

# A New World of Many Cultures, 1491–1607

*Thirty-three days after my departure from [the Canary Islands] I reached the Indian Sea, where I discovered many islands, thickly peopled, of which I took possession without resistance in the name of our most illustrious monarch, by public proclamation and with unfurled banners.*

Christopher Columbus, *Select Letters*, 1493.

The original discovery, exploration, and settlement of North and South America occurred at least 10,000 years before Christopher Columbus was born. Some archeologists estimate that the first people to settle North America arrived as many as 40,000 years ago. Waves of migrants from Asia may have crossed a land bridge that once connected Siberia and Alaska (land now submerged under the Bering Sea). Over a long period of time, successive generations migrated southward from the Arctic Circle to the southern tip of South America. The first Americans adapted to the varied environments of the regions that they found. They evolved into hundreds of tribes, spoke different languages, and practiced different cultures. Estimates of the native population in the Americas in the 1490s vary from 50 million to 100 million people.

## Cultures of Central and South America

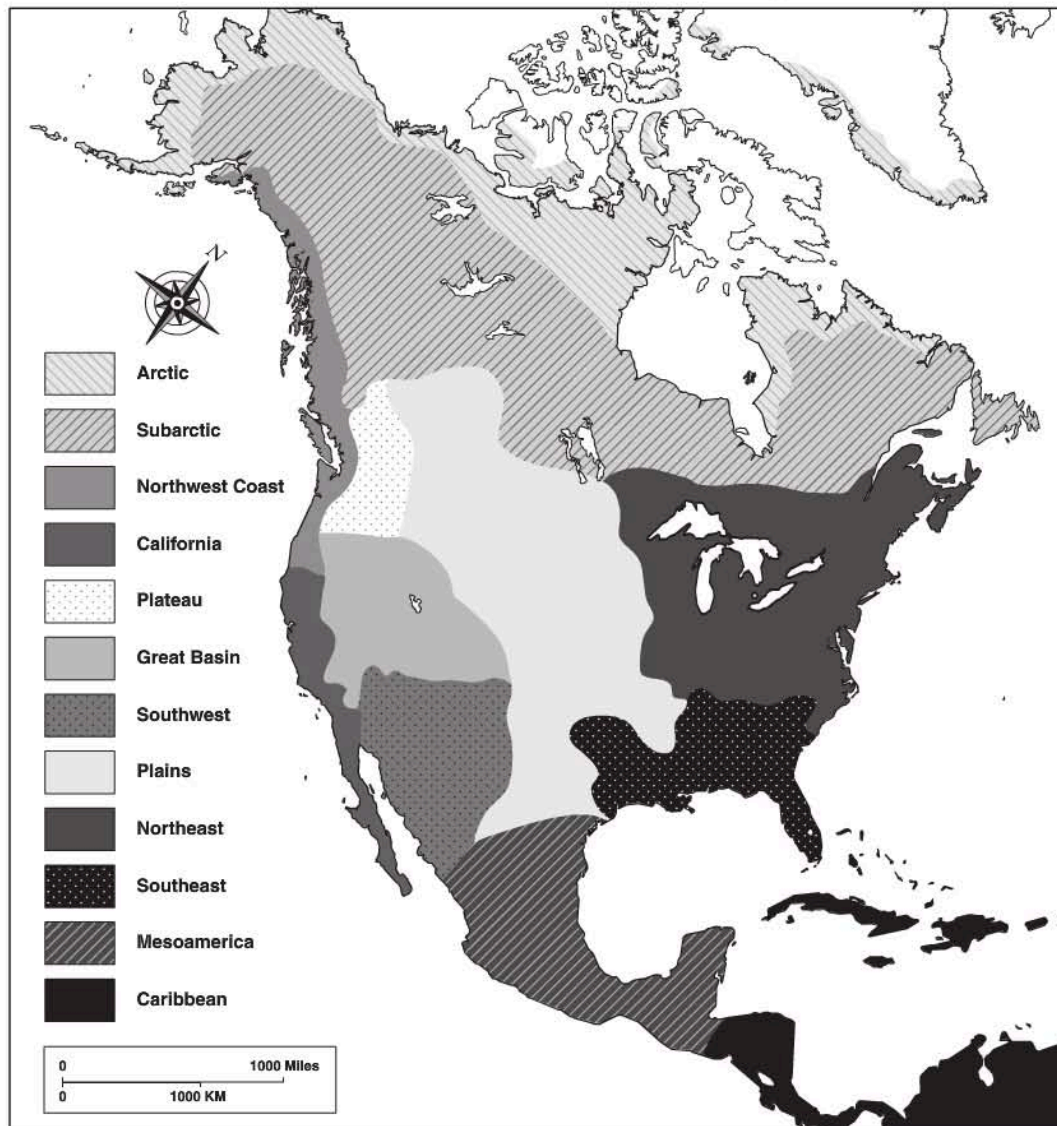
The native population was concentrated in three highly developed civilizations. Between A.D. 300 and 800, the Mayas built remarkable cities in the rain forests of the Yucatán Peninsula (present-day Guatemala, Belize, and southern Mexico). Several centuries after the decline of the Mayas, the Aztecs from central Mexico developed a powerful empire. The Aztec capital, Tenochtitlán, had a population of about 200,000, equivalent in population to the largest cities of Europe. While the Aztecs were dominating Mexico and Central America, the Incas based in Peru developed a vast empire in South America. All three civilizations developed highly organized societies, carried on an extensive trade, and created calendars that were based on accurate scientific observations. All three cultivated crops that provided a stable food supply, particularly corn for the Mayas and Aztecs and potatoes for the Incas.

