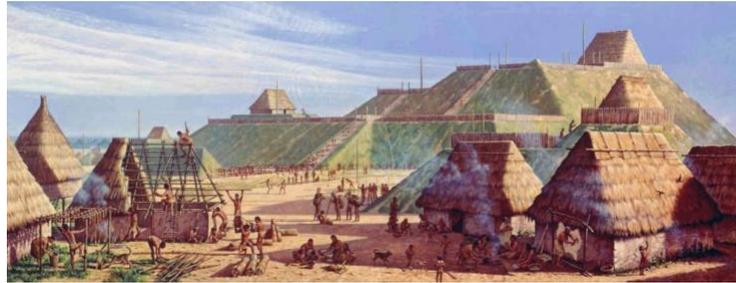

Indigenous America



Cahokia, as it may have appeared around 1150 CE. Painting by Michael Hampshire for the [Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site](#). =

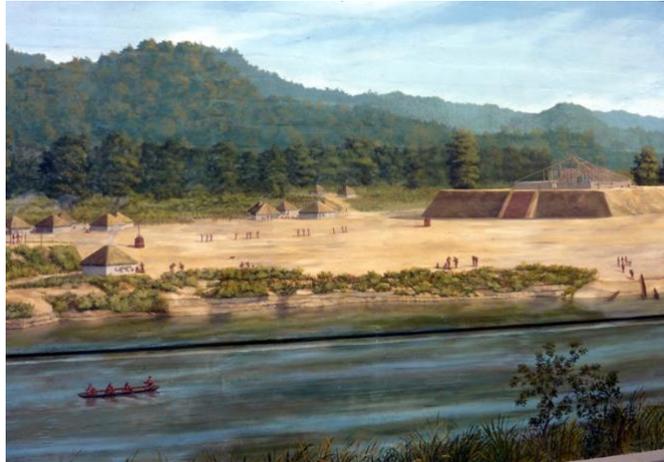
Introduction

Europeans called the Americas “the New World.” But for the millions of Native Americans they encountered, it was anything but. Humans have lived in the Americas for over ten thousand years. Dynamic and diverse, they spoke hundreds of languages and created thousands of distinct cultures. Native Americans built settled communities and followed seasonal migration patterns, maintained peace through alliances and warred with their neighbors, and developed self-sufficient economies and maintained vast trade networks. They cultivated distinct art forms and spiritual values. Kinship ties knit their communities together. But the arrival of Europeans and the resulting global exchange of people, animals, plants, and microbes—what scholars benignly call the Columbian Exchange—bridged more than ten thousand years of geographic separation, inaugurated centuries of violence, unleashed the greatest biological terror the world had ever seen, and revolutionized the history of the world. It began one of the most consequential developments in all of human history and the first chapter in the long American yawp.

The First American Cities

Agriculture arose sometime between nine thousand and five thousand years ago, almost simultaneously in the Eastern and Western Hemispheres. Mesoamericans in modern-day Mexico and Central America relied on domesticated maize (corn) to develop the hemisphere’s first

settled population around 1200 BCE.⁸ Corn was high in caloric content, easily dried and stored, and, in Mesoamerica's warm and fertile Gulf Coast, could sometimes be harvested twice in a year. Corn—as well as other Mesoamerican crops—spread across North America.



Prehistoric Settlement in Warren County, Mississippi. Mural by Robert Dafford, depicting the Kings Crossing archaeological site as it may have appeared in 1000 CE. [Vicksburg Riverfront Murals](#).

Agriculture flourished in the fertile river valleys between the Mississippi River and the Atlantic Ocean, an area known as the Eastern Woodlands. There, three crops in particular—corn, beans, and squash, known as the Three Sisters—provided nutritional needs necessary to sustain cities and civilizations. In Woodland areas from the Great Lakes and the Mississippi River to the Atlantic coast, Native communities managed their forest resources by burning underbrush to create vast parklike hunting grounds and to clear the ground for planting the Three Sisters. In the fertile regions of the Eastern Woodlands, Native American farmers engaged in permanent, intensive agriculture using hand tools. The rich soil and use of hand tools enabled effective and sustainable farming practices, producing high yields without overburdening the soil.⁹ Typically in Woodland communities, women practiced agriculture while men hunted and fished.

Social Change from Agriculture

Agriculture allowed for dramatic social change, but for some, it also may have accompanied a decline in health. Analysis of remains reveals that societies transitioning to agriculture often experienced weaker bones and teeth.¹⁰ But despite these possible declines, agriculture brought

important benefits. Farmers could produce more food than hunters, enabling some members of the community to pursue other skills. Religious leaders, skilled soldiers, and artists could devote their energy to activities other than food production.

The Pueblo

Two thousand years ago, some of the largest culture groups in North America were the Puebloan groups, centered in the current-day Greater Southwest (the southwestern United States and northwestern Mexico), the Mississippian groups located along the Great River and its tributaries, and the Mesoamerican groups of the areas now known as central Mexico and the Yucatán. Previous developments in agricultural technology enabled the explosive growth of the large early societies, such as that at Tenochtitlán in the Valley of Mexico, Cahokia along the Mississippi River, and in the desert oasis areas of the Greater Southwest.



