

Name: _____ Class Period: _____

THE AMERICAS TO 1500

Purpose:

This Crossroads Essay is an optional enrichment activity providing additional insight into the era. Students who complete this activity before they take the chapter 1 reading quiz will earn up to 10 additional points.

Directions:

As you read the article annotate and answer questions in the spaces provided. *Use INK.*

Sample annotations have been provided for you in section I.

Annotate by:

- Highlighting the main ideas/arguments,
- identifying major themes (BAGPIPE)
- identifying historical context
- defining terms you may not know.

Beliefs and ideas (roles of ideas, beliefs, social mores, and creative expression in development of United States)
America in the world (global context of how United States originated and developed as well as its role in world affairs)
Geography (role of environment, geography, and climate on the development of United States and individual actions)
Peopling (migration, immigration, adaptation and impact of various groups on social and physical environments)
Identify (development of American national identity, including focus on subpopulations such as women and minorities)
Politics and power (changing role of government/state, the development of citizenship and concept of American liberty)
Economy (work, exchange, technology) (development of American economy; agriculture, manufacturing, labor, etc.)

I. Introducing Methodology of History

This period, which deals with **the world the Indians knew before the arrival of European explorers**, poses difficulties flowing mostly from the lack of the usual evidentiary foundation for doing history: written documents (for example, letters, speeches, treaties, constitutions, laws, books, newspapers, magazines, almanacs).

It is difficult to fully understand Indian culture before contact with Europeans.

In seeking to understand the first human beings who settled North and South America either 15,000 or 40,000 years ago (the dates are a matter of vigorous historical dispute), historians use some or all of the following: archaeology, comparative religion and folklore, medicine, geology, climatology, and ecology, linguistics, anthropology.

Context...Pre-Contact...Prehistoric times to European exploration; Americas (era/time period/place)

“As new discoveries and studies occur, history changes. As new perspectives inspect the past, history changes. It is important to consider history as gray... not black and white.”¹
 “**Historiography** reminds us that history is not a closed book, not a collection of inarguable facts or a seamless story. Historiography is a reminder that there is something to argue about in history, something that makes us think about the conduct of our contemporary lives.”²

Historiography = the study of historical writing

One last preliminary question: What is a culture? What do we mean when we talk about a given people's culture? James Axtell has provided a definition of culture that, in many ways, illustrates the problems of grappling with this slippery concept... A culture is the body of **ideas, ways of looking at the world, values, and standards for conduct and behavior that a given people or nation hold in common**. It includes the range of meanings that people assign to their own perceptions and behavior, as well as to the natural world around them. ..

Beliefs and ideas (major theme) = culture

¹Richardson commentary

²Francis G. Couvares et al (Editors). Interpretations of American History: Patterns and Perspectives. (7th Ed.) New York: The Free Press, 2000

That Indian peoples lacked some of the elements of European culture (for example, the wheel, firearms, horses, the Roman Catholic or Protestant Christian faiths) led many Europeans and their descendants to conclude -- erroneously -- that the Indians had no culture at all, or at least none that Europeans were bound to respect. This perception has, as noted above and emphasized below, distorted most of the later accounts of Indian history. In studying the Indians of the Americas, the first task that a modern scholar or teacher must carry out is to clear the ground of the discarded rubble of former "scholarship."

Cultural differences led to intolerance and biased history.

American identity today includes more fair and tolerant interpretation of the past.

II. Indian History and Culture

We begin American history with a great mystery and a great challenge. The mystery surrounds the people who were standing on the shores of the American continents and the Caribbean islands when the European explorers landed there -- by some recent estimates, over ten million people in South America and about four million in the region of North America that became the United States. Who were they? Where did they come from? What were they like?

Too often in the past, the Indians have been part of the background for the grand, sanitized pageant of "discovery and settlement" -- the American continents have appeared in older histories as "empty," waiting for settlement, despite the presence of millions of indigenous inhabitants. Even when historians have acknowledged Indians' sufferings at the hands of European colonizers and conquerors, or their role in aiding or even saving those colonists, they are largely voiceless; we see them and hear them through European eyes and ears. We all are aware just how controversial and difficult it is to do justice to Indian history and culture. For one thing, there is no clear agreement even as to what we are to call the peoples who originally populated the Americas. As the leading colonial ethno-historian James Axtell has pointed out, most Native Americans now prefer the term "Indians," even though we all know how it evolved as a misnomer rooted in Columbus's misunderstanding of geography...

The implicit message of much of the older... [history]... of many "eyewitness" accounts of the period from 1492 through 1890, and even of the idea that a people can be studied usefully only through scholarly disciplines usually applied to "primitive" peoples, is that Indians are somehow inferior to European. The corollary to this message is that, as "primitive" peoples, the Indians either "deserved" conquest by the Europeans, or needed to be "civilized" by the Europeans, or both. [European Global Perspective] To guard against this tendency, we should recall the warning of Claude Levi-Strauss, quoted by Alvin Josephy at the beginning of his classic book *The Indian Heritage of America: A PRIMITIVE PEOPLE ARE NOT A BACKWARD OR RETARDED PEOPLE; INDEED IT MAY POSSESS A GENIUS FOR INVENTION OR ACTION THAT LEAVES THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF CIVILIZED PEOPLES FAR BEHIND*. While it is tempting to lump the Indians together as one people, and while most students may come into the class with that way of thinking firmly in place, we have to make certain that we recognize the extraordinary spectrum of diverse peoples, cultures, languages, customs, traditions, economies, and forms of society and government that compose the history of the Indian peoples of the Americas. As many significant differences -- in geographical location, language, politics, economics, religion, and cult culture -- distinguish the Mohawk from the Cherokee, the Sioux from the Seminoles, the Apaches from the Inuit, the Kwakiutl from the Mandan, the Maya from the Pueblo, the Inca from the Aztec, as distinguish the French from the Uzbeks, the Welsh from the Norwegians, or the Serbs from the Croats.

