

Phips Bounty Proclamation

Excerpt from an article written by Bonnie D. Newsom and Jamie Bissonette-Lewey, “Wabanaki Resistance and Healing: An Exploration of the Contemporary Role of an Eighteenth Century Bounty Proclamation in an Indigenous Decolonization Process,” pp. 1-4.

This paper focuses on how the changing cultural context of ... the 1755 Spencer Phips Bounty Proclamation ... has transformed the document from serving as a tool for sanctioned violence to a tool of decolonization for the Indigenous peoples of Maine.... Since European contact, the history of the Wabanaki people has often been violent. Land dispossession, war, disease, oppression, and genocide are all part of the Wabanaki story. Evidence of both physical and structural violence directed against Wabanaki people exists in document form. Treaties, petitions, death certificates, and maps ... illustrate relationships between groups and individuals.... Documents can be displayed, discarded, curated, sold or traded ... through human influences. It is the content of the document combined with its cultural context that dictates the role of a document in human society....

Most recently, the Maine Indian Tribal-State Commission (MITSC)¹ used the Phips Proclamation to initiate a healing process around the inappropriate use of an Indian mascot and the associated team name of “Redskins” by a local school district ... in Wiscasset, Maine, location of the Wiscasset Incident ... but also the location of a colonial garrison where bounty hunters would register to hunt Wabanaki people for scalps.... Hunting Wabanaki people became very lucrative....

Since the early 1930s the Wiscasset High School’s mascot has been the “Redskins”.... MITSC sent a letter to the RSU-12 School Board requesting that Wiscasset stop using the mascot name “Redskins” and the stereotypical caricature image of a Native American wearing a rendition of a western plains-style headdress.

By way of follow-up to their written request, MITSC representatives attended a RSU-12 School Board meeting and shared with them a copy of the Phips Proclamation.... During the presentation, representatives explained the shared tragic history of the descendants of the Wabanaki Tribes and the descendants of the colonial families in Wiscasset. MITSC requested that RSU-12 change the Redskins mascot in order to create an academic environment where Native and non-Native children could live and learn together with respect and understanding.

Even though over 250 years has passed since the Phips Proclamation was issued, the anger engendered by the request was fresh. Many in the community disputed the connection between the Phips Proclamation and the term “redskins.” They cited revisionist history that painted a picture of Indian people who spoke of themselves as redskins all the while claiming that they have always treated “their mascot” with the utmost respect. Indigenous people were referred to as “people from away” while the people from Wiscasset claimed a status akin to indigenous.

¹ MITSC is an intergovernmental body comprised of six tribal representatives and six representatives from the State of Maine. MITSC is charged with monitoring compliance with the Maine Implementing Act and assuring good and respectful relations between the state and the tribes. Co-author Jamie Bissonette-Lewey is chair of MITSC.

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MITSC raised the issues of racism, genocide, and oppression only through the presentation of the Phips artifact. These words were not used. Nor was an analysis of the artifact offered. Yet, Wiscasset citizens repeatedly stated they were not racist, rather the victims of a vicious form of “political correct-ism.” At one point during the discussions, the Phips Proclamation was alleged to be a fraud.

Throughout the conversation, MITSC reflected the image of a culturally aware, centered, modern, and powerful indigenous perspective. Their offering was calm yet assertive and was enhanced by the ability of Indigenous spokespeople to clearly, calmly, and strongly articulate the request and the rationale behind it. The theme of healing was consistent throughout MITSC’s presentations. This, combined with the presence of contemporary Wabanaki who lay claim to their history of survival and recovery manifested in the Phips Proclamation, shifted the balance of power. The oppressed became the initiator articulating a way forward.

After months of rancor, the RSU-12 School Board, in a split 10-9 vote, mandated a change in mascot and a prohibition of Native American imagery for all sporting teams in the RSU. In the last conversation before the final vote on the subject, State Representative Leslie Fossel testified before the RSU-12 School Board. He turned his back to the board and faced the audience stating, “I have come to tell you the truth, and history is closing in on you. You will no longer be able to continue the way you have. It is time to change.” Allies and Indigenous people successfully used the Phips Proclamation to remind others of what was done and that it should never happen again. “History is closing in,” it is time to heal...

...[W]e offer an alternative interpretation of why the Phips Proclamation has achieved such visibility in contemporary Wabanaki society. In 1782, General George Washington issued an order creating the Badge of Military Merit, which served as the precursor to the Purple Heart medal. Today this medal is issued by the President of the United States to those soldiers wounded or killed as the result of an enemy or hostile act.... Many Wabanaki people were wounded or killed in the defense of their homeland. Similar to the Purple Heart medal, the act of posting the Spencer Phips Proclamation acknowledges those ancestors whose bloodshed helped to preserve the integrity of a homeland and identity. It reflects an act of sovereignty and a testament to Wabanaki survival.