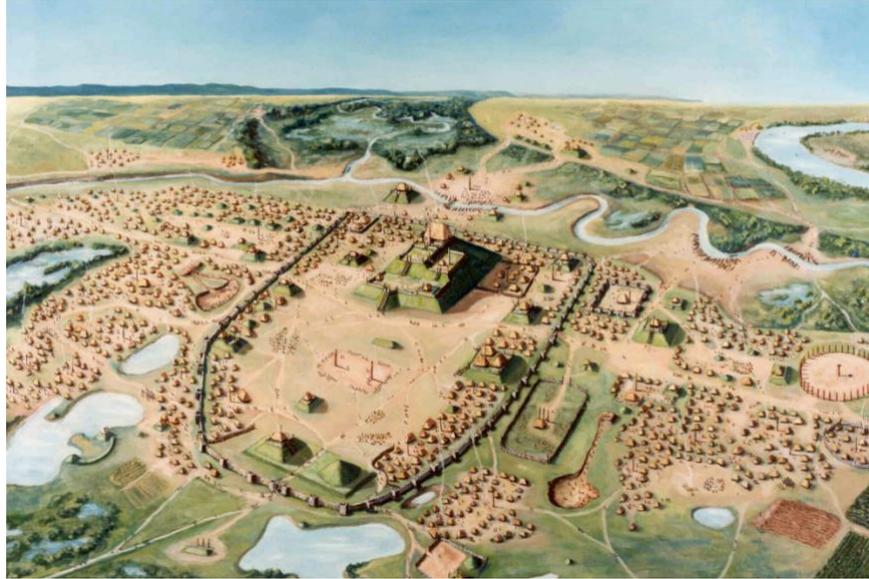
Native peoples in the Southwest began constructing these highly defensible cliff dwellings in 1190 CE and continued expanding and refurbishing them until 1260 CE before abandoning them around 1300 CE. Andreas F. Borchert, Mesa Verde National Park Cliff Palace. [Wikimedia](#). Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Germany.

Chaco Canyon in northern New Mexico was home to ancestral Puebloan peoples between 900 and 1300 CE. As many as fifteen thousand individuals lived in the Chaco Canyon complex in present-day New Mexico.¹³ Sophisticated agricultural practices, extensive trading networks, and even the domestication of animals like turkeys allowed the population to swell. Massive residential structures, built from sandstone blocks and lumber carried across great distances, housed hundreds of Puebloan people.¹⁴ Homes often included a small dugout room, or *kiva*, which played an important role in a variety of ceremonies and served as an important center for Puebloan life and culture.¹⁵

The Mississippians

The Mississippians developed one of the largest civilizations north of modern-day Mexico. Roughly one thousand years ago, the largest Mississippian settlement, Cahokia, located just east of modern-day St. Louis, Missouri peaked at a population of between ten thousand and thirty thousand. It rivaled contemporary European cities in size. No city north of modern Mexico, in fact, would match Cahokia's peak population levels until after the American Revolution. The city itself spanned two thousand acres and centered on Monks Mound, a large earthen hill that rose ten stories and was larger at its base than the pyramids of Egypt.

Cahokia was politically organized around chiefdoms, a hierarchical, clan-based system that gave leaders both secular and sacred authority. The size of the city and the extent of its influence suggest that the city relied on a number of lesser chiefdoms under the authority of a paramount leader. Social stratification was partly preserved through frequent warfare. War captives were enslaved, and these captives formed an important part of the economy in the North American Southeast. Native American slavery was not based on holding people as property. Instead, Native Americans understood the enslaved as people who lacked kinship networks. Slavery, then, was not always a permanent condition. Very often, a formerly enslaved person could become a fully integrated member of the community. Adoption or marriage could enable an enslaved person to enter a kinship network and join the community. Slavery and captive trading became an important way that many Native communities regrew and gained or maintained power.



An artist's rendering of Cahokia as it may have appeared in 1150 CE. Prepared by Bill Isminger and Mark Esarey with artwork by Greg Harlin. From the [Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site](#).

Around 1050, Cahokia experienced what one archaeologist has called a “big bang,” which included “a virtually instantaneous and pervasive shift in all things political, social, and ideological.”¹⁶ The population grew almost 500 percent in only one generation, and new people groups were absorbed into the city and its supporting communities. By 1300, the once-powerful city had undergone a series of strains that led to collapse. Scholars previously pointed to ecological disaster or slow depopulation through emigration, but new research instead emphasizes mounting warfare, or internal political tensions. Environmental explanations suggest that population growth placed too great a burden on the arable land. Others suggest that the demand for fuel and building materials led to deforestation, erosion, and perhaps an extended drought. Recent evidence, including defensive stockades, suggests that political turmoil among the ruling elite and threats from external enemies may explain the end of the once-great civilization.¹⁷

North American communities were connected by kin, politics, and culture and sustained by long-distance trading routes. The Mississippi River served as an important trade artery, but all of the continent's waterways were vital to transportation and communication. Cahokia became a key trading center partly because of its position near the Mississippi, Illinois, and Missouri Rivers. These rivers created networks that stretched from the Great Lakes to the American Southeast.

Archaeologists can identify materials, like seashells, that traveled over a thousand miles to reach the center of this civilization.

