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Nathaniel Philbrick's Insights into Early American History

Historian and award-winning author explores how America emerged from bloody conflicts in the culmination of the 2013 Common Reading program



October 8, 2013 | Jill Rodrigues '05

BRISTOL, R.I. – More than 150 years separated the Pilgrims' voyage across the Atlantic Ocean to an unfettered life in the New World and New England's uprising against British imperialism in the American Revolution. While most textbooks divide these events into distinct snapshots of American history, the story of the Pilgrims' successes and blunders dictated the course of events in the later emerging of the United States.

When the Pilgrims first arrived in Plymouth Harbor in 1620, they quickly formed a mutually beneficial partnership with the Wampanoag confederation – the English traded their goods and the Wampanoags offered food, survival skills for wintering through the area, and protection from other tribes. Pilgrims hired the Wampanoags as farmhands, they exchanged iron, axes and muskets for fish and game, and soon hailed their native neighbors with the greeting "neetop," meaning "friend."

But only 50 years later their blossoming friendship devolved into terror and genocide in King Philip's War, a battle between colonists and natives that marks the bloodiest conflict per capita in American history.

On October 3, historian and National Book Award-winning author Nathaniel Philbrick examined how America emerged from the "terrible darkness" of King Philip's War to become the United States a century later via 2007's "Mayflower" and his recently published "Bunker Hill." Philbrick – a finalist for the 2007 Pulitzer Prize in History – spent the day at Roger Williams teaching a master class with journalism students and delivered the keynote address for the 2013 Common Reading program, in which all first-year students and many others on campus read "Mayflower."

In his address, Philbrick explored America's evolution from the voyage of the Mayflower to the Battle of Bunker Hill, "and what that has to say about the meaning of liberty in a nation that has never entirely escaped the terror, anger, violence and guilt that went with colonizing this ancient and blood-soaked land," he said.

While "Bunker Hill" may end with the creation of the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution – and the idea that these events mark the point where all Americans become free – Philbrick explained that even then some questioned whether the work of the revolution was over. For Philbrick, America's constantly evolving ideals and nature are what distinguish this country.

"The United States of America will always be a work in progress. All the promises, problems, conflicts and ideals that first brought the Pilgrims to America and contributed to the outbreak of the Revolution in 1775, as well as the Civil War in 1861, are still driving this country's ever-contentious march into the future. For me that is what the United States is all about," Philbrick said.

Spanning 150 years, here are 10 facts from the Pilgrim's landing to the American Revolution that you may have missed in history class, courtesy of Nathaniel Philbrick:

- The Pilgrims believed they were on a mission from God – to break away from the established Church of England and carve out a new life, first in religiously tolerant Holland and then in the New World, in order to return worship to its purest form. On an old, leaky wooden ship famously known as the Mayflower, 102 Pilgrims and hired men sailed for 65 grueling days during winter across the Atlantic before reaching Plymouth Harbor, falling short of their intended settlement at the mouth of the Hudson River. In the Pilgrims' account of their voyage, they wrote, "We verily believe and trust the Lord is with us, and that He will graciously prosper our endeavors according to the simplicity of our hearts therein."
- About half of the voyagers were strangers to the Pilgrims – hired men to help sail the ship and set up the new colony – much to the chagrin of the faithful who wished to remain autonomous and insulated from others who didn't share their religious beliefs. But being forced to contend with these differences was their saving grace, according to Philbrick: "From the start the Pilgrims were

forced to accommodate others, instead of slipping immediately into the kind of solipsistic bubble that would have left them defenseless in a world of unpredictable and frightening change. They quickly realized their future welfare depended on working with those outside their own spiritual community.”

- During the first decades of the colony, there weren’t any clear-cut boundaries between the Pilgrims and the natives’ land, and an essential – and unavoidable – intimacy existed between them as neighbors and friends. “This was no cross-cultural paradise,” Philbrick said. “And yet during the 17th century’s midpoint, both sides were still doing their best to negotiate their way through the inevitable differences that arose.”
- Unburdened by the struggle for survival thanks to their parents’ efforts, the Pilgrims’ children scorned alliances with the natives and seized as much native land as possible via unjust means when they assumed leadership of the colony. They pushed the Wampanoags to war, Philbrick said, “unintentionally paving the way for a return to the old, horrifying days of death and despair.”
- In just 14 months of King Philip’s War, no other conflict in American history saw as many fatalities per capita. According to Philbrick, World War II caused the loss of less than one percent of the United States’ adult male population, while the Civil War realized a casualty rate between four and five percent. In King Philip’s War, Plymouth colony lost nearly eight percent of its men. But the real tragedy was the total decimation of the local Native Americans. Of a population of about 20,000 natives, 2,000 died in battle or from injuries; 3,000 died of illnesses related to the war; and another 1,000 men, women and children were sold into slavery – primarily to the sugar trade in the Caribbean.
- A pivotal moment for the American Revolution was Samuel Adams’ idea in 1772 to create a Boston Committee of Correspondence – a 21-member committee that informed on the events of British imperialism in Boston to the farthest reaches of small towns throughout New England. All 250 towns received communications, marking the first time a network of debate circumvented the governing system and England’s reach to those government officials. Their formative work was the Boston Declaration – “a kind of tutorial on why the colonists’ God-given natural rights superseded anything Parliament could devise,” Philbrick said.
- Beyond just Boston, the ancestors of people who lived through King Philip’s War and other conflicts with Native Americans wholeheartedly took up the revolutionary struggle throughout New England. The town of Gorham, Maine, located about 10 miles inland of present-day Portland, was home to veterans and descendants of those earlier battles, and still remembered a 1746 Native American raid on their town that left five colonists dead and three abducted. “For the citizens of Gorham, the fight for liberty was not about the current frustrations with Parliament; it was about

what they had already sacrificed in defending their homes,” Philbrick said.

- Some books and films sanitize and glorify the battles in the American Revolution, Philbrick said, “a romanticized vision of noble militiamen taking carefully aimed potshots at evil British soldiers. But in reality the fighting along what is now Massachusetts Avenue devolved into an extremely ruthless kind of fighting as the militiamen and British soldiers shot and bayoneted each other, often within the colonists’ own homes.”
- Philbrick drew definitive parallels between the Great Swamp Fight in 1675 to the 1775 Battle of Bunker Hill, noting that both bloody skirmishes marked the advent of all-out war, and though both were English victories, “almost cost the victors the war,” he said. The Great Swamp Fight forced a peaceful native tribe to join the warring Wampanoags, prolonging King Philip’s War and launching the bloodiest part. And at Bunker Hill, British soldiers suffered nearly 15 percent losses in their ranks.
- Both King Philip’s War and the American Revolution feature a man named Benjamin Church – and both were studies of contradiction. A leading military figure in King Philip’s War, the elder Church forced captured Wampanoag warriors to fight for the colonists and mastered the natives’ fighting tactics, while at the same time objecting to native enslavement. However, since native slavery also served as the income he derived from war, Church became “one of New England’s leading slave catchers.” The younger Church (the great-grandson) was a European-trained doctor serving as the chief physician for the Continental Army and delegate to the Massachusetts Provincial Congress. He professed to be a leading patriot while actually operating as a British spy.

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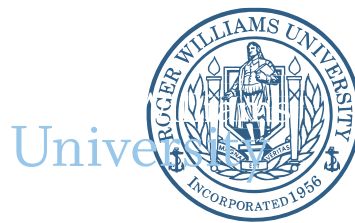
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