## Cultures of North America

The population in the region north of Mexico (present-day United States and Canada) in the 1490s may have been anywhere from under 1 million to more than 10 million. In general, the native societies in this region were smaller and less sophisticated than those in Mexico and South America. One reason for this was the slowness of the northward spread of corn cultivation from Mexico.

Some of the most populous and complex societies in North America had disappeared by the 15th century, for reasons not well understood. By the time of Columbus, most people in the Americas in what is now the United States and Canada lived in semipermanent settlements in groups seldom exceeding 300 people. The men spent their time making tools and hunting for game, while the women gathered plants and nuts or grew crops such as corn, beans, and tobacco.

NATIVE PEOPLES OF THE AMERICAS, 1491





**Language** Beyond these similarities, the cultures of American Indians were very diverse. For example, while English, Spanish, and almost all other European languages were part of just one language family (Indo-European), American Indian languages constituted more than 20 language families. Among the largest of these were Algonquian in the Northeast, Siouan on the Great Plains, and Athabaskan in the Southwest. Together, these 20 families included more than 400 distinct languages.

**Southwest Settlements** In the dry region that now includes New Mexico and Arizona, groups such as the Hokokam, Anasazi, and Pueblos evolved multifaceted societies supported by farming with irrigation systems. In large numbers they lived in caves, under cliffs, and in multistoried buildings. By the time Europeans arrived, extreme drought and other hostile natives had taken their toll on these groups. However, much of their way of life was preserved in the arid land and their stone and masonry dwellings.

**Northwest Settlements** Along the Pacific coast from what is today Alaska to northern California, people lived in permanent longhouses or plank houses. They had a rich diet based on hunting, fishing, and gathering nuts, berries, and roots. To save stories, legends, and myths, they carved large totem poles. The high mountain ranges in this region isolated tribes from one another, creating barriers to development.

**Great Plains** Most people who lived on the Great Plains were either nomadic hunters or sedentary people who farmed and traded. The nomadic tribes survived on hunting, principally the buffalo, which supplied their food as well as decorations, crafting tools, knives, and clothing. They lived in tepees, frames of poles covered in animal skins, which were easily disassembled and transported. While the farming tribes also hunted buffalo, they lived permanently in earthen lodges often along rivers. They raised corn, beans, and squash while actively trading with other tribes. Not until the 17th century did American Indians acquire horses by trading or stealing them from Spanish settlers. With horses, tribes such as the Lakota Sioux moved away from farming to hunting and easily following the buffalo across the plains. The plains tribes would at times merge or split apart as conditions changed. Migration also was common. For example, the Apaches gradually migrated southward from Canada to Texas.