The Lenape

In the Eastern Woodlands, many Native American societies lived in smaller, dispersed communities to take advantage of rich soils and abundant rivers and streams. The Lenapes, who occupied present day New York City farmed the bottomlands throughout the Hudson and Delaware River watersheds. Their hundreds of settlements, stretching from southern Massachusetts through Delaware, were loosely bound together by political, social, and spiritual connections.

Dispersed and relatively independent, Lenape communities were bound together by oral histories, ceremonial traditions, consensus-based political organization, kinship networks, and a shared clan system. Kinship tied the various Lenape communities and clans together, and society was organized along matrilineal lines. Marriage occurred between clans, and a married man joined the clan of his wife. Lenape women wielded authority over marriages, households, and agricultural production and may even have played a significant part in determining the selection of leaders, called sachems. Dispersed authority, small settlements, and kin-based organization contributed to the long-lasting stability and resilience of Lenape communities.¹⁸ One or more sachems governed Lenape communities by the consent of their people. Lenape sachems acquired their authority by demonstrating wisdom and experience. This differed from the hierarchical organization of many Mississippian cultures. Large gatherings did exist, however, as dispersed communities and their leaders gathered for ceremonial purposes or to make big decisions. Sachems spoke for their people in larger councils that included men, women, and elders. The Lenapes experienced occasional tensions with other Indigenous groups like the Iroquois to the north or the Susquehannock to the south, but the lack of defensive fortifications near Lenape communities convinced archaeologists that the Lenapes avoided large-scale warfare.

The continued longevity of Lenape societies, which began centuries before European contact, was also due to their skills as farmers and fishers. Along with the Three Sisters, Lenape women planted tobacco, sunflowers, and gourds. They harvested fruits and nuts from trees and cultivated

numerous medicinal plants, which they used with great proficiency. The Lenapes organized their communities to take advantage of growing seasons and the migration patterns of animals and fowl that were a part of their diet. During planting and harvesting seasons, Lenapes gathered in larger groups to coordinate their labor and take advantage of local abundance. As proficient fishers, they organized seasonal fish camps to net shellfish and catch shad. Lenapes wove nets, baskets, mats, and a variety of household materials from the rushes found along the streams, rivers, and coasts. They made their homes in some of the most fertile and abundant lands in the Eastern Woodlands and used their skills to create a stable and prosperous civilization. The first Dutch and Swedish settlers who encountered the Lenapes in the seventeenth century recognized Lenape prosperity and quickly sought their friendship. Their lives came to depend on it.

Colliding Cultures



Theodor de Bry, "Negotiating Peace With the Indians," 1634, [Virginia Historical Society](#).

The Columbian Exchange transformed both sides of the Atlantic, but with dramatically disparate outcomes. New diseases wiped out entire civilizations in the Americas, while newly imported nutrient-rich foodstuffs enabled a European population boom. Spain benefited most immediately as the wealth of the Aztec and Incan Empires strengthened the Spanish monarchy. Spain used its new riches to gain an advantage over other European nations, but this advantage was soon contested.

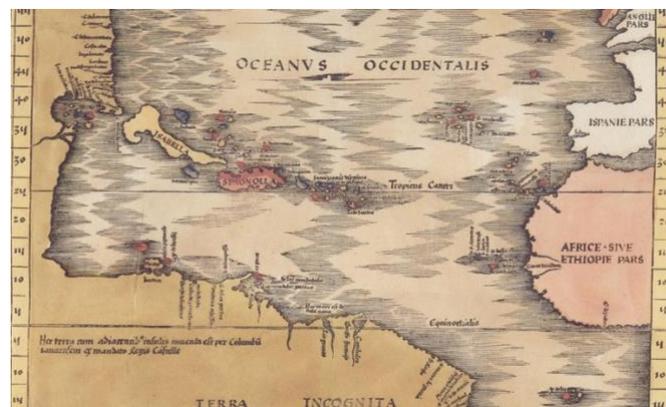
Portugal, France, the Netherlands, and England all raced to the New World, eager to match the gains of the Spanish. Native peoples greeted the new visitors with responses ranging from welcoming cooperation to aggressive violence, but the ravages of disease and the possibility of new trading relationships enabled Europeans to create settlements all along the western rim of

the Atlantic world. New empires would emerge from these tenuous beginnings, and by the end of the seventeenth century, Spain would lose its privileged position to its rivals. An age of colonization had begun and, with it, a great collision of cultures commenced.

Spanish America

Spain extended its reach in the Americas after reaping the benefits of its colonies in Mexico, the Caribbean, and South America. Expeditions slowly began combing the continent and bringing Europeans into the modern-day United States in the hopes of establishing religious and economic dominance in a new territory.

Juan Ponce de León arrived in the area named La Florida in 1513. He found between 150,000 and 300,000 Native Americans. But then two and a half centuries of contact with European and African peoples—whether through war, slave raids, or, most dramatically, foreign disease—decimated Florida’s Indigenous population. European explorers, meanwhile, had hoped to find great wealth in Florida, but reality never aligned with their imaginations.



