

The Mark of Uncas

Lesson Two

Video Segment

The Pequot War to Lasting Connections
16 minutes

*"It has begun. He has to follow it through to the end."
Joseph Bruchac, Abenaki author and storyteller*



Pequot village in pre- Pequot War times.

Learning Objectives

1. Contrast James Fenimore Cooper's image of the Mohican/Mohegan environment and culture with the reality of the 1600's and 1700's. Remember, Cooper fictionalized the dates for his novel, which is set many years after Uncas actually lived.
2. Determine the impact of Dutch/English trading and colonization on the American Indian tribes of New England.
3. Analyze the roots of Uncas's choice to ally with the English colonists.
4. Examine ways in which the alliance with the Mohegan Tribe influenced English colonial development in New England, and affected the balance of power between New England's American Indian tribes.
5. Explore the importance of tribal survival to the Mohegan Tribe and the compromises with the English colonists that this required.
6. Identify the ways of knowing for documenting the events of the Pequot War.

Background Study

Reading One:

This reading provides both a summary of early contacts between New England's American Indian tribes and Anglo/European traders and colonists, and an examination of the impact of those contacts on the tribes through the 18th century.

Points of Contact

The earliest documented contact between European explorers and Native Americans occurred at Newfoundland in 1001 by the Norse explorers Leif Ericsson and Thorvald Ericsson.

Irish oral tradition tells of the journey of a monk named Brendan several centuries earlier to the North Atlantic coast. Prevailing opinion, however, credits Christopher Columbus as having made the first substantive contact with Native Americans in 1492. Archaeologists continue to explore possible sites of earlier contact.

Throughout the 16th century, the French, Dutch, Irish and English explored and settled the Northeast coast of Canada and the United States. By 1504 these nations had begun fishing Newfoundland's Outer Banks and operating fisheries on shore.

In 1524, the Italian navigator Verazanno explored the Eastern shore of Canada and the United States. He found the Native Americans of New England "the most beautiful [people who] have the most civil customs...." The French established trading posts along the St. Lawrence Gulf and Great Lakes. There were no permanent settlements in New England until 1619 when Dutch adventurers explored the New England coast and established a trading post at present-day Hartford, Connecticut. By the time of these first settlements, the population of New England's Native peoples had been decimated by a smallpox epidemic from their first contacts with Europeans. The disease exterminated entire villages and tribes.

Between 1620 and 1630, Dutch traders and English colonists settled the coastal areas of New England. The first colonists encountered Native tribes who controlled extensive cleared agricultural and hunting lands, and a trail system that linked agricultural river valleys, hunting meadows, and choice coastal and inland fishing sites. Early explorers and settlers described the Native population as healthy, handsome, intelligent, helpful, peaceable and willing to negotiate land use through treaties. Colonists took note of the extraordinary eloquence of the tribal leaders, who used public debate to bring about consensus on tribal issues. After 1630, land-hungry English colonists began moving inland, locating their settlements on the cleared land along the established trails of the Native tribes. By 1638, there were Connecticut settlements at present-day Windsor, Wethersfield, Hartford, New Haven and Saybrook. For sustenance, the colonists were largely dependent on the agricultural products and fishing and hunting sites of the tribes. They adopted wampum as a money system and took advantage of the trading and treaty relationships between New England's tribes and other tribes in the interior.

By 1633, a second wave of smallpox further decimated New England tribes, disrupting tribal organization and community structures, and leaving weakened tribes prey to those tribes less affected by the disease.

The Dutch traders and English colonists took note of tensions between the tribes and exploited them in their competition with each other – and with the French – as a means of strengthening and extending their presence in New England.

Exploitation and Oppression of the Native Americans

The English lagged almost a century behind other European countries in establishing colonies and trade routes in North and South America.

By 1600, the Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch and French had colonized extensively in the present-day West Indies, South and Central America, the southern United States, the east coast of North America, and into the Great Lakes region of the United States and Canada. Once the English established colonies in New England in the early 1600's, they were aggressive in acquiring trade and territory from Native Americans.

The Dutch traders recognized the ceremonial and spiritual importance of wampum to the Eastern Algonquian tribes for ratifying agreements and documenting disputes. The Dutch adapted wampum to their own purposes as a kind of

“money” to negotiate trade agreements with the Iroquois Confederacy and other inland tribes, particularly anxious to obtain this valued commodity. The English quickly followed the Dutch in adopting wampum as a trade commodity.