**Midwest Settlements** East of the Mississippi River, the Woodland American Indians prospered with a rich food supply. Supported by hunting, fishing, and agriculture, many permanent settlements developed in the Mississippi and Ohio River valleys and elsewhere. The Adena-Hopewell culture, centered in what is now Ohio, is famous for the large earthen mounds it created, some as large as 300 feet long. One of the largest settlements in the Midwest was Cahokia (near present-day East St. Louis, Illinois), with as many as 30,000 inhabitants.

**Northeast Settlements** Some descendants of the Adena-Hopewell culture spread from the Ohio Valley into New York. Their culture combined hunting



and farming. However, their farming techniques exhausted the soil quickly, so people had to move to fresh land frequently. Among the most famous groups of American Indians in this region was the Iroquois Confederation, a political union of five independent tribes who lived in the Mohawk Valley of New York. The five tribes were the Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, and Mohawk. Multiple families related through a mother lived in longhouses, up to 200 feet long. From the 16th century through the American Revolution, the Iroquois were a powerful force, battling rival American Indians as well as Europeans.

**Atlantic Seaboard Settlements** In the area from New Jersey south to Florida lived the people of the Coastal Plains. Many were descendants of the Woodland mound builders and built timber and bark lodgings along rivers. The rivers and the Atlantic Ocean provided a rich source of food.

## **Europe Moves Toward Exploration**

Until the late 1400s, Americans and the people of Europe, Africa, and Asia had no knowledge of the people on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. While Vikings from Scandinavia had visited Greenland and North America around the year 1000, these voyages had no lasting impact. Columbus's voyages of exploration finally brought people into contact across the Atlantic. Several factors made an oceanic crossing and exploration possible in the late 15th century.

### ***Improvements in Technology***

In Europe, a rebirth of classical learning prompted an outburst of artistic and scientific activity in the 15th and 16th centuries known as the Renaissance. Several of the technological advances during the Renaissance resulted from Europeans making improvements in the inventions of others. For example, they began to use gunpowder (invented by the Chinese) and the sailing compass (adopted from Arab merchants who learned about it from the Chinese). Europeans also made major improvements in shipbuilding and mapmaking. In addition, the invention of the printing press in the 1450s aided the spread of knowledge across Europe.

### ***Religious Conflict***

The later years of the Renaissance were a time of intense religious zeal and conflict. The Roman Catholic Church that had once dominated Western Europe was threatened from without by Ottoman Turks who were followers of Islam and from within by a revolt against the pope's authority.

**Catholic Victory in Spain** In the 8th century, Islamic invaders from North Africa, known as Moors, rapidly conquered most of what is now Spain. Over the next several centuries, Spanish Christians reconquered much of the land and set up several independent kingdoms. Two of the largest of these kingdoms united when Isabella, queen of Castile, and Ferdinand, king of Aragon, married in 1469. In 1492, under the leadership of Isabella and Ferdinand, the Spanish conquered the last Moorish stronghold in Spain, the city of Granada. In that year, the monarchs also funded Christopher Columbus on his historic



first voyage. The uniting of Spain under Isabella and Ferdinand, the conquest of Granada, and the launching of Columbus signaled new leadership, hope, and power for Europeans who followed the Roman Catholic faith.

**Protestant Revolt in Northern Europe** In the early 1500s, certain Christians in Germany, England, France, Holland, and other northern European countries revolted against the authority of the pope in Rome. Their revolt was known as the Protestant Reformation. Conflict between Catholics and Protestants led to a series of religious wars. The conflict also caused the Catholics of Spain and Portugal and the Protestants of England and Holland to want to spread their own versions of Christianity to people in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. Thus, a religious motive for exploration and colonization was added to political and economic motives.

