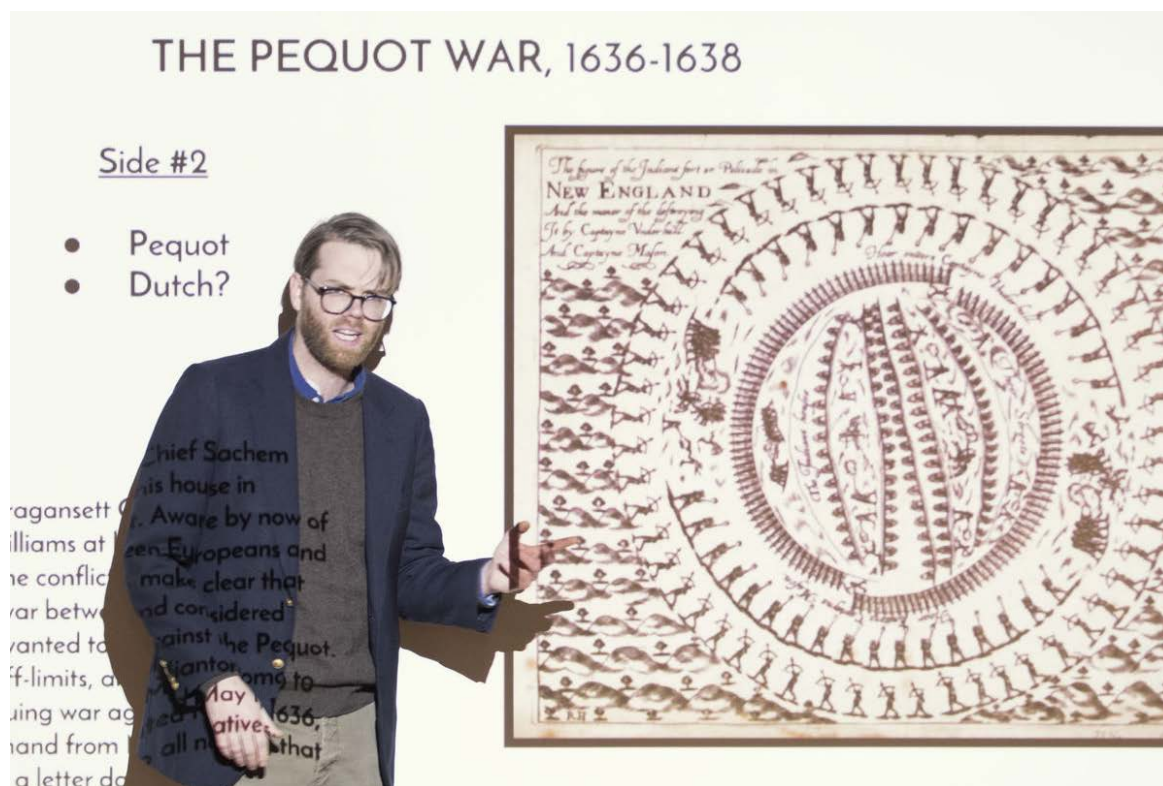


FEATURED TOP STORY

## Discussion at library focuses on Native American slavery

By Derek Gomes | Staff writer Nov 15, 2017



Michael Simpson, an adjunct professor at Becker College and Bristol Community College, talks about enslavement of Native Americans during the Pequot and King Philip's wars during a lecture Tuesday at the Newport Public Library.

Dave Hansen | Staff photographer

NEWPORT - The Newport Middle Passage Project, which is commemorating the thousands of people who died in the Middle Passage slave trade, turned its focus to Native American slavery that took root in the colony of Rhode Island in the 1600s.

"Today, four centuries later, the casualties and survivors of the Atlantic slave trade are finally being memorialized by the Newport Middle Passage Project", according to the project website. "As part of this movement, the Newport Middle Passage Project is also opening a discussion of the trade of enslaved Native Americans in Rhode Island."

Michael J. Simpson, an adjunct professor at Becker College and Bristol Community College, gave an overview Tuesday night at the Newport Public Library about how the practice took hold and its consequences for the Native Americans who had been living in what is now Rhode Island for thousands of years before Europeans arrived.

Part of the English colonists' strategy was aligning themselves with certain tribes against others. That happened in the Pequot War from 1636 to 1638 when the colonists sided with the Narragansett and Mohegan tribes against the Pequots. The colonists attacked fortifications that protected women, children and the elderly, Simpson said during his talk at the Newport library. About 600 or 700 people were killed in what is known as the Mystic Massacre.

After the colonists and their allies prevailed in the war, more than 250 Native American captives were taken to Connecticut and Massachusetts and sold at auction.

And while Roger Williams, the founder of the Providence settlement, is remembered fondly as a champion of religious freedoms and his closeness with Native Americans, he is a "complex" figure, according to Simpson. In the aftermath of the Pequot War, he wrote Massachusetts Gov. John Winthrop asking for a specific enslaved child, "another miserable drone of Adam's degenerate seed", he wrote.

People "paint Roger Williams as a wonderful man, but you find out people are complex", Simpson said, advising people against "idolizing (someone) because of a single quote".

Later in the 1600s, Native Americans were being enslaved through the legal system. Simpson cited a case in Newport in which a man was sentenced to pay a fine for a theft. If he did not have the money by a certain date, he would be sold into slavery.

In 1676, the Rhode Island legislature passed a law banning Native American slavery, with key caveats. If a person was in debt or did not "perform a covenant", they could be forced into slavery. Nighttime curfews were implemented that forced Native Americans to remain home.

More atrocities against natives occurred during King Philip's War from 1675 to 1676, according to

Simpson. At the end of the war, Native American captives were gathered in Rhode Island. Some were transported to Newport and sold at a public auction. "Well-established Newport families purchased slaves and took them home to work as in-house slaves," according to a history on the Newport Middle Passage Project's website.

African and Native American slaves helped each other escape, a common occurrence at that time. Newspaper advertisements in the Newport Mercury called for the return of runaway slaves.

Even after American independence, forced labor of Native Americans did not end, according to the website.

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