

# HISTORY IS A BATTLEGROUND

Every historical account is shaped by choices - what to highlight, what to leave out, and how to connect events. **Those choices aren't neutral** - they reflect the perspectives, power struggles, and political goals of those who write it. How we engage with our past determines what we think is possible for the future.

## CULTURAL INTERESTS SHAPE HOW WE INTERPRET EVENTS

Every culture brings its own lens to understanding what happened. The same event can be documented and framed in radically different ways.

### FOR EXAMPLE

The Haitian Revolution might be celebrated in Haiti as a heroic fight for freedom and resistance to oppression, while in France & the U.S., it has often been downplayed as a cautionary tale of chaos, reflecting fears of revolt and challenges to colonial power.

## WHAT GETS RECORDED (AND WHAT DOESN'T) SHAPES THE STORY

What survives in the historical record is rarely a full picture - it often reflects the interests of the powerful.

### FOR EXAMPLE

Medieval documents focus almost exclusively on the lives of kings and church affairs. The lives of peasants were largely absent because those in power didn't consider them worth recording.

## NOT ALL CULTURES SEE HISTORY AS A "FIXED RECORD"

Many societies don't prioritize history as a static record of what "actually happened". Instead, they use storytelling to transmit knowledge for survival and creating social meaning.

### FOR EXAMPLE

The Haida people of the Pacific Northwest preserve oral traditions about great floods and migrations. Their original purpose wasn't to document events, but to pass on cultural lessons about survival and adaptation.

## HISTORY IS ALWAYS A STORY -- AND STORIES ARE ALWAYS PARTIAL

Historians can't talk about everything that happened. They make choices about what events to include, whose experiences to prioritize, and how to link events into a coherent narrative.

### FOR EXAMPLE

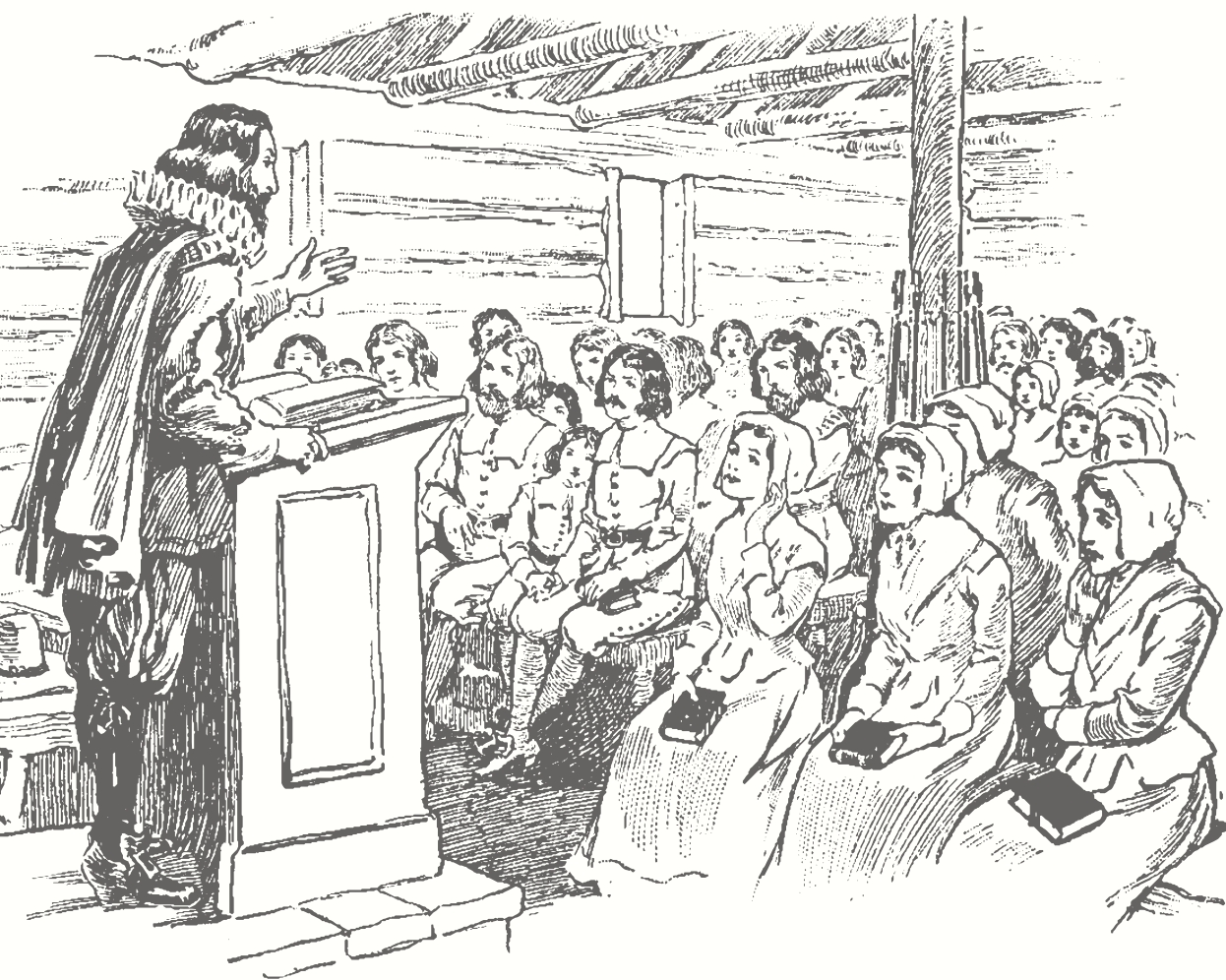
Early U.S. histories framed the revolution as a story of liberty and republican ideals. Modern historians have added layers to this story; exploring how enslaved people, Indigenous communities, and women experienced and shaped the revolution.





## POWER SHAPES THE NARRATIVE

History isn't just about what happened - it's about who gets to tell the story.



### FOR EXAMPLE

During colonial rule in India, British colonists used their control of cultural institutions to promote colonization as a “civilizing mission”. Post-Independence, Indian history was rewritten to highlight resistance movements and the richness of pre-colonial societies.

The shift reflects political changes, not new “facts” - showing how power determines whose version of history we are taught or have access to.

## EVEN EVIDENCE IS POLITICAL

Even when historians rely on archives of documents, politics shapes what survives and what gets erased.



### FOR EXAMPLE

The Spanish burned Maya codices during colonization, erasing much of Maya historical knowledge. The erasure wasn't accidental - it was part of a political effort to impose colonial rule and Catholicism by controlling knowledge.



## THE FRAMING OF HISTORICAL NARRATIVES

People frame historical narratives in ways that align with their goals and programs, emphasizing certain aspects while minimizing others, and shaping the lessons we take from them.

### FOR EXAMPLE

Martin Luther King Jr. is often invoked as a symbol of peaceful protest and civil rights advocacy. However, this framing focuses on a “safer” version of his legacy, forgetting how, during his lifetime, he was demonized by the media as dangerous for his direct actions while also muting his more radical demands for global and economic justice.



## THE TAKEAWAY

History isn't just a story about the past—history is a tool that shapes how we understand the present and imagine the future. The narratives we accept influence what struggles are remembered, what victories are celebrated, and who we think is a driver for change. These narratives, in turn, shape our sense of what is natural or inevitable, including ideas about inequality and social change.

If one history teaches us that inequality has always existed and is simply “human nature,” we are less likely to challenge it. But if another version shows us that inequality is not timeless but a product of specific systems, we are more likely to believe that change is possible.