## Expanding Trade

Economic motives for exploration grew out of a fierce competition among European kingdoms for increased trade with Africa, India, and China. In the past, merchants had traveled from the Italian city-state of Venice and the Byzantine city of Constantinople on a long, slow, expensive overland route that reached all the way to the capital of the Chinese empire. This land route to Asia had become blocked in 1453 when the Ottoman Turks seized control of Constantinople.

**New Routes** So the challenge to finding a new way to the rich Asian trade appeared to be by sailing either south along the West African coast east to China, or sailing west across the Atlantic Ocean. The Portuguese, who realized the route south and east was the shortest path, thought this option seemed more promising. Voyages of exploration sponsored by Portugal's Prince Henry the Navigator eventually succeeded in opening up a long sea route around South Africa's Cape of Good Hope. In 1498, the Portuguese sea captain Vasco da Gama was the first European to reach India via this route. By this time, Columbus had attempted what he mistakenly believed would be a shorter route to Asia.

**Slave Trading** Since ancient times people in Europe, Africa, and Asia had enslaved people captured in wars. In the 15th century, the Portuguese began trading for slaves from West Africa. They used the slaves to work newly established sugar plantations on the Madeira and Azores islands off the African coast. Producing sugar with slave labor was so profitable that when Europeans later established colonies in the Americas, they used the slave system there.

**African Resistance** Enslaved Africans resisted slavery in whatever ways they could. Though transported thousands of miles from their homelands and brutally repressed, they often ran away, sabotaged work, or revolted. And for generations they maintained aspects of their African culture, particularly in music, religion, and folkways.

## Developing Nation-States

Europe was also changing politically in the 15th century. Small kingdoms, such as Castile and Aragon, were uniting into larger ones. Enormous multiethnic empires, such as the sprawling Holy Roman Empire in central Europe, were

breaking up. Replacing the small kingdoms and the multiethnic empires were nation-states, countries in which the majority of people shared both a common culture and common loyalty toward a central government. The monarchs of the emerging nation-states, such as Isabella and Ferdinand of Spain; Prince Henry the Navigator of Portugal; and similar monarchs of France, England, and the Netherlands; depended on trade to bring in needed revenues and on the church to justify their right to rule. They used their power to search for riches abroad and to spread the influence of their version of Christianity to new overseas dominions.

## Early Explorations

Changing economic, political, and social conditions in Europe shaped the ambitions of the Italian-born Christopher Columbus.

### *Christopher Columbus*

Columbus spent eight years seeking financial support for his plan to sail west from Europe to the “Indies.” Finally, in 1492, he succeeded in winning the backing of Isabella and Ferdinand. The two Spanish monarchs were then at the height of their power, having just defeated the Moors in Granada. They agreed to outfit three ships and to make Columbus governor, admiral, and viceroy of all the lands that he would claim for Spain.

After sailing from the Canary Islands on September 6, Columbus landed on an island in the Bahamas on October 12. His success in reaching lands on the other side of the ocean brought him a burst of glory in Spain. But three subsequent voyages across the Atlantic were disappointing—he found little gold, few spices, and no simple path to China and India.

**Columbus’s Legacy** Columbus died in 1506, still believing that he had found a western route to Asia. However, many Spaniards viewed Columbus as a failure because they suspected that he had found not a valuable trade route, but a “New World.” Today, some people scoff at Columbus for having erroneously giving the people he encountered the name “Indians.” Even the land that he had explored was named for someone else, Amerigo Vespucci, another Italian sailor. Columbus’s critics also point out the many problems and injustices suffered by the natives of the Americas after Europeans arrived and took over their land.

Nevertheless, most historians agree on Columbus’s importance. Modern scholars have recognized his great skills as a navigator and his daring commitment in going forth where nobody else had ever dared to venture. Furthermore, Columbus’s voyages brought about, for the first time in history, permanent interaction between people from all over the globe. He changed the world forever.