The coastal tribes made wampum by stringing together small beads produced from white and purple seashells, such as quahogs and whelks.

The Dutch traded metal tools and other European goods for the precious beads, then traded the wampum with interior tribes to secure control of the beaver trade. Using those metal tools, the coastal tribes could produce yet more wampum, and of a higher quality. In Connecticut, the Pequots controlled wampum production, and the Dutch had exclusive trade agreements with them for it.

The English colonists of Massachusetts and Connecticut realized that their economic future depended on their having goods, such as furs, to trade with England. But the Dutch – through their control of the wampum supply – had a virtual lock on the fur trade with the interior tribes. The English decided that the first step in competing with the Dutch was to disrupt the coastal tribes from making wampum. The English then began to incite hostilities both among the coastal tribes and with the Dutch by instigating skirmishes of increasing intensity. On May 26, 1637, at the Court House in Hartford, Connecticut, the colonial assembly authorized John Mason and John Underhill to raise a militia to exterminate the Pequot Nation.

The Mohegan Sachem Uncas had recently separated from the Pequots over disagreement on how to respond to the Dutch and English threat. Whereas the Pequots chose to resist the English newcomers and continue their trade with the Dutch, Uncas decided that such a course would be futile. It was the English who planned to stay and settle the Indian lands. Also, there continued to be enmity between the Mohegans and Pequots over Uncas’s separation from the Pequots. Uncas pledged to ally with the English in any of their battles in order to secure the survival of his small and vulnerable tribe. The first test of his declared allegiance came when Mason required Uncas to engage in a battle against the Pequots. Along with numerous warriors from the Narragansett Tribe, the Mohegans fought with the English in attacking the main Pequot fort near Mystic.

The Pequots, already reduced in strength through disease, were summarily massacred in little more than an hour. Most of the Pequots who were not at the fort were cornered and executed in the succeeding months. Others were absorbed by the Mohegans, sold into slavery to neighboring tribes, or to English colonies in the West Indies.

In an attempt to maintain a balance of power, the Eastern Algonquian tribes generally tried to find ways to accommodate the English colonists through land use agreements and the sharing of knowledge about the environment, cultivated foods, medicines, established trails and cleared lands.

There was a fundamental conflict between the Native tribes’ belief in a shared stewardship of the land and the English colonists’ determination to own it. To justify the ownership and control of traditional tribal territories, as well as their paternalistic interference in tribal affairs and practices, the English portrayed the Native population as subhuman, ignorant, savage, uncivilized and Satan-worshipping.

In 1675, a loose confederation of Native tribes in Rhode Island, Connecticut and Massachusetts, under the leadership of Metacomet (known to the English as King Philip), attempted to resist the pattern of forced land sales and loss of autonomy to the English. In what was one of the bloodiest wars ever fought on American soil, the English eventually defeated the coalition. But the war terrorized English colonists in the Northeast. Harsh retaliatory laws were enacted in each colony, including the wholesale taking of Indian lands.

By the mid 1700’s, the balance of power among Eastern Algonquian tribes and with the colonists was destroyed. Native populations dramatically declined through disease, enslavement and warfare. Tribal lands were isolated islands, threatened by encroaching English towns and farms.

In Connecticut, the Pequot Nation was reduced to fewer than 200 people living on a reservation of less than a thousand acres. Some tribes, such as the Mohegans, disposed of their reservations to rid themselves of government control. Several tribes totally disappeared, some members joining other tribal groups or drifting into English or African slave communities. No longer able to sustain themselves through fishing, hunting, trade and agriculture, Native people worked as laborers for the English and sold more tribal land. Until the 1980’s, government overseers who were often corrupt or negligent managed tribal relationships, land sales and management, housing, welfare and education.

Kathleen A. Hunter, adapted from [The Native Americans of Connecticut: Holding On and Moving Forward](#), Connecticut State Department of Education Teacher Resource Guide, Hartford, Connecticut, 2000.

Reading Two:

This reading provides English colonial interpretations of the conflict between the Pequots and the English, and the English relationship with Uncas.

