

ACCORDING TO TRADITION

Objective: Students will analyze an excerpt from Joseph Nicolar's *The Life and Traditions of the Red Man*, and will evaluate it as a historical document.

Materials:

- **Doc 2.5:** Excerpt from Joseph Nicolar's *The Life and Traditions of the Red Man*

Timing: One class period

Background Reading: Chapters One and Two

Procedure:

1. Go over the term **oral history** with students (see Ch. 1 of textbook). A story can be passed down over generations and still retain some accuracy, though some of the details may change. Using oral history is an important way to study Native cultures, because storytelling is such a strong tradition, and because it's one of the only records we have of early history from a Native perspective. It is important to use oral history with an eye towards ideas and themes, rather than dates or details.
2. Explain that Joseph Nicolar was a Penobscot journalist and politician who lived in the 1800s. He wrote a column for the Indian Island newspaper, and represented the Penobscot Nation in the Maine Legislature. His book, *The Life and Traditions of the Red Man*, was based on Penobscot oral tradition. (See Chapter Five of the textbook for more information on Nicolar.)
3. Read the Joseph Nicolar excerpt out loud to the class. Have students read along.
4. Discuss the excerpt with the class, using the following questions:
 - How do the Wabanaki Indians first encounter the white man? What is the reaction of the old man? Why?
 - What did the Wabanaki Indians think of the white men when they saw them? How did they describe them?
 - Why did everyone take the arrival of the white man "as though it was an old affair?"
 - This was written down in 1893 about an event that probably happened about three hundred years earlier. How does this differ from an historical record dating from the time of the event?
 - Can Nicolar's writing tell us anything about the Wabanaki peoples at the time of European contact? Can it tell us anything about the Penobscot Nation in the late 1800s?
 - How does this story compare with written European accounts of meeting the Wabanaki?

- How does point of view influence the way people remember history? How does culture influence the way people remember history?

Follow up activity:

- Portfolio Option: Have students write down an episode or story that has been passed to them by members of their family. It does not have to be an historical event. What parts of the story do they remember? Do they think any part of the story might be embellished at all? What do they believe to be the facts of the story? What does the story tell them about their family?

Alignment with Learning Results:

Grade Level: **6th-8th**

Content Area: Social Studies: **HISTORY**

Standard: **Historical Knowledge, Concepts, Themes, and Patterns**

Students understand major eras, majoring enduring themes, and historic influences in the history of Maine, the United States, and various regions of the world.

Descriptor **E1d**: Analyze interpretations of historical events that are based on different perspectives and evidence.

THE COMING OF THE WHITE MAN
AS TOLD BY JOSEPH NICOLAR, ACCORDING TO PENOBSCOT ORAL TRADITION, 1893

. . . [S]ome young men were out on a hunt, and according to custom had taken one old man with them, and on coming out to the seashore in a little cove where a small brook came out to the sea, the young men discovered a man's track upon the high land, . . . but no canoe of any kind could be seen moving as far as they could see. . . . Upon comparing the strange tracks to those they made, there was a vast difference in three ways, first, the person that made the strange tracks must have had on moccasins made of hard substance; second, the tracks were larger than theirs; third, and the most strange part of all, the toes pointed outward instead of inward like those they made themselves. Upon arriving at a conclusion, that the tracks were made by a strange person, it so affected the old man that he shed tears. . . . [and he said] 'Upon seeing the strange tracks all the warnings which have been given us, how that a time is coming when we must look for the coming of the white man from the direction of the rising sun, and the tracks were so very strange, not like our people's tracks, [it] came upon me so fresh I could not withhold the tears that rushed upon my brow. Knowing that a great change must follow his coming it made me weak and the weakness overcame me, because his coming will put a bar to our happiness, and our destiny will be at the mercy of the events'. . . . When the other old men had learned of all that had been seen, it came heavier upon them than did the departure of Gluskabe. . . .

This long looked for event [of the white man seen sailing in a strange craft along the coast] created such a stir that the noted men were called to discuss the matter and to see what must be done about it, and on their getting together it was decided that there shall be some good spiritual men selected and sent on along the coast to watch the strange people's movements. These people were considered very strange because they were not white as the snow, and not so white as the people expected them to be, but were brown and hairy people. Whether they were creatures with the speech or not, none knew because no one had heard them talk. However it was determined to have them watched and this watching to continue until his true description and habits had been learned. . . . These people are white and the lower part of the faces of the elder ones are covered with hair, and the hair is in different colors, and the eyes are not alike, some have eyes the color of the blue sky. They have shown nothing only friendship, they take the red man's hands in their own and bow their heads down and make many signs in the direction of the stars; and their big canoe is filled with food which they eat and also give some to those that come to them and made signs of friendship.

When this news spread, the people took it so quietly and talked about it in such a way, there was no excitement, but everybody took it as though it was an old affair, yet it had such effect upon them, that it was evident that the general desire was, that the habits of the strange people must be well learned, and all agree to wait and see what kind of a treatment they will extend to the red people.

From *The Life and Traditions of the Red Man*, Joseph Nicolar,
Bangor: C.H. Glass & Co., Printers, 1893. pp. 106-7, 128.