**Exchanges** Europeans and the original inhabitants of the Americas had developed vastly different cultures over the millennia. The contact between them resulted in the Columbian Exchange, a transfer of plants, animals, and germs from one side of the Atlantic to the other for the first time. Europeans learned about many new plants and foods, including beans, corn, sweet and



white potatoes, tomatoes, and tobacco. They also contracted a new disease, syphilis. Europeans introduced to the Americas sugar cane, bluegrasses, pigs, and horses, as well as the wheel, iron implements, and guns. Deadlier than all the guns was the European importation of germs and diseases, such as smallpox and measles, to which the natives had no immunity. Millions died (there was a mortality rate of more than 90 percent), including entire tribal communities. These exchanges, biological and cultural, would permanently change the entire world.

### ***Dividing the Americas***

Spain and Portugal were the first European kingdoms to claim territories in the Americas. Their claims overlapped, leading to disputes. The Catholic monarchs of the two countries turned to the pope in Rome to resolve their differences. In 1493, the pope drew a vertical, north-south line on a world map, called the *line of demarcation*. The pope granted Spain all lands to the west of the line and Portugal all lands to the east.

In 1494, Spain and Portugal moved the pope's line a few degrees to the west and signed an agreement called the Treaty of Tordesillas. The line passed through what is now the country of Brazil. This treaty, together with Portuguese explorations, established Portugal's claim to Brazil. Spain claimed the rest of the Americas. However, other European countries soon challenged these claims.

### ***Spanish Exploration and Conquest***

Spanish dominance in the Americas was based on more than a papal ruling and a treaty. Spain owed its expanding power to its explorers and conquerors (called *conquistadores*). Feats such as the journey across the Isthmus of Panama to the Pacific Ocean by Vasco Núñez de Balboa, the circumnavigation of the world by one of Ferdinand Magellan's ships (Magellan died before completing the trip), the conquests of the Aztecs in Mexico by Hernan Cortés, and the conquest of the Incas in Peru by Francisco Pizarro secured Spain's initial supremacy in the Americas.

The conquistadores sent ships loaded with gold and silver back to Spain from Mexico and Peru. They increased the gold supply by more than 500 percent, making Spain the richest and most powerful nation in Europe. Spain's success encouraged other nations to turn to the Americas in search of gold and power. After seizing the wealth of the Indian empires, the Spanish instituted an *encomienda* system, with the king of Spain giving grants of land and natives to individual Spaniards. These Indians had to farm or work in the mines. The fruits of their labors went to their Spanish masters, who in turn had to "care" for them. As Europeans' diseases and brutality reduced the native population, the Spanish brought enslaved people from West Africa under the *asiento* system. This required the Spanish to pay a tax to their king on each slave they imported to the Americas.

## EARLY SETTLEMENTS IN NORTH AMERICA 1600s



### ***English Claims***

England's earliest claims to territory in the Americas rested on the voyages of John Cabot, an Italian sea captain who sailed under contract to England's King Henry VII. Cabot explored the coast of Newfoundland in 1497.

England, however, did not follow up Cabot's discoveries with other expeditions of exploration and settlement. Other issues preoccupied England's monarchy in the 1500s, including Henry VIII's break with the Roman Catholic Church. In the 1570s and 1580s, under Queen Elizabeth I, England challenged Spanish shipping in both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Sir Francis Drake, for example, attacked Spanish ships, seized the gold and silver that they carried, and even attacked Spanish settlements on the coast of Peru. Another English adventurer, Sir Walter Raleigh, attempted to establish a settlement at Roanoke Island off the North Carolina coast in 1587, but the venture failed.



## ***French Claims***

The French monarchy first showed interest in exploration in 1524 when it sponsored a voyage by an Italian navigator, Giovanni da Verrazano. Hoping to find a northwest passage leading through the Americas to Asia, Verrazano explored part of North America's eastern coast, including the New York harbor. French claims to American territory were also based on the voyages of Jacques Cartier (1534–1542), who explored the St. Lawrence River extensively.

Like the English, the French were slow to develop colonies across the Atlantic. During the 1500s, the French monarchy was preoccupied with European wars as well as with internal religious conflict between Roman Catholics and French Protestants known as Huguenots. Only in the next century did France develop a strong interest in following up its claims to North American land.