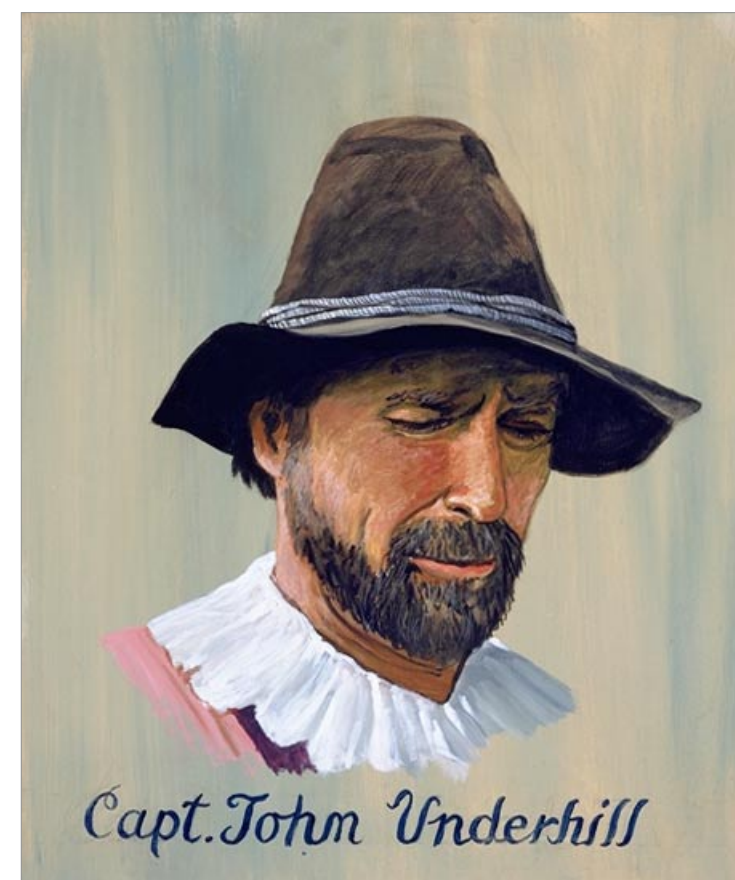
“Newes From America” Captain John Underhill’s Journal

There are conflicting accounts about how many Pequots were massacred at Mystic in 1637, but there is no disagreement that the war was brutal and exceptionally cruel. Underhill’s journal captures both the horror and the justification.

“Down fell men, women, and children. Those that 'scaped us, fell into the hands of the Indians that were in the rear of us. Not above five of them 'scaped out of our hands. Our Indians came up and greatly admired the manner of the Englishmen's fight, but cried ‘Mach it, mach it!’* -- that is, ‘It is naught, it is naught, because it is too furious, and slays too many men.’ Great and doleful was the bloody sight to the view of young soldiers that never had been in war, to see so many souls lie gasping on the ground, so thick, in some places, that you could hardly pass along.”

“It may be demanded, Why should you be so furious? Should not Christians have more mercy and compassion? Sometimes the Scripture declareth women and children must perish with their parents. Sometimes the case alters, but we will not dispute it now. We had sufficient light from the word of God for our proceedings.”

* “Mache” is the Algonquian word for “bad”.



**History of the Pequot War
Major John Mason**

“They were taken in their own Snare, and we through Mercy escaped. And thus in little more than one Hour’s space was their impregnable Fort with themselves utterly Destroyed, to the Number of six or seven Hundred, as some of themselves confessed. There were only seven taken Captive & about seven escaped. ...Thus did the LORD judge among the Heathen, filling the Place with dead Bodies!”

**The Hartford Treaty
1638**

Following the Pequot War, the remaining leaders of the conquered Pequots were brought to Hartford in September 1638, where they were forced to sign the Hartford (or Tripartite) Treaty. The Treaty divided the Pequot lands, placed the Pequots in servitude to white plantation owners in Bermuda and Connecticut, or to other American Indian tribes, including the Mohegans. The vehemence with which the English colonists sought to annihilate the Pequots is reflected in a provision of the treaty that outlawed the use of the name “Pequot.” In 1643, a church man wrote:

“And in the war, which we made against them [the Pequots], God’s hand from heaven was so manifested that a very few of our men in a short time pursued through the wilderness, slew, and took prisoners about 1,400 of them, even all they could find, to the great terror and amazement of all the Indians to this day; so that the name of the Pequots is blotted out from under heaven, there being not one that is, or (at least) dare call himself a Pequot.”
Laurence M. Hauptman, “The Pequot War and Its Legacies,” *The Pequots in Southern New England*, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1990.