1513 Atlantic map from cartographer Martin Waldseemuller. [Wikimedia](#).

Farther west, in 1598, Juan de Oñate led four hundred settlers, soldiers, and missionaries from Mexico into New Mexico. The Spanish Southwest had brutal beginnings. When Oñate sacked the Pueblo city of Acoma, the “sky city,” the Spaniards slaughtered nearly half of its roughly 1,500 inhabitants, including women and children. Oñate ordered one foot cut off every surviving male over age fifteen, and he enslaved the remaining women and children.²

Santa Fe, the first permanent European settlement in the Southwest, was established in 1610. Few Spaniards relocated to the Southwest because of the distance from Mexico City and the dry and hostile environment. Thus, the Spanish never achieved a commanding presence in the region. By 1680, only about three thousand colonists called Spanish New Mexico home.³ There, they traded with and exploited the local Puebloan peoples. The region's Puebloan population had plummeted from as many as sixty thousand in 1600 to about seventeen thousand in 1680.⁴

An Aztec account of the Spanish attack by Cortés against the Aztecs

This source aggregates a number of early written reports by Aztec authors describing the destruction of Tenochtitlan at the hands of a coalition of Spanish and Indigenous armies. This collection of sources was assembled by Miguel Leon Portilla, a Mexican anthropologist.

When Montezuma had given necklaces to each one, Cortés asked him: “Are you Montezuma? Are you the king? Is it true that you are the king Montezuma?”

And the king said: “Yes, I am Montezuma.” Then he stood up to welcome Cortés; he came forward, bowed his head low and addressed him in these words: “Our lord, you are weary. The journey has tired you, but now you have arrived on the earth. You have come to your city, Mexico. You have come here to sit on your throne, to sit under its canopy.

“The kings who have gone before, your representatives, guarded it and preserved it for your coming. The kings Itzcoatl, Montezuma the Elder, Axayacatl, Tizoc and Ahuitzol ruled for you in the City of Mexico. The people were protected by their swords and sheltered by their shields.

“Do the kings know the destiny of those they left behind, their posterity? If only they are watching! If only they can see what I see!

No, it is not a dream. I am not walking in my sleep. I am not seeing you in my dreams.... I have seen you at last! I have met you face to face! I was in agony for five days, for ten days, with my eyes fixed on the Region of the Mystery. And now you have come out of the clouds and mists to sit on your throne again.

This was foretold by the kings who governed your city, and now it has taken place. You have come back to us; you have come down from the sky. Rest now, and take possession of your royal houses. Welcome to your land, my lords!”

When Montezuma had finished, La Malinche translated his address into Spanish so that the Captain could understand it. Cortés replied in his strange and savage tongue, speaking first to La Malinche: “Tell Montezuma that we are his friends. There is nothing to fear. We have wanted to see him for a long time, and now we have seen his face and heard his words. Tell him that we love him well and that our hearts are contented.”

Then he said to Montezuma: “We have come to your house in Mexico as friends. There is nothing to fear.”

La Malinche translated this speech and the Spaniards grasped Montezuma’s hands and patted his back to show their affection for him....

During this time, the people asked Montezuma how they should celebrate their god’s fiesta. He said: “Dress him in all his finery, in all his sacred ornaments.”

During this same time, The Sun commanded that Montezuma and Itzcohuatzin, the military chief of Tlatelolco, be made prisoners. The Spaniards hanged a chief from Acolhuacan named Nezahualquentzin. They also murdered the king of Nauhtla, Cohualpopocatzin, by wounding him with arrows and then burning him alive.

For this reason, our warriors were on guard at the Eagle Gate. The sentries from Tenochtitlan stood at one side of the gate, and the sentries from Tlatelolco at the other. But messengers came to tell them to dress the figure of Huitzilopochtli. They left their posts and went to dress him in his sacred finery: his ornaments and his paper clothing.

When this had been done, the celebrants began to sing their songs. That is how they celebrated the first day of the fiesta. On the second day they began to sing again, but without warning they were all put to death. The dancers and singers were completely unarmed. They brought only their embroidered cloaks, their turquoises, their lip plugs, their necklaces, their clusters of heron

feathers, their trinkets made of deer hooves. Those who played the drums, the old men, had brought their gourds of snuff and their timbrels.

The Spaniards attacked the musicians first, slashing at their hands and faces until they had killed all of them. The singers-and even the spectators- were also killed. This slaughter in the Sacred Patio went on for three hours. Then the Spaniards burst into the rooms of the temple to kill the others: those who were carrying water, or bringing fodder for the horses, or grinding meal, or sweeping, or standing watch over this work.

The king Montezuma, who was accompanied by Itzcohuatzin and by those who had brought food for the Spaniards, protested: “Our lords, that is enough! What are you doing? These people are not carrying shields or macanas. Our lords, they are completely unarmed!”

The Sun had treacherously murdered our people on the twentieth day after the captain left for the coast. We allowed the Captain to return to the city in peace. But on the following day we attacked him with all our might, and that was the beginning of the war.

III. Spain’s Rivals Emerge



The earliest plan of New Amsterdam (now Manhattan), 1660. [Wikimedia](#).