The first permanent French settlement in America was established by Samuel de Champlain in 1608 at Quebec, a fortified village on the St. Lawrence River. Champlain's strong leadership won him the nickname "Father of New France." Other explorers extended French claims across a vast territory. In 1673, Louis Jolliet and Father Jacques Marquette explored the upper Mississippi River, and in 1682, Robert de La Salle explored the Mississippi basin, which he named Louisiana (after the French king, Louis XIV).

## ***Dutch Claims***

During the 1600s, the Netherlands also began to sponsor voyages of exploration. The Dutch government hired Henry Hudson, an experienced English sailor, to seek westward passage to Asia through northern America. In 1609, while searching for a northwest passage, Hudson sailed up a broad river that was later named for him, the Hudson River. This expedition established Dutch claims to the surrounding area that would become New Amsterdam (and later New York). The Dutch government granted a private company, the Dutch West India Company, the right to control the region for economic gain.

## **Spanish Settlements in North America**

Spanish settlements developed slowly in North America, as a result of limited mineral resources and strong opposition from American Indians.

**Florida** After a number of failed attempts and against the strong resistance of American Indians in the region, the Spanish established a permanent settlement at St. Augustine in 1565. Today, St. Augustine is the oldest city in North America founded by Europeans.

**New Mexico** Santa Fe was established as the capital of New Mexico in 1610. Harsh efforts to Christianize the American Indians caused the Pueblo people to revolt in 1680. The Spanish were driven from the area until 1692.

**Texas** In between Florida and New Mexico, the Spanish established settlements in Texas. These communities grew in the early 1700s as Spain attempted to resist French efforts to explore the lower Mississippi River.

**California** In response to Russian exploration from Alaska, the Spanish established permanent settlements at San Diego in 1769 and San Francisco in 1776. By 1784, a series of missions or settlements had been established along the California coast by members of the Franciscan order. Father Junípero Serra founded nine of these missions.

## **European Treatment of Native Americans**

Most Europeans looked down upon Native Americans. The Europeans who colonized North and South America generally viewed Native Americans as inferior people who could be exploited for economic gain, converted to Christianity, and used as military allies. However, Europeans used various approaches for controlling Native Americans and operating their colonies.

### ***Spanish Policy***

The Spanish who settled in Mexico and Peru encountered the highly organized Aztec and Inca empires. Even after diseases killed most natives, millions remained in these empires that the Spanish could incorporate as laborers in their own empire. Many natives who did not die from disease died from forced labor. Because few families came from Spain to settle the empire, the explorers and soldiers intermarried with natives as well as with Africans. The latter were captured in Africa and forced to travel across the ocean to provide slave labor for the Spanish colonists. A rigid class system developed in the Spanish colonies, one dominated by pure-blooded Spaniards.

**Bartolomé de Las Casas** One European who dissented from the views of most Europeans toward Native Americans was a Spanish priest named Bartolomé de Las Casas. Though he had owned land and slaves in the West Indies and had fought in wars against the Indians, he eventually became an advocate for better treatment for Indians. He persuaded the king to institute the New Laws of 1542. These laws ended Indian slavery, halted forced Indian labor, and began to end the *encomienda* system which kept the Indians in serfdom. Conservative Spaniards, eager to keep the *encomienda* system, responded and successfully pushed the king to repeal parts of the New Laws.

**Valladolid Debate** The debate over the role for Indians in the Spanish colonies came to a head in a formal debate in 1550–1551 in Valladolid, Spain. On one side, Las Casas argued that the Indians were completely human and morally equal to Europeans, so enslaving them was not justified. On the other side, another priest, Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, argued that Indians were less than human. Hence, they benefited from serving the Spaniards in the *encomienda* system. Neither side clearly won the debate. Though Las Casas was unable to gain equal treatment for Native Americans, he established the basic arguments on behalf of justice for Indians.



