



Critical Reading

## Indigenous Resistance in the Wake of Empire: Pontiac's Rebellion and the Proclamation of 1763

### Historical Context

In the mid-1700s, powerful empires were fighting for control of North America. The British and the French had been at war for years, and when the British won the French and Indian War in 1763, they gained a huge amount of land from the French, including territory west of the Appalachian Mountains. But while the British saw this as a victory, many Indigenous nations saw it as a serious threat to their land, their power, and their way of life. Soon after the British took control of former French territory, a large group of Native American tribes led by the Ottawa chief Pontiac began fighting back. This uprising, known as Pontiac's Rebellion, included tribes like the Delaware, Shawnee, Miami, and Huron. These groups attacked British forts and settlements, hoping to drive the British out and restore Native control. Pontiac and other Native leaders were angry that the British were taking land without permission, ending trade agreements, and refusing to treat Native nations as allies, as the French had done. The British government responded by trying to calm tensions. That same year, they issued the Proclamation of 1763, a law that said colonists could not settle west of the Appalachian Mountains. This was meant to protect Native lands and prevent further violence. However, many British colonists ignored the law and continued to move west, leading to more conflict in the years ahead. Pontiac's Rebellion and the Proclamation of 1763 were important turning points. They showed that Indigenous people were not passive victims, but active leaders fighting to defend their land and sovereignty. They also revealed growing tensions between British colonists and the government tensions that would help lead to the American Revolution.

### Connection to Habit

Pontiac's Rebellion and the Proclamation of 1763 offer powerful opportunities to practice critical reading of historical sources. Much of what we know about these events comes from British colonial records, which often described Indigenous resistance as violent and unjustified. But by asking who wrote these accounts, why they were written, and whose voices are missing, students can uncover deeper truths. Critical reading helps us see that Native leaders like Pontiac were not just reacting; they were making strategic decisions to defend their people and land. By questioning perspective and bias in primary and secondary sources, we gain a fuller understanding of how Indigenous resistance challenged the British empire and shaped history.

## Discussion Questions

- What were the main causes of Pontiac’s Rebellion, and how did they relate to the outcomes of the French and Indian War?
- Why did Pontiac and other Indigenous leaders choose to resist British rule through a united, pan-Indian (Indigenous) movement?
- What were the British trying to accomplish with the Proclamation of 1763? How did different groups interpret it?
- How do British sources from the time describe Pontiac’s Rebellion? What words or phrases suggest bias?
- What similarities do you see between Pontiac’s Rebellion and other examples of Indigenous resistance in US history?
- How did the failure of the Proclamation of 1763 to protect Native lands influence later conflicts in US history?

## Suggested Activity

Materials Needed:

- [Pontiac’s Rebellion and the Proclamation of 1763 Primary Sources](#)
- Notebook or sheet of paper

Step 1: Context Mini-Lecture [10 mins]

Provide students with a short overview of the end of the French and Indian War, the rise of Pontiac’s Rebellion, and the creation of the Proclamation of 1763. You can utilize the Historical Context to facilitate this minilecture.

Step 2: Source Stations [40 mins]

Set up three stations, each with one primary source (A, B, or C). Divide students into small groups and rotate them through each station.

At each station, students will complete the following questions:

- Who is the speaker, and what is their perspective?
- What is the speaker’s goal or motivation?
- How does this source help explain either Pontiac’s Rebellion or the Proclamation?
- What are the short-term and long-term consequences implied by this document?

Step 3: Town Hall Role Play [20 mins]

After analyzing the sources, assign students one of the three roles:

- Indigenous leader (inspired by Pontiac)
- British colonial official
- Unauthorized frontier settler

Students form new mixed-role groups (3–4 students per group, one of each role) and hold a mini town hall meeting to discuss the question:

“Whose interests should matter most when it comes to land and law after war?”

Each student must make a short statement from their character’s point of view, then the group must try to come to a decision about how the land should be handled knowing what happened in history.

Step 4: Exit Reflection/Optional Writing Prompt [10 mins]

How do these primary sources reveal competing ideas about land, rights, and justice in 1763? How do the voices in these sources connect to issues we still debate today?

# Primary Source

## Source A: Pontiac Calls for War (1763)

Context: In 1763, following the British victory in the French and Indian War, Indigenous nations in the Great Lakes and Ohio Valley regions faced increasing encroachment on their lands and a shift in colonial policies that disregarded previous alliances. Ottawa war chief Pontiac, drawing inspiration from the spiritual teachings of the Delaware prophet Neolin, called for a unified Indigenous resistance against British occupation. In the speech, Pontiac urges Native peoples to reject European customs and reassert their sovereignty by expelling the British from their territories.

