

Native Americans- Case studies (Hour 2)

1/ Mount Rushmore and the Black Hills

The public narrative

Mount Rushmore's four presidents make national leadership and achievement visible in a monumental landscape. The anniversary celebration uses an immediately recognisable symbol to encourage identification with the nation. The Guardian reports Trump's anniversary appearance at the monument. The official Freedom 250 event account frames it as a tribute to independence, freedom and self-government. These are the organisers' stated values, not evidence that all communities share the site's meaning.

The history at stake

The worksheet places the monument in the Black Hills, sacred to the Lakota, whose rights were recognised under the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie before US seizure. The NPS contextual account adds that gold discoveries encouraged incursions in violation of the treaty and that the sculpture's location disregarded the mountain's existing cultural significance. The presidents occupy the visual foreground, but the land has a history that predates the monument.

The treatment of that history

The evidence card should distinguish the event's celebratory framing from the fuller history of the site. The issue is whose relationship to the land is foregrounded. A patriotic image may make the landscape appear to be an uncomplicated national possession. This is an inference about the framing, not proof that every visitor receives the same message. Neither the worksheet nor this comparison establishes that a Native American exhibit was physically removed from Mount Rushmore.

The justification and criticism

The official account justifies the celebration through patriotic remembrance. It does not explain why particular Indigenous material might be omitted: for that specific rationale, write "not stated". The historical objection is that using this sacred, contested place as an unqualified symbol of freedom can obscure dispossession. The criticism concerns both recognition and the meaning of the location; adding a passing acknowledgement would not itself settle treaty or land questions.

A qualified assessment

Selection is certain: a commemoration foregrounds some people and values. Simplification describes a heroic image that compresses a complex site. Sanitisation is a defensible interpretation if the account makes the place's history seem untroubled by suppressing its contradictions. Historical rewriting requires stronger evidence that facts, emphasis or causal relationships have been altered. The NPS itself recognises conflicting meanings, so do not claim that every official account denies Indigenous history.

Answer to the investigation question: Mount Rushmore can provide a powerful national symbol, but a shared story cannot assume a shared meaning. It needs to acknowledge why the same place can signify achievement to some and dispossession to others.

2/ Westward expansion as a national epic

The public narrative

Freedom 250's official description presents the Washington Monument projection as a succession of five chapters, from discovery and independence through westward expansion and industrial development to the present and future. Covered wagons are among its emblematic images. The description emphasises achievement and the American spirit. The monumental setting and sequence encourage an interpretation of national development as cumulative progress. The sequence is evidence; its effect on the viewer is analysis.

The history at stake

The worksheet asks students to confront this epic with conquest, displacement, broken treaties, resistance and survival. Westward expansion therefore cannot be assessed solely from the settlers' viewpoint: territory acquired by the United States could also be territory lost by Native nations. "Expansion" describes movement and growth, while the additional history asks through whose power, at whose expense and with what consequences.

ICT's America 250 material shifts the perspective towards the first peoples of the land. Its event description connects colonial legacies with resilience and ongoing contributions; its accompanying page also foregrounds sovereignty, activism and a more inclusive future narrative. Native peoples appear as participants in the present and future, not simply victims located in a vanished past.

The treatment of that history

The official written description foregrounds a triumphant sequence and does not explain Indigenous experiences of expansion. This establishes an omission in that description. It does not by itself establish that the entire audiovisual show contains no Indigenous content. Students who inspect the projection can add precisely located observations; they should not turn an inference from the promotional text into a claim about every scene.

The justification and criticism

The organisers' stated purpose is a patriotic anniversary celebration. A short public spectacle necessarily selects and condenses material; this is a reasonable qualification, not a stated explanation for excluding any specific history. ICT offers an alternative perspective on the anniversary. The supplied ICT page is not itself a direct review of the projection, so do not attribute to its panelists a specific accusation against the show that the page does not document.

A qualified assessment

Selection and simplification are well supported. Sanitisation becomes a defensible interpretation where a narrative of progress obscures the human and political costs identified in the historical comparison. Historical rewriting is a stronger claim: it needs evidence of alteration or misleading causal framing. Missing details alone do not demonstrate intentional falsification.

Answer to the investigation question: an Indigenous perspective changes "progress" from an apparently common national experience into a question about unequal benefits and losses. A fuller commemoration can acknowledge achievement while recognising dispossession and Native survival.

3/ Connect each case to the PBS report

Case study 1 and the Philadelphia exhibit

Concrete video example: an exhibit about nine people enslaved by Washington was removed in Philadelphia. Citizens protested, the city sued and a judge ordered the panels returned while litigation continued. This shows an actual intervention in public access to historical information.

Common issue: both cases ask whether a symbol of national freedom can be understood fairly without the experiences of people whose freedom or rights were denied. Washington's achievements do not erase enslavement; the presidents' monumental status does not erase the land's contested history. The point of comparison is the relationship between honour and historical accountability.