The Spanish exploitation of New Spain’s riches inspired European monarchs to invest in exploration and conquest. Reports of Spanish atrocities spread throughout Europe and provided a

humanitarian justification for European colonization. An English reprint of the writings of Bartolomé de Las Casas bore the sensational title “Popery Truly Display’d in its Bloody Colours: Or, a Faithful Narrative of the Horrid and Unexampled Massacres, Butcheries, and all manners of Cruelties that Hell and Malice could invent, committed by the Popish Spanish.” An English writer explained that Native Americans “were simple and plain men, and lived without great labour,” but in their lust for gold the Spaniards “forced the people (that were not used to labour) to stand all the daie in the hot sun gathering gold in the sand of the rivers. By this means a great number of them (not used to such pains) died, and a great number of them (seeing themselves brought from so quiet a life to such misery and slavery) of desperation killed themselves. And many would not marry, because they would not have their children slaves to the Spaniards.”⁵ The Spanish accused their critics of fostering a “Black Legend.” The Black Legend drew on religious differences and political rivalries. Spain had successful conquests in France, Italy, Germany, and the Netherlands and left many in those nations yearning to break free from Spanish influence. English writers argued that Spanish barbarities were foiling a tremendous opportunity for the expansion of Christianity across the globe and that a benevolent conquest of the New World by non-Spanish monarchies offered the surest salvation of the New World’s pagan masses. With these religious justifications, and with obvious economic motives, Spain’s rivals arrived in the New World.

The French

The French crown subsidized exploration in the early sixteenth century. Early French explorers sought a fabled Northwest Passage, a mythical waterway passing through the North American continent to Asia. Despite the wealth of the New World, Asia’s riches still beckoned to Europeans. Canada’s St. Lawrence River appeared to be such a passage, stretching deep into the continent and into the Great Lakes. French colonial possessions centered on these bodies of water (and, later, down the Mississippi River to the port of New Orleans).

French colonization developed through investment from private trading companies. Traders established Port Royal in Acadia (Nova Scotia) in 1603 and launched trading expeditions that

stretched down the Atlantic coast as far as Cape Cod. The needs of the fur trade set the future pattern of French colonization. Founded in 1608 under the leadership of Samuel de Champlain, Quebec provided the foothold for what would become New France. French fur traders placed a higher value on cooperating with Indigenous people than on establishing a successful French colonial footprint. Asserting dominance in the region could have been to their own detriment, as it might have compromised their access to skilled Native American trappers, and therefore wealth. Few Frenchmen traveled to the New World to settle permanently.⁶



*This depiction of New Orleans in 1726 when it was an eight-year-old French frontier settlement. Jean-Pierre Lassus, *Vue et Perspective de la Nouvelle Orleans, 1726*, Centre des archives d'outre-mer, France. [Wikimedia](#).*

The French preference for trade over permanent settlement fostered more cooperative and mutually beneficial relationships with Native Americans than was typical among the Spanish and English. Perhaps eager to debunk the anti-Catholic elements of the Black Legend, the French worked to cultivate cooperation with Native Americans. Jesuit missionaries, for instance, adopted different conversion strategies than the Spanish Franciscans. Spanish missionaries brought Natives into enclosed missions, whereas Jesuits more often lived with or alongside Indigenous people. Many French fur traders married Native American women.⁷ The offspring of Native American women and French men were so common in New France that the French developed a word for these children, *Métis(sage)*. The Huron people developed a particularly close relationship with the French, and many converted to Christianity and engaged in the fur trade. But close relationships with the French would come at a high cost. The Huron were decimated by the ravages of European disease, and entanglements in French and Dutch conflicts proved disastrous.⁸ Despite this, some Native peoples maintained alliances with the French.

Pressure from the powerful Iroquois in the East pushed many Algonquian-speaking peoples toward French territory in the mid-seventeenth century, and together they crafted what historians have called a “middle ground,” a kind of cross-cultural space that allowed for native and European interaction, negotiation, and accommodation. French traders adopted—sometimes clumsily—the gift-giving and mediation strategies expected of Native leaders. Natives similarly engaged the impersonal European market and adapted—often haphazardly—to European laws. The Great Lakes “middle ground” experienced tumultuous success throughout the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries until English colonial officials and American settlers swarmed the region. The pressures of European expansion strained even the closest bonds.⁹

The Dutch

Ravaged by the turmoil of the Reformation, the Dutch embraced greater religious tolerance and freedom of the press than other European nations.¹⁰ Radical Protestants, Catholics, and Jews flocked to the Netherlands. The English Pilgrims, for instance, fled first to the Netherlands before sailing to the New World years later. The Netherlands built its colonial empire through the work of experienced merchants and skilled sailors. Although the Dutch offered liberties, they offered very little democracy—power remained in the hands of only a few. And Dutch liberties certainly had their limits. The Dutch advanced the slave trade and brought enslaved Africans with them to the New World. Slavery was an essential part of Dutch capitalist triumphs.

Sharing the European hunger for access to Asia, in 1609 the Dutch commissioned the Englishman Henry Hudson to discover the fabled Northwest Passage through North America. He failed, of course, but nevertheless found the Hudson River and claimed modern-day New York for the Dutch. There they established New Netherland, an essential part of the Dutch New World empire. The Netherlands chartered the Dutch West India Company in 1621 and established colonies in Africa, the Caribbean, and North America. The island of Manhattan provided a launching pad to support its Caribbean colonies and attack Spanish trade.