I am the Master of Life, whom thou desirest to know and to whom thou wouldst speak. Listen well to what I am going to say to thee and all thy red brethren. I am he who made heaven and earth, the trees, lakes, rivers, all men, and all that thou seest, and all that thou hast seen on earth. Because . . . I love you, you must do what I say and [not do] what I hate. I do not like that you drink until you lose your reason, as you do; or that you fight with each other; or that you take two wives, or run after the wives of others; you do not well; I hate that. You must have but one wife, and keep her until death. When you are going to war, you juggle, join the medicine dance, and believe that I am speaking. You are mistaken, it is to Manitou to whom you speak; he is a bad spirit who whispers to you nothing but evil, and to whom you listen because you do not know me well. This land, where you live, I have made for you and not for others. How comes it that you suffer the whites on your lands? Can you not do without them? I know that those whom you call the children of your Great Father supply your wants, but if you were not bad, as you are, you would well do without them. You might live wholly as you did before you knew them. Before those whom you call your brothers come on your lands, did you not live by bow and arrow? You had no need of gun nor powder, nor the rest of their things, and nevertheless you caught animals to live and clothe yourselves with their skins, but when I saw that you inclined to the evil, I called back the animals into the depths of the woods, so that you had need of your brothers to have your wants supplied and I shall send back to you the animals to live on. I do not forbid you, for all that, to suffer amongst you the children of your father. I love them, they know me and pray to me, and I give them their necessities and all that they bring to you, but as regards those who have come to trouble your country, drive them out, make war on them. I love them not, they know me not, they are my enemies and the enemies of your brothers. Send them back to the country which I made for them. There let them remain. The English are our enemies. They wish to destroy us. We must drive them out. They care nothing for our people, our lands, or our ways. When the French were here, we traded fairly. The English take what they want and treat us with contempt.

# Primary Source

## Source B: The Royal Proclamation of 1763 [Excerpt]

Context: The Royal Proclamation of 1763 is an official document issued by King George III after the French and Indian War. It established a boundary, known as the Proclamation Line, along the Appalachian Mountains, beyond which colonists were forbidden to settle. The goal was to prevent further conflict with Native American tribes by reserving that land for them. While it aimed to stabilize relations between Britain and Indigenous peoples, many colonists were angered by the restriction, seeing it as an obstacle to westward expansion. The proclamation also laid the groundwork for future land treaties and British colonial governance in North America. This an excerpt from the full document, which is a public record found in numerous archives.

And whereas it is just and reasonable, and essential to Our Interest and the Security of Our Colonies, that the several Nations or Tribes of Indians, with whom We are connected, and who live under Our Protection, should not be molested or disturbed in the Possession of such Parts of Our Dominions and Territories as, not having been ceded to, or purchased by Us, are reserved to them, or any of them, as their Hunting Grounds...

And We do further strictly enjoin and require all Persons whatever, who have either wilfully or inadvertently seated themselves upon any Lands within the Countries above described, or upon any other Lands, which, not having been ceded to, or purchased by Us, are still reserved to the said Indians as aforesaid, forthwith to remove themselves from such Settlements.

## Primary Source

### Source C: Excerpt of Declaration and Remonstrance (1764) written by frontiersmen to Governor John Penn [Excerpt]

Context: In the years that followed, tensions between frontier settlers and Native communities continued to grow, especially in Pennsylvania. One of the most violent episodes occurred in 1763 when a group of frontiersmen known as the Paxton Boys launched a brutal attack on the Conestoga people, a peaceful group of Susquehannock who had lived in Pennsylvania for generations. Fueled by fear, racism, and anger over what they saw as government favoritism toward Indigenous groups, the Paxton Boys murdered more than 20 Conestoga men, women, and children. When colonial authorities condemned the killings, the Paxton Boys marched on Philadelphia, demanding protection from Native resistance and greater political power for frontier settlers. Their actions exposed deep divisions in colonial society over race, power, and justice and raised troubling questions about who was considered deserving of rights and protection in the British colonies. This declaration was delivered criticizing the colonial government for favoring Native Americans over white settlers and justifying their actions as reluctantly necessary. Clergymen Smith and Gibson formally list nine grievances from five frontier counties, demanding fair representation, protection, and harsher policies toward Native Americans.

To the Honorable John Penn, Esquire, Governor of the Province of Pennsylvania and of the Counties of New-Castle, Kent and Sussex on Delaware; and to the Representatives of the Free-Men of said Province, in Assembly met. We Matthew Smith and James Gibson, on behalf of ourselves and his Majesty's faithful and loyal subjects, the inhabitants of the frontier counties of Lancaster, York, Cumberland, Berks, and Northampton, humbly beg leave to remonstrate and to lay before you the following grievances which we submit to your wisdom for redress.

1st. We apprehend that as free-men and English subjects, we have an indisputable title to the same privileges and immunities with his Majesty's other subjects who reside in the interior counties of Philadelphia, Chester, and Bucks and therefore ought not to be excluded from an equal share with them in the very important privilege of legislation. Nevertheless, contrary to the Proprietors Charter and the acknowledged principles of common justice and equity, our five counties are restrained from electing more than ten Representatives while the three counties (and city) of Philadelphia, Chester, and Bucks elect Twenty-six. This we humbly conceive is oppressive, unequal and unjust.

2ndly. We understand that a Bill is now before the House of Assembly wherein it is provided that such persons as shall be charged with killing any Indians in Lancaster County shall not be tried in the county where the fact was committed, but in the counties of Philadelphia, Chester, or Bucks. This is manifestly to deprive British Subjects of their known Privileges. However, we hope that the Legislator of this province will never enact a law of so dangerous a tendency or take away from his Majesty's good subjects a privilege so long esteemed sacred by English Men.

3rdly. During the late and present Indian Wars, the frontiers of this province have been repeatedly attacked and ravaged by skulking parties of the Indians who have with the most savage cruelty, murdered men, women, and children without distinction and have reduced near a thousand families to the most extreme distress. It grieves us to the very heart to see such of our frontier inhabitants as have escaped from savage fury with the loss of their parents, their children, their husbands, wives, or relatives left destitute by the public and exposed to the most cruel poverty and wretchedness.

Signed on behalf of ourselves and by appointment of a great number of the frontier inhabitants,

Matthew Smith  
James Gibson  
February 13th, 1764