“The Pequot and Narragansett Wars” established Uncas and the Mohegan Tribe as a loyal ally of the English colonists. But the allegiance was always fragile, constantly testing Uncas diplomatic skills to assure survival of the Mohegan Tribe. By the mid 19th century, once Connecticut’s Native peoples no longer represented a threat to the non-Indian community, they were romanticized in novels such as Cooper’s *Last of the Mohegans* and popular art such as this calendar. How does the Calendar reflect the significance of the Mohegan’s tribal history to the cultural heritage of Connecticut’s non-Indian population?

Discussion

§ Ways of Knowing

“In gratitude to Uncas and the Mohegan’s, King Charles II gave Uncas a bible to show him the path to Heaven and a sword to protect himself from his enemies. Tribal legend has it that Uncas preferred the sword.”

Eric Schweig, Inuit actor and Narrator of the Mark of Uncas

1. Review the traditional ways of knowing used to tell the story of the Mohegan Tribe in this segment of the video, such as oral history.
2. Review the Background Readings for this lesson. What new source of information is used to learn about the activities of the Mohegan Tribe? And their interaction with the English colonists in Connecticut? From these readings, does it appear that the English colonists rely more on oral history and familiarity with place, or on the written record to document history?
3. In the story about the gift to Uncas related in this segment of the video, given the strong oral history tradition and the value placed on ceremonial objects, does it help explain Uncas’s preference for the sword over the book?
4. How might the value of the written word in Anglo/European culture change traditional social and tribal relationships within American Indian tribes? What is the significance of the “Mark of Uncas” within the context of written documentation of history? Why might tribal leaders employ elaborate pictographs to sign documents, rather than choose to write their name alphabetically on documents?

§ Divide and Conquer

“The Pequot War was nothing more than feuding factions of the Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Connecticut colonies opting and vying for power and attempting to use the Indians as their pawns.”

John Brown, Narragansett Tribal Historic Preservation Officer

1. Using historic maps of New England, determine where traditional American Indian settlements were located, and where the Dutch, French and English colonies were established. In which areas of New England did each of these European nations dominate? Which geographical features appear to have been critical to the location of Native and colonial settlements? Which river and trail systems linked Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Connecticut to the interior.
[Insert maps of settlements, river trails]
2. English colonists began settling New England in 1620 and began settlement in Connecticut in the 1630’s. The Reverend Thomas Hooker and his party of 100 followers arrived from Newtown (now Cambridge), Massachusetts at the site of Hartford in October 1636 where they formed the Connecticut Colony with Windsor and Wethersfield. After a winter of tensions and skirmishes between the Pequots and Mohegans, in Spring 1637, the Colony declared war on the Pequots. The Mohegans under Uncas allied themselves with the English colonists.

Given the English colonists’ competition with the French and the Dutch, their need for cleared land, and their large debt to London financiers, examine their policy of taking control of Indian lands and trade. In view of the number of Indian tribes in southern New England and the ever-shifting balance of power that existed among them, determine if the “divide and conquer” strategy of the English colonists was the most practical from their perspective. Form a hypothesis that justifies the English strategy.

Speculate on why Uncas might have decided that allegiance with the English provided the best option for the survival of the Mohegan tribe, and perhaps all American Indian tribes in the region. How much contact may have occurred between Uncas and the English at Hartford by 1637? What might he have learned about the English through his limited contacts? How might the colonists’ urgency have influenced Uncas’s decision in forming an allegiance with the English? Consider Karen Cooper’s observation in this video segment on the cultural collision between the Native peoples and the English settlers. Form a hypothesis that justifies Uncas’s strategy.

§ Bloody War

“I cannot help but think that Uncas was horrified when he saw what happened, when he saw the tremendous violence that was unleashed by the English on the Pequot people.”
Joseph Bruchac, Abenaki author and storyteller

“But with European arrival, then you had a very different people and Europeans were experienced in wars that just totally decimated people and with the weapons they had those weapons served them to that purpose. So for Native people, contemplating warfare meant they really had to think about it in new ways.”

Karen Cooper, Smithsonian Center for Museum Studies, Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma

2. Compare Joseph Bruchac’s, and Karen Cooper’s statements in the video with Captain John Underhill’s and Major John Mason’s accounts of the massacre at Mystic. Do Underhill’s and Mason’s account corroborate Joseph Bruchac’s and Karen Cooper’s interpretation of Uncas’s expectation of the Pequot war? Examine why the English colonists would feel justified in totally exterminating the Pequots. How do the terms of the Hartford Treaty reinforce the English colonists’ intent?
3. There are several accounts of the terrifying brutality of the American Indians (allied with the English) towards captured allies of the Pequots. Compare the total extermination of a tribe with the brutal torture of one enemy. How might the motive of each approach be different and bring about different results? Review again Joseph Bruchac’s and Karen Cooper’s observation on the purpose and method of American Indian warfare. Why might Uncas prefer to capture the Pequots and place them in his servitude, rather than exterminate them?