Spiteful of the Spanish and mindful of the Black Legend, the Dutch were determined not to repeat Spanish atrocities. They fashioned guidelines that Native peoples possessed the same natural rights as Europeans. Colony leaders insisted that land be purchased; in 1626 Peter Minuit

therefore “bought” Manhattan from Munsee people.¹¹ Despite the seemingly honorable intentions, it is likely the Dutch paid the wrong people for the land (either intentionally or unintentionally) or that the Munsee and the Dutch understood the transaction in very different terms. Transactions like these illustrated both the Dutch attempt to find a more peaceful process of colonization and the inconsistency between European and Native American understandings of property.

Like the French, the Dutch sought to profit, not to conquer. Trade with Native peoples became New Netherland’s central economic activity. Dutch traders carried wampum along Native trade routes and exchanged it for beaver pelts. Wampum consisted of shell beads fashioned by Algonquians on the southern New England coast and was valued as a ceremonial and diplomatic commodity among the Iroquois. Wampum became a currency that could buy anything from a loaf of bread to a plot of land.¹²

In addition to developing these trading networks, the Dutch also established farms, settlements, and lumber camps. The West India Company directors implemented the patroon system to encourage colonization. The patroon system granted large estates to wealthy landlords, who subsequently paid passage for the tenants to work their land. Expanding Dutch settlements correlated with deteriorating relations with local Native Americans. In the interior of the continent, the Dutch retained valuable alliances with the Iroquois to maintain Beverwijck, modern-day Albany, as a hub for the fur trade.¹³ In the places where the Dutch built permanent settlements, the ideals of peaceful colonization succumbed to the settlers’ increasing demand for land. Armed conflicts erupted as colonial settlements encroached on Native villages and hunting lands. Profit and peace, it seemed, could not coexist.

Labor shortages, meanwhile, crippled Dutch colonization. The patroon system failed to bring enough tenants, and the colony could not attract a sufficient number of indentured servants to satisfy the colony’s backers. In response, the colony imported eleven enslaved people owned by the company in 1626, the same year that they “purchased” Manhattan. Enslaved laborers were tasked with building New Amsterdam (modern-day New York City), including a defensive wall along the northern edge of the colony (the site of modern-day Wall Street). They created its

roads and maintained its all-important port. Fears of racial mixing led the Dutch to import enslaved women, enabling the formation of African Dutch families. The colony's first African marriage occurred in 1641, and by 1650 there were at least five hundred enslaved Africans in the colony. By 1660, New Amsterdam had the largest urban enslaved population on the continent.¹⁴

As was typical of the practice of African slavery in much of the early seventeenth century, Dutch slavery in New Amsterdam was less comprehensively exploitative than later systems of American slavery. Some enslaved Africans, for instance, successfully sued for back wages. When several enslaved people owned by the company fought for the colony against the Munsee, they petitioned for their freedom and won a kind of “half freedom” that allowed them to work their own land in return for paying a large tithe, or tax, to their enslavers. The children of these “half-free” laborers remained held in bondage by the West India Company, however. The Dutch, who so proudly touted their liberties, grappled with the reality of African slavery, and some New Netherlanders protested the enslavement of Christianized Africans. The economic goals of the colony slowly crowded out these cultural and religious objections, and the much-boasted liberties of the Dutch came to exist alongside increasingly brutal systems of slavery.

English Colonization



Nicholas Hilliard, The Battle of Gravelines, 1588. [Wikimedia](#)

Spain had a one-hundred-year head start on New World colonization, and a jealous England eyed the enormous wealth that Spain gleaned. The Protestant Reformation had shaken England, but Elizabeth I assumed the English crown in 1558. Elizabeth oversaw England's so-called golden age, which included both the expansion of trade and exploration and the literary achievements of Shakespeare and Marlowe. English mercantilism, a state-assisted manufacturing and trading

system, created and maintained markets. The markets provided a steady supply of consumers and laborers, stimulated economic expansion, and increased English wealth.

However, wrenching social and economic changes unsettled the English population. The island's population increased from fewer than three million in 1500 to over five million by the middle of the seventeenth century.¹⁶ The skyrocketing cost of land coincided with plummeting farming income. Rents and prices rose but wages stagnated. Moreover, movements to enclose public land—sparked by the transition of English landholders from agriculture to livestock raising—evicted tenants from the land and created hordes of landless, jobless peasants that haunted the cities and countryside. One quarter to one half of the population lived in extreme poverty.¹⁷

New World colonization won support in England amid a time of rising English fortunes among the wealthy, a tense Spanish rivalry, and mounting internal social unrest. But supporters of English colonization always touted more than economic gains and mere national self-interest. They claimed to be doing God's work. This noble rhetoric veiled the coarse economic motives that brought England to the New World.

New economic structures and a new merchant class paved the way for colonization. England's merchants lacked estates, but they had new plans to build wealth. English colonization would look very different from Spanish or French colonization. England had long been trying to conquer Catholic Ireland. Rather than integrating with the Irish and trying to convert them to Protestantism, England more often simply seized land through violence and pushed out the former inhabitants, leaving them to move elsewhere or to die. These same tactics would later be deployed in North American invasions.

Jamestown



Incolarum Virginiae piscandi ratio (The Method of Fishing of the Inhabitants of Virginia), c. 1590. [The Encyclopedia Virginia](#).

