Company of Philadelphia, and the creative director of the Redrawing History project.

The massacre was a repudiation of the idea that European colonists should have to respect any Native American claims to land, or even coexist with native people, he said.

After the murders, different groups of colonists debated policy and ideology in the press, through pamphlets—“the social media of the 1700s,” Fenton told the teachers. But native voices are almost entirely absent from the pages of printed records available.

When these stories and perspectives aren't included in mainstream resources, teachers can start to believe they don't matter, said LéAnn Murphy Cassidy, an 8th grade U.S. history teacher at Memorial Middle School in Middlebury, Conn., and the school's social studies instructional leader.

“I’m fighting colleagues who believe that anyone of color who’s important is in the textbook, and if not, they’re not important,” she said.

Julie Levine, an assistant reading specialist at Shaw Avenue Elementary in Valley Stream, N.Y., and Ted Zimmerman, an 8th grade U.S. history at the Math, Civics, and Sciences Charter School in Philadelphia, look over archived political cartoons.

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‘Sharing Power’

Bringing these stories to light is an ongoing project in classrooms across the country.

The [California Indian History Curriculum Coalition](#), based out of Sacramento State University, is among the groups trying to rewrite old narratives.

A coalition of educators, tribal scholars, and native activists, the group has created resources, vetted by California Indians, that center the perspective of native peoples in history.

“We actually have a lot of documentation,” said Rose Borunda, a member of the coalition and the director of the doctorate in educational leadership program at Sacramento State.

European contact occurred later in California than in other parts of the country, so more primary sources exist from there, she said. And more than 100 federally recognized tribes live within the state. Often, their histories are also embedded in stories passed down through an oral tradition, said Borunda.

Partnering with Native Americans in the state is essential to the curriculum project, she said. “We don’t want to continue oppressive practices in which we’re speaking for people who we don’t have a right to speak on behalf of,” said Borunda, who is indigenous. “They know their stories better than we do.”

The National Council for the Social Studies also endorses this practice. “Central to this process is the concept of sharing power—this means moving beyond inviting Indigenous Peoples as guest speakers, to including Indigenous Peoples as decision-makers,” reads a [2018 position paper from the organization](#).

‘A Conceptual Sea Change’

Back in Pennsylvania, though, the people at the center of the Paxton Boys story are gone. “An American genocide was completed on the Susquehannock people,” said Lee Francis, a Native American comic book publisher and the author of the upcoming graphic novel *Ghost River: the Fall and Rise of the Conestoga*. Francis spoke with the teachers at the University of Pennsylvania, the day after they visited the archives. Francis, who had seen the same primary source documents months earlier as he started work on *Ghost River*, said he had been excited to examine them, too. “But it definitely clued us in on who is telling the story,” he said.

He and illustrator Weshoyot Alvitre set to work, Francis said, trying to “un-erase” the gaps in the story. As part of the process, they consulted with the local [Circle Legacy Center](#), an advocacy group that has memorialized the massacre. “I’m not from this place either,” said Francis, who is from the Laguna Pueblo in New Mexico. “So for me, it was also about getting permission to write this story.”

Ghost River takes on a nonlinear narrative structure, switching back and forth from the events of the past to the present day, when Francis, Alvitre, and Fenton are crafting the story.

These creators are written into the novel. The dual perspective shows that while the Susquehannock are gone, native people still exist and are still telling their stories, said Francis. “Not only is this book a historical representation, but it’s an honoring,” he said.

Some of the teachers listening struggled to imagine how they could use a book without a linear timeline, and one that didn’t attempt to take an objective point of view, in a history classroom. “What’s going on in my head this week is a conceptual sea change,” one teacher told Francis. But teaching history that has long been marginalized, or has been left out of the written record, is complicated, said Maria Adamson, an 11th grade U.S. history teacher at William Penn Charter School in Philadelphia. “There are people today who are carriers of history, like Toni Morrison,” she said. “Did *Beloved* actually happen? No, but it can speak to the lived history that wasn’t written down.”

Ultimately, Adamson said, teachers have to investigate the gaps in primary sources, and sometimes rely on thoughtfully reconstructed narratives.

“If you’re interested in the history of women, or the lower class, or anyone who’s not white, you have to ask these questions,” she said. “You can’t just not teach it.”



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