Also, as noted above, there is the problem of the stereotype of these peoples as "primitive." Certainly, many European explorers thought that Indians were primitive because they did not hold European ideas of the appropriate relations between human beings and land or natural resources -- ideas of dominion, ownership, and property. That view persisted well into the twentieth century. But the failure to hold European views or ideas does not imply an absence of one's own views or ideas. Whatever the range of differences among them, the Indian peoples had their own histories and cultures, their own understandings of how to live in the world, their own systems of governance and law. Not only are these understandings, at least, worthy of respectful study -- they often can prove enlightening in and of themselves:

- Indian religion recognized the unity of all living things and taught reverence for life and for the earth. But the exact nature of Indian religious beliefs is still a matter of historical and cultural controversy -- was it a simple pantheism (seeing gods everywhere in everything) or a more sophisticated and structured set of beliefs recognizing a hierarchy of tutelary spirits and a single, overarching creator or "Great Spirit?"
- Indian ideas about property are closely tied in certain key respects to their religion. For example, Indians believed for several reasons -- reverence for the earth, the equation of the earth with nature or air, and the tendency to think in communal rather than individualistic terms -- that it was silly or beside the point to talk of owning land. Exclusive possession of a given tract of land seemed outlandish to them, even though it was the core of the English common law. And yet, Indians believed that a person could own the products of the land; for example, a farmer could own his crops, hunters could own the fruits of their hunting, and those who made artifacts could own them. In addition, some Indian peoples believed that you could manipulate the environment in limited ways without forcing fundamental changes in it -- for example, by burning trees to create grasslands rich in game.
- Indian ideas about government once were dismissed by most Western observers as primitive or even savage -- though, of course, there were notable exceptions, including Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson. Today, by contrast, most scholars who study Indians treat their ideas about government and politics with as much respect as their colleagues devote to the study of the Founding Fathers, John Locke, or the constitutional jurisprudence of the United States Supreme Court. Some Indian peoples, such as those of the Iroquois Confederation, did possess what we would recognize as democratic methods of governance, emphasizing reasoned deliberation, fostering political argument and oratory, recognizing the participation of women in politics, devising parallels to what we call federalism, and stressing the need for supermajorities, consensus, or even unanimity in reaching key decisions. Other peoples, such as the Inca of Peru or the Maya and the Aztec of Mexico, created vast empires whose authority was grounded in religion and which exerted almost totalitarian power over their subjects equal in efficiency to that of any European empire.
- Indian ideas about law are similarly different from European ideas, but recent scholars, such as Professor John Phillip Reid of New York University Law School, have come to recognize that Indian peoples did possess legal systems, even without written codes of laws, records of judicial decisions, or formal systems of legislatures and courts. We need not explore this issue in depth; it is enough to say that they had laws grounded in customs, and that these customary systems of laws served such peoples as the Cherokee very well.

- Indian achievements in science and technology were considerable, and even now receive respectful study by historians of architecture, astronomy, and agriculture. The Mayan calendar was at least as accurate as calendars devised by Europeans, and Mayan astronomical observations are sophisticated and accurate enough to be used by astronomers and historians of astronomy to test the work and confirm the observations of European astronomers. And yet, by the time the Europeans first came to the Americas, no indigenous American society or culture had yet developed the use of wheeled vehicles. (The Indians' failure to discover the wheel is not a measure of scientific, technological, or cultural "backwardness." All it proves is that different societies pursue science and technology in different ways, and that technological insights such as the wheel are not inevitable.)
- Indian economies were shaped by their geography, climate, and ecology. As noted above, some Indian peoples were primarily hunters and grazers, while others were primarily agricultural, and still others possessed complex, sophisticated, and successful mixed economies that rivaled European economic systems.

One last point: Again, all these areas remain controversial in the extreme, implicating as they do such disputes as whether Indian peoples are "primitive" and whether the concept of "primitive" is useful or even appropriate in analyzing a different people's culture and way of life. A complicating factor in the study of the Americas before the arrival of European explorers and settlers is the idea -- widely circulated and discussed during the 500th anniversary of Columbus's arrival in the "New World" -- that the Europeans dispossessed the rightful inhabitants of these continents, and that all later American civilization and history, however notable and estimable its achievements and ideals, is based on a colossal series of acts of expropriation, fraud, and genocide.

Defend, refute or modify the assertion that American Indians at the time of European contact were a primitive and uncultured people.

Your stand/response:

Evidence to support your assessment:

(1)

(2)

(3)

Evidence to support the alternative viewpoint:

(1)

(2)

(3)

What does it mean to be "native?"

Are you a "native American?"

Why do you think a significant number of "Native Americans" prefer to be called "American Indians?"

What do you think about other ethno-terms such as "African American," "European American," "Asian American," etc. Are they needed?