In April 1607 Englishmen aboard three ships—the *Susan Constant*, the *Godspeed*, and the *Discovery*—sailed forty miles up the James River (named for the English king) in present-day Virginia (named for Elizabeth I, the Virgin Queen) and settled on just such a place. The uninhabited peninsula they selected was upriver and out of sight of Spanish patrols. It offered easy defense against ground assaults and was both uninhabited and located close to many Native American villages and their potentially lucrative trade networks. But the location was a disaster. Indigenous people had ignored the peninsula for two reasons: terrible soil hampered agriculture, and brackish tidal water led to debilitating disease. Despite these setbacks, the English built Jamestown, the first permanent English colony in the present-day United States.

The English had not entered a wilderness but had arrived amid a people they called the Powhatan Confederacy. Powhatan, or Wahunsenacawh, as he called himself, led nearly ten thousand Algonquian-speaking people in the Chesapeake. They burned vast acreage to clear brush and create sprawling artificial parklike grasslands so they could easily hunt deer, elk, and bison. The Powhatan raised corn, beans, squash, and possibly sunflowers, rotating acreage throughout the Chesapeake. Without plows, manure, or draft animals, the Powhatan produced a remarkable number of calories cheaply and efficiently.

Jamestown was a profit-seeking venture backed by investors. The colonists were mostly gentlemen and proved entirely unprepared for the challenges ahead. They hoped for easy riches but found none. As John Smith later complained, they “would rather starve than work.”²² And so they did. Disease and starvation ravaged the colonists, thanks in part to the peninsula’s

unhealthy location and the fact that supplies from England arrived sporadically or spoiled. Fewer than half of the original colonists survived the first nine months.

Powhatan kept the English alive that first winter. The Powhatan had welcomed the English and placed a high value on metal ax-heads, kettles, tools, and guns and eagerly traded furs and other abundant goods for them. With ten thousand confederated natives and with food in abundance, Indigenous people had little to fear and much to gain from the isolated outpost of sick and dying Englishmen.



John White, "Village of the Secotan, 1585. [Wikimedia](#).

Despite reinforcements, the English continued to die. Four hundred settlers arrived in 1609, but the overwhelmed colony entered a desperate “starving time” in the winter of 1609–1610. Supplies were lost at sea. Relations with Native Americans deteriorated and the colonists fought a kind of slow-burning guerrilla war with the Powhatan. Disaster loomed for the colony. The settlers ate everything they could, roaming the woods for nuts and berries. They boiled leather. They dug up graves to eat the corpses of their former neighbors. One man was executed for killing and eating his wife. Some years later, George Percy recalled the colonists’ desperation during these years, when he served as the colony’s president: “Having fed upon our horses and other beasts as long as they lasted, we were glad to make shift with vermin as dogs, cats, rats and mice . . . as to eat boots shoes or any other leather. . . . And now famine beginning to look ghastly and pale in every face, that nothing was spared to maintain life and to doe those things which seem incredible, as to dig up dead corpses out of graves and to eat them.”²³ Archaeological excavations in 2012 exhumed the bones of a fourteen-year-old girl that exhibited signs of cannibalism.²⁴ All but sixty settlers would die by the summer of 1610. Little

improved over the next several years. By 1616, 80 percent of all English immigrants who had arrived in Jamestown had perished. England's first American colony was a catastrophe.

The colonists were unable to find any profitable commodities and remained dependent on Native Americans and sporadic shipments from England for food. But then tobacco saved Jamestown.

In 1617 the colony sent its first cargo of tobacco back to England. The "noxious weed," a native of the New World, fetched a high price in Europe and the tobacco boom began in Virginia and then later spread to Maryland. Within fifteen years American colonists were exporting over five hundred thousand pounds of tobacco per year. Within forty years, they were exporting fifteen million.[25](#)

Tobacco changed everything. It saved Virginia from ruin, incentivized further colonization, and laid the groundwork for what would become the United States. With a new market open, Virginia drew not only merchants and traders but also settlers. Colonists came in droves. They were mostly young, mostly male, and mostly indentured servants who signed contracts called indentures that bonded them to employers for a period of years in return for passage across the ocean. But even the rough terms of servitude were no match for the promise of land and potential profits that beckoned English farmers. But still there were not enough of them. Tobacco was a labor-intensive crop and ambitious planters, with seemingly limitless land before them, lacked only laborers to escalate their wealth and status. The colony's great labor vacuum inspired the creation of the "headright policy" in 1618: any person who migrated to Virginia would automatically receive fifty acres of land and any immigrant whose passage they paid would entitle them to fifty acres more. In 1619, the Virginia Company established the House of Burgesses, a limited representative body composed of white landowners that first met in Jamestown. That same year, a Dutch slave ship sold twenty Africans to the Virginia colonists. Southern slavery was born.

Soon the tobacco-growing colonists expanded beyond the bounds of Jamestown's deadly peninsula. When it became clear that the English were not merely intent on maintaining a small trading post but sought a permanent ever-expanding colony, conflict with the Powhatan Confederacy became almost inevitable. Powhatan died in 1622 and was succeeded by his

brother, Opechancanough, who promised to drive the land-hungry colonists back into the sea. He launched a surprise attack and in a single day (March 22, 1622) killed over 350 colonists, or one third of all the colonists in Virginia.²⁶ The colonists retaliated and revisited the massacres on Indigenous settlements many times over. The massacre freed the colonists to drive Native Americans off their land. The governor of Virginia declared it colonial policy to achieve the “expulsion of the savages to gain the free range of the country.”²⁷ War and disease tilted the balance of power decisively toward the English colonizers.