§ Above all else, survive

“And Uncas was a survivor, a wise survivor. In the latest demographics it’s estimated that in the eastern United States, east of the Mississippi River, there were 12 to 14 million Indian people. Where’d they go? Where’d they go? So Uncas represents someone who is smart enough to survive and he got his people to survive, otherwise they’d be as extinct as the hundreds of Indian nations that were wiped out in the holocaust of the settlement of the East.”
Russell Means, Lakota, Activist

5. It is well documented in the Colonial Records of Connecticut and histories of the time that Uncas’s treatment of his Pequot captives was harsh. In fact, at one point the Colonial government stepped in and removed some Pequots from Uncas’s control. In this video segment, however, Bruchac relates the famous encounter between Governor Winthrop and Uncas. How did Winthrop’s anger that Uncas would take Pequots with him to Boston fit with the provisions of the Treaty of Hartford. Was there hypocrisy in the English colonists’ decision to remove the Pequot captives from under Uncas’s control? What other motive might they have had?

Examine Uncas’s diplomatic strategy in this well-known account to protect the Pequots. Consider why Uncas might want to protect the Pequot captives under his control. Why was it important to Uncas to consolidate allegiances among the Native tribes of Connecticut, and reduce the influence of tribes from the other colonies (such as the Narragansetts)? What would it take to survive the intrusion of English colonists into Southern New England?

6. When Uncas and his band separated from the mighty Pequot tribe, his influence was slight and the land base of the Mohegan Tribe was small. Following the Pequot Wars, he consolidated his power in Connecticut by bringing into the tribe leaders, warriors and wives from the Pequots. He formed alliances with other tribes in the region.

During the period following the Pequot Wars, the General Court in Hartford was fully preoccupied with relationships between the colonists and the Native tribes – land usage and sales, trade, allegiances. Hardly did a session of the Court convene without report of some incident involving these issues. New laws were constantly being enacted to govern relationships between colonists and Native peoples, and to control the power of the tribes. Because of his faithful service to the English, the growing population of the Mohegan Tribe and its alliances with tribes in the region, Uncas’s voice was heard in Hartford. He was recognized by the English colonists as a person “with whom they could, as it were, do business,” as Lord Saye describes the relationship.

Examine Sam Deloria’s interpretation of Uncas’s motives and diplomatic skills:

“This guy [Uncas] was a diplomat and he had to make some alliance of some kind and he made a choice. And

interpreting his choice strictly along racial grounds I think is a very limited way of looking at it. He made some choices, and they’re very easy to second guess 350 years later. He certainly had diplomatic skills in being able to manipulate the system to enable himself to survive. This was an early example of a much more subtle view of the power politics of the day than the people who just stayed in one place and say ‘we’re gonna fight to the end,’ and, in fact, they did fight to the end, and it was over.”

Realistically, what were Uncas’s options at the time of the Pequot War? There were several powerful American Indian tribes in the region which were maneuvering for survival during the early period of English settlement, such as the Pequots, Narragansetts and Wampanoags. Given the marginal status of the Mohegan Tribe prior to the Pequot Wars, what likelihood was there that the tribe would have survived if a Pequot and Dutch alliance had overtaken the English colonists? If Uncas and the Mohegan Tribe had stood on the sidelines of the Pequot War, what would have become of them? What has become of other small tribes in Connecticut, such as the Podunks and Saukiags? If Uncas had not assumed an almost ruthless leadership among Connecticut’s Native people, would English colonial treatment of the tribes have been harsher?

Formulate a position on diplomacy as an effective solution to cultural and economic conflict. Compare and contrast the conflicts and decisions that surrounded Uncas with those of contemporary regions and nations.

Student Project

Organize a student debate around this proposition: In the face of a stronger dominating group, it is better to survive as an identifiable community, even if that requires some loss of one's cultural traditions and values, than it is to resist any domination, even if that results in a total loss of one's community. In developing arguments for both sides of the proposition, use evidence from the video and readings.

Further Study

1. King Philip's War
2. Colonial Records of Connecticut leading up to and following the Pequot War.
3. Compare and contrast the Mohegan and Pequot experience at the time of the Pequot War with the experience of other American Indian tribes under pressure from Anglo/European expansion.