

A Look at Primary Sources: The Tragedy at Sandy Lake

I. Curricular Area

1. Social Studies/History
2. Language Arts

II. Learner Goals

Students will gain an understanding of how treaties directly affected American Indians by reading two primary sources.

III. Learner Outcomes

Students will be able to

1. Identify the difference between primary and secondary sources.
2. Analyze a primary source.
3. Explain what happened at Sandy Lake.

IV. Teacher Background Information

The Sandy Lake Tragedy was an incident that took place in Sandy Lake, Minnesota, that resulted in the death of several hundred Ojibwe during the US Government's attempt in 1850 to remove several bands of the tribe to areas west of the Mississippi River; about 400 men, women and children died. (12% of the tribe)

Background

By the 17th century, the Ojibwe nation was spread across the Lake Superior region in modern day Ontario, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. With the bands in Wisconsin, Michigan, and parts of eastern Minnesota being east of the Mississippi River, they came under the effect of the Indian Removal Act. In 1830, when the act was signed by US President Andrew Jackson, the Ojibwe lands east of the Mississippi were not highly desired by white settlers. By 1850, however, pressure from whites in both Wisconsin and Minnesota led President Zachary Taylor to order their unlawful and unconstitutional removal, breaking multiple treaties in the process.

Tragedy

To force the Ojibwe west of the Mississippi, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) made a last-minute change to move the annual annuity payments from a central region around LaPointe, Wisconsin, the economic and spiritual center of the nation, to not-so-central, but well known trade-hub location of Sandy Lake, Minnesota. The BIA hoped to strategically trap the Ojibwe in Minnesota, forcing them to spend their annuity payments in Minnesota rather than Wisconsin, which was both economically and politically beneficial to the BIA. The Ojibwe were concerned about the issues this move presented, and many bands gathered together to deliberate their options. Unfortunately, the discussions consumed such a lengthy span of time that the Ojibwe were left with sparse time to plant their spring crops/gather food. As a result they were forced to relocate to Sandy Lake if they wished to survive. So, in the fall of 1850, representatives from 19 Ojibwe bands packed up and started the arduous journey to the shores of Sandy Lake, where they had been told to gather in late October for their annual annuity payments and supplies. They waited several weeks before a government agent arrived and informed them that Congress had been unable to send the appropriate money and supplies. A small portion of the payment finally arrived in early December,

consisting of spoiled food and a small percentage of the promised payment. By this time, around 150 Ojibwe had died of dysentery, measles, starvation, or freezing. The return journey was equally perilous: aside from being weak from sickness and hunger, the Ojibwe were unprepared for a winter journey. As a result, 200-230 more Ojibwe died on the return trip.

Results

As a result of this tragedy, the Lake Superior bands under the leadership of Chief Buffalo of LaPointe, pressed President Millard Fillmore to cancel the removal order. There was a loud public outcry from some whites regarding the government's inhumane treatment of the Ojibwe, supporting Chief Buffalo's request, resulting in the formal end of the Indian Removal Act. Still, not wanting to have Indians among them, whites encouraged the establishment of Indian Reservations

V. Student Activities

1. Review with students the differences between primary and secondary sources.
2. Review the teacher background information on Sandy Lake.
3. Have students read the document.
4. Students will fill out the Historical Document Analysis worksheet. An example has been provided, but there are many ways to capture this information.
5. Review as a large group.
6. After students have reviewed both documents, have them do a free-response writing activity using the following prompts;
 - a. What were your initial reactions to the readings?
 - b. Imagine you were writing a response to Flat Mouth, what would you have said? What do you think was actually done?
7. If time permits, have students share their reactions to the readings with the larger group.

"Tell him I blame him for the children we have lost...."

FLAT MOUTH

December 3, 1850

NEARLY 3,000 OJIBWAYS gathered at Sandy Lake to receive their annuities in the fall of 1850. However, the money did not arrive for two months. In the meantime, they were fed spoiled provisions of musty pork head, rotten corned beef, and bad flour. Before long, 150 people were dead. Although William Warren blamed the contractors for the disaster, Flat Mouth felt that Governor Ramsey was responsible, and therefore sent the following message to him through agent John S. Watrous:

I want you to write down the words I speak and carry them to him. Tell him I blame him for the children we have lost, for the sickness we have suffered, and for the hunger we have endured. The fault rests on his shoulders.

Why were our goods not given to us at Crow Wing? Why were we brought here to be made a laughing stock among the other Indians? Tell him I blame him for this.... I told him last spring that we got nothing to eat from our Great Father when we came to the payment, but had to depend upon the charity of our fellow Indians to supply us. The Governor promised to feed us while here. He has not done it. We have been stealing all we have eaten from our fellow Chippewas; of this we have been accused and made a laughing stock thereby....

My friend, it makes our hearts sore to look at the losses we have sustained while at Sandy Lake. You call us your children, but I do not think we are your children. If we were, we should be white. You are not our father and I think you call us your children only in mocking. The earth is our father and I will never call you so. The reason we call the earth our father is because it resembles us in color; and we call the sky our grandfather. We do not sell the ground to our Great Father. We gave it to him in order that he might follow our example and be liberal to us. I told the Governor at Crow Wing that we had not received an equivalent for our lands--that we wanted more. As much again as we got would not be too much. I expected to have seen him here. I should have called upon him to increase our annuity. When I saw him at Fort Gaines others heard what he said. He promised to get us more. Will he do it? If he will, let him add one half to our present payment. If he will do this, we will again come for our annuities; but if not, we will not come. Our people will not come if I tell them not to....I have great influence with the upper Indians, and when I put words into their hearts they are not soon forgotten nor lightly regarded....I call on you to double our payment next year. I do not blame our Great Father because we were so badly cheated in the sale of our lands. It was the traders' fault. He put honey on his lips to deceive us; and if our annuity cannot be doubled next year, we will not come for it....

Source: Flat Mouth speech, Dec. 3, 1850, recorded by John Watrous, in Alexander Ramsey Papers, MHS.

What is AP PARTS?

A concrete way for us to analyze historical documents!

Author: Who created the source? What do you know about the author? What is the author's point of view?

Place and Time: Where and when was the source produced? How might this affect the meaning of the source?

Prior Knowledge: Beyond information about the author and the context of its creation, what do you know that would help you further understand the primary source? For example, do you recognize any symbols and recall what they represent?

Audience: For whom was the source created and how might this affect the reliability of the source?

Reason: Why was this source produced and how might this affect the reliability of the source?

The Main Idea: What point is the source trying to convey?

Significance: Why is this source important? Ask yourself, "So what?" in relation to the question asked.

AP PARTS Document Analysis

Name or description of Document:

Author

Who created the document?

Does he or she have a certain viewpoint that affects the meaning?

Place and Time

Where and when was the document created?

Does the place and time affect the meaning of the document?

Prior Knowledge

What information is helpful to know when approaching the document?

Audience

For whom was the document created? Who was meant to read it?

Reason

Why was the document created? Why at the time and place?

The Main Idea

What is the Main Idea (or thesis) behind the document?

Significance

So What? How does the document relate to the topic at hand?

Why is the document important?