English colonists brought to the New World particular visions of racial, cultural, and religious supremacy. Despite starving in the shadow of the Powhatan Confederacy, English colonists nevertheless judged themselves physically, spiritually, and technologically superior to Native peoples in North America. Christianity, metallurgy, intensive agriculture, transatlantic navigation, and even wheat all magnified the English sense of superiority. This sense of superiority, when coupled with outbreaks of violence, left the English feeling entitled to Indigenous lands and resources.

New England



Seal of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. [The History Project](#) (UC Davis).

The English colonies in New England established from 1620 onward were founded with loftier goals than those in Virginia. Although migrants to New England expected economic profit,

religious motives directed the rhetoric and much of the reality of these colonies. Not every English person who moved to New England during the seventeenth century was a Puritan, but Puritans dominated the politics, religion, and culture of New England. Even after 1700, the region's Puritan inheritance shaped many aspects of its history.

The term *Puritan* began as an insult, and its recipients usually referred to each other as “the godly” if they used a specific term at all. Puritans were stereotyped by their enemies as dour killjoys, and the exaggeration has endured. It is certainly true that the Puritans' disdain for excess and opposition to many holidays popular in Europe (including Christmas, which, as Puritans never tired of reminding everyone, the Bible never told anyone to celebrate) lent themselves to caricature. But Puritans understood themselves as advocating a reasonable middle path in a corrupt world. It would never occur to a Puritan, for example, to abstain from alcohol or sex. Facing growing persecution, the Puritans began the Great Migration, during which about twenty thousand people traveled to New England between 1630 and 1640.

The Puritans did not seek to create a haven of religious toleration, a notion that they—along with nearly all European Christians—regarded as ridiculous at best and dangerous at worst. While the Puritans did not succeed in building a godly utopia in New England, a combination of Puritan traits with several external factors created colonies wildly different from any other region settled by English people. Unlike those heading to Virginia, colonists in New England (Plymouth [1620], Massachusetts Bay [1630], Connecticut [1636], and Rhode Island [1636]) generally arrived in family groups. Most New England immigrants were small landholders in England, a class contemporary English called the “middling sort.” When they arrived in New England they tended to replicate their home environments, founding towns composed of independent landholders. The New England climate and soil made large-scale plantation agriculture impractical, so the system of large landholders using masses of enslaved laborers or indentured servants to grow labor-intensive crops never took hold.

There is no evidence that the New England Puritans would have opposed such a system were it possible; other Puritans made their fortunes on the Caribbean sugar islands, and New England merchants profited as suppliers of provisions and enslaved laborers to those colonies. By

accident of geography as much as by design, New England society was much less stratified than any of Britain's other seventeenth-century colonies. Although New England colonies could boast wealthy landholding elites, the disparity of wealth in the region remained narrow compared to the Chesapeake, Carolina, or the Caribbean. Instead, seventeenth-century New England was characterized by a broadly shared modest prosperity based on a mixed economy dependent on small farms, shops, fishing, lumber, shipbuilding, and trade with the Atlantic World.

They generally divided part of the land for immediate use while keeping much of the rest as "commons" or undivided land for future generations. The town's inhabitants collectively decided the size of each settler's home lot based on their current wealth and status. Besides oversight of property, the town restricted membership, and new arrivals needed to apply for admission. Those who gained admittance could participate in town governments that, while not democratic by modern standards, nevertheless had broad popular involvement. All male property holders could vote in town meetings and choose the selectmen, assessors, constables, and other officials from among themselves to conduct the daily affairs of government. Upon their founding, towns wrote covenants, reflecting the Puritan belief in God's covenant with his people. Towns sought to arbitrate disputes and contain strife, as did the Church. Wayward or divergent individuals were persuaded, corrected, or coerced. Popular conceptions of Puritans as hardened authoritarians are exaggerated, but if persuasion and arbitration failed, people who did not conform to community norms were punished or removed. Massachusetts banished Anne Hutchinson, Roger Williams, and other religious dissenters like the Quakers.

A combination of environmental factors and the Puritan social ethos produced a region of remarkable health and stability during the seventeenth century. New England immigrants avoided most of the deadly outbreaks of tropical disease that turned the Chesapeake colonies into graveyards. Disease, in fact, only aided English settlement and relations to Native Americans. In contrast to other English colonists who had to contend with powerful Native American neighbors, the Puritans confronted the stunned survivors of a biological catastrophe. A lethal pandemic of smallpox during the 1610s swept away as much as 90 percent of the region's Native American population. Many survivors welcomed the English as potential allies against rival tribes who had escaped the catastrophe. The relatively healthy environment coupled with

political stability and the predominance of family groups among early immigrants allowed the New England population to grow to 91,000 people by 1700 from only 21,000 immigrants. In contrast, 120,000 English went to the Chesapeake, and only 85,000 white colonists remained in 1700.[32](#)