### ***English Policy***

Unlike the Spanish, the English settled in areas without large native empires that could be controlled as a workforce. In addition, many English colonists came in families rather than as single young men, so marriage with natives was less common. Initially, at least in Massachusetts, the English and the American Indians coexisted, traded, and shared ideas. American Indians taught the settlers how to grow new crops such as corn and showed them how to hunt in the forests. They traded various furs for an array of English manufactured goods, including iron tools and weapons. But peaceful relations soon gave way to conflict and open warfare. The English had no respect for American Indian cultures, which they viewed as primitive or “savage.” For their part, American Indians saw their way of life threatened as the English began to take more land to support their ever-increasing population. The English occupied the land and forced the small, scattered tribes they encountered to move away from the coast to inland territories. They expelled the natives rather than subjugating them.

### ***French Policy***

The French, looking for furs and converts to Catholicism, viewed American Indians as potential economic and military allies. Compared to the Spaniards and the English, the French maintained good relations with the tribes they encountered. Seeking to control the fur trade, the French built trading posts throughout the St. Lawrence Valley, the Great Lakes region, and along the Mississippi River. At these posts, they exchanged French goods for beaver pelts and other furs collected by American Indians. Because the French had few colonists, farms, or towns, they posed less threat to the native population than did other Europeans. In addition, French soldiers assisted the Huron people in fighting their traditional enemy, the Iroquois.

### ***Native American Reaction***

North American tribes saw themselves as groups distinct from each other, not as part of a larger body of Native Americans. As a result, European settlers rarely had to be concerned with a unified response from the Native Americans. Initially the European goods such as copper pots and guns had motivated the natives to interact with the strangers. After the decimation of their peoples from the violence and disease of the Europeans, the Native Americans had to adopt new ways to survive. Upon observing the Europeans fighting each other, some tribes allied themselves with one European power or another in hopes of gaining support in order to survive. A number of tribes simply migrated to new land to get away from the slowly encroaching settlers. Regardless of how they dealt with the European invasion, Native Americans would never be able to return to the life they had known prior to 1492.

## HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES: WAS COLUMBUS A GREAT HERO?

Over the centuries, Columbus has received both praise for his role as a “discoverer” and blame for his actions as a “conqueror.” In the United States, he has traditionally been viewed as a hero. As early as 1828, Washington Irving wrote a popular biography extolling the explorer’s virtues. The apex of Columbus’s heroic reputation was reached in 1934 when President Franklin Roosevelt declared October 12 a national holiday.

Since the 1990s, however, revisionist histories and biographies have been highly critical of Columbus. His detractors argue that Columbus was simply at the right place at the right time. Europe at the end of the 15th century was ready to expand. If Columbus had not crossed the Atlantic in 1492, some other explorer—perhaps Vespucci or Cabot—would have done so a few years later. According to this interpretation, Columbus was little more than a good navigator and a self-promoter who exploited an opportunity.

Some revisionists take a harsh view of Columbus and regard him not as the first discoverer of America but rather as its first conqueror. They portray him as a religious fanatic in the European Christian tradition who sought to convert the American natives to Christianity and liquidated those who resisted.

The revisionist argument has not gone unanswered. For example, historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. has argued that the chief motivation for Columbus’s deeds was neither greed for gold nor ambition for conquest. What drove him, in Schlesinger’s view, was the challenge of the unknown. Columbus’s apologists admit that millions of Native Americans died as a result of European exploration in the Americas, but they point out that an unknown number had suffered horrible deaths in Aztec sacrifices. Moreover, the mistreatment of Native Americans was perhaps partially offset by such positive results as the gradual development of democratic institutions in the colonies and later the United States.

Historians will continue to debate the nature of Columbus’s achievement. As with other historical questions, distinguishing between fact and fiction and separating a writer’s personal biases from objective reality is difficult. One conclusion is inescapable: As a result of Columbus’s voyages, world history took a sharp turn in a new direction. His explorations established a permanent point of contact between Europeans and the first Americans, and soon between both groups and Africans. People are still living with the consequences of this interaction.