Relevant difference: Philadelphia concerns an identifiable removal and a judicial order about exhibition panels. Mount Rushmore concerns the meaning and use of sacred land, dispossession and treaty rights. The response needed in one case cannot simply be transferred to the other: restoring panels is not the same as addressing a land dispute.

What the second example adds: inclusion requires more than mentioning disadvantaged groups. The place chosen for celebration can itself determine who feels recognised and whose claims remain marginal.

Case study 2 and Abraham Brian at Gettysburg

Concrete video example: Brian was a free African American whose family fled advancing Confederate forces for fear of enslavement. Including this story enriches the battlefield's military account by showing what the conflict meant for people's freedom.

Common issue: a familiar national narrative becomes more informative when it incorporates the experiences of people who faced threats hidden by a heroic overview. Brian qualifies a military narrative; Indigenous history qualifies an expansion narrative. In each case, the additional perspective changes the explanation, rather than merely adding a name.

Relevant difference: Brian's story concerns a Black family's threatened freedom in a Civil War setting. The Indigenous case concerns Native nations, territorial dispossession and sovereignty across a broader process of expansion. Do not equate enslavement and dispossession, or treat the affected communities as a single group.

What the second example adds: the same development can have different consequences for different people. A shared identity can accommodate these unequal experiences without requiring a single heroic interpretation of progress.

Compare the two Native American cases

Mount Rushmore raises the meaning of a specific contested place; the projection raises the interpretation of a historical process. The first challenges the assumption that a national landmark is a neutral setting. The second challenges the assumption that territorial growth is progress for everyone. Both show that inclusion affects the structure of the national story, not just the number of people mentioned.

4/ Plan an argued answer

Question: To what extent can national commemorations build a shared American identity while acknowledging histories of exclusion and dispossession?

What the question requires

“To what extent” requires a qualified answer about possibilities and limits. “Can” asks whether commemoration can achieve this purpose and under what conditions. “Shared” need not mean that everyone interprets the past identically. “While acknowledging” requires explanation of how recognition can contribute to belonging, rather than assuming that acknowledgement automatically divides the nation.

A possible line of reasoning

Main claim: commemoration can offer common ground if recognition of exclusion changes the way national achievements are explained. Example 1 provides concrete evidence from the video. Example 2 tests the claim in a Native American context and adds a distinct insight. The qualification admits that no ceremony can include everything; the response distinguishes necessary selection from omitting facts essential to understanding the subject. The conclusion states the conditions for shared identity.

Outline for case study 1

Claim: recognition makes national pride more inclusive.

Philadelphia: removal narrows the account of a figure associated with liberty, while civic and judicial responses challenge exclusion.

Mount Rushmore: the location adds sacred land and treaty rights to the issue of representation.

Qualification: selection is unavoidable, but these histories are central to the meaning of the places.

Conclusion: belonging cannot rest on asking excluded communities to accept a misleading account.

Outline for case study 2

Claim: commemorations can unite people if their account of progress recognises unequal consequences.

Brian: a civilian Black experience changes the meaning of a military site.

Projection: an epic of expansion needs to be qualified by Indigenous experiences.

Qualification: omission in a brief format does not alone prove deliberate falsification.

Conclusion: shared belonging can recognise achievements and injustice together.

5/ Two model paragraphs

Case study 1 Mount Rushmore and the Black Hills

National commemorations can strengthen a shared American identity if they acknowledge the contradictions behind national achievements. In Philadelphia, removing the exhibit about people enslaved by Washington narrowed the public account of a president associated with liberty; the judicial order to restore it shows that citizens can challenge exclusion. Similarly, celebrating at Mount Rushmore without addressing the Lakota history of the Black Hills risks presenting dispossession as an uncontested national inheritance. Unlike Philadelphia, this controversy concerns sacred land and treaty rights, not simply exhibition panels. Admittedly, commemorations cannot recount everything, but these histories explain the meaning of the places being celebrated. Shared pride therefore requires recognition of injustice, rather than selective remembrance that asks excluded communities to accept a misleading story.

Case study 2 Westward expansion as a national epic

National commemorations can unite Americans around common ideals, provided that their storytelling does not turn exclusion into an invisible cost of progress. At Gettysburg, Abraham Brian's family fled Confederate forces for fear of enslavement, revealing how military history intersects with the precarious freedom of Black Americans. Freedom 250's Washington Monument projection, by presenting westward expansion within an epic of national achievement, invites scrutiny of whose experience defines progress. Indigenous histories of displacement and resistance complicate that narrative. Yet a brief celebratory show necessarily selects material, so omission alone does not establish deliberate falsification. The answer is to connect achievements with their consequences and include Indigenous perspectives. Commemoration can then support shared belonging without demanding agreement on an uncomplicated, heroic past.