

A NEW WORLD

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THE FIRST AMERICANS



Christopher Columbus. A contemporary portrait by Sebastiano del Piombo.

At daybreak on the morning of Friday, August 3 1492, an Italian adventurer named Christopher Columbus set sail from Spain to find a new way from Europe to Asia. His aim was to open up a shorter trade route between the two continents. In Asia, he intended to load his three small ships with silks, spices and gold, and sail back to Europe a rich man.

Columbus first sailed south to the Canary Islands. Then he turned west across the unknown waters of the mid-Atlantic Ocean. Ten weeks after leaving Spain, on the morning of October 12, he stepped ashore on the beach of a low sandy island. He named the island San Salvador—Holy Savior. Columbus believed that he had landed in the Indies, a group of

islands close to the mainland of India. For this reason he called the friendly, brown-skinned people who greeted him “los Indios”—Indians.

In fact, Columbus was not near India. It was not the edge of Asia that he had reached, but islands off the shores of a new continent. Europeans would soon name the new continent America, but for many years they went on calling its inhabitants Indians. Only recently have these first Americans been described more accurately as “native Americans” or Amerindians.

There were many different groups of Amerindians. Those north of Mexico, in what is now the United States and Canada, were scattered across the grasslands and forests in separate groups called “tribes.” These tribes followed very different ways of life. Some were hunters, some were farmers. Some were peaceful, others warlike. They spoke over three hundred separate languages, some of which were as different from one another as English is from Chinese.

Europeans called America “the New World.” But it was not new to the Amerindians. Their ancestors had already been living there for maybe 50,000 years when Columbus stepped on to the beach in San Salvador.

We say “maybe” because nobody is completely sure. Scientists believe that the distant ancestors of the Amerindians came to America from Asia. This happened, they say, during the earth’s last ice age, long before people began to make written records.

At that time a bridge of ice joined Asia to America across what is now the Bering Strait. Hunters from Siberia crossed this bridge into Alaska. From Alaska the hunters moved south and east across America, following herds of caribou and buffalo as the animals went from one feeding ground to the next. Maybe 12,000 years ago, descendants of these first Americans were crossing the isthmus of Panama into

South America. About 5,000 years later their camp fires were burning on the frozen southern tip of the continent, now called Tierra del Fuego—the Land of Fire.

For many centuries early Amerindians lived as wandering hunters and gatherers of food. Then a more settled way of life began. People living in highland areas of what is now Mexico found a wild grass with tiny seeds that were good to eat. These people became America's first farmers. They cultivated the wild grass with great care to make its seeds larger. Eventually it became Indian corn, or maize. Other cultivated plant foods were developed. By 5000 BC Amerindians in Mexico were growing and eating beans, squash and peppers.

The Pueblo people of present day Arizona and New Mexico were the best organized of the Amerindian farming peoples. They lived in groups of villages, or in towns which were built for safety on the sides and tops of cliffs. They shared terraced buildings made of adobe (mud and straw) bricks, dried in the sun. Some of these buildings contained as many as 800 rooms, crowded together on top of one another. The Pueblo

made clothing and blankets from cotton which grew wild in the surrounding deserts. On their feet they wore boot-shaped leather moccasins to protect their legs against the sharp rocks and cactus plants of the desert. For food they grew crops of maize and beans. Irrigation made them successful as farmers. Long before Europeans came to America the Pueblo were building networks of canals across the deserts to bring water to their fields. In one desert valley modern archaeologists have traced canals and ditches which enabled the Pueblo to irrigate 250,000 acres of farmland.

A people called the Apache were the neighbors of the Pueblo. The Apache never became settled farmers. They wandered the deserts and mountains in small bands, hunting deer and gathering wild plants, nuts and roots. They also obtained food by raiding their Pueblo neighbors and stealing it. The Apache were fierce and warlike, and they were much feared by the Pueblo.

The Buffalo Hunt by Charles M. Russell. Amerindians hunting buffalo.



The Iroquois were a group of tribes – a “nation” – who lived far away from the Pueblo and the Apache in the thick woods of northeastern North America. Like the Pueblo, the Iroquois were skilled farmers. In fields cleared from the forest they worked together growing beans, squash and twelve different varieties of maize. They were also hunters and fishermen. They used birch bark canoes to carry them swiftly along the rivers and lakes of their forest homeland. The Iroquois lived in permanent villages, in long wooden huts with barrel-shaped roofs. These huts were made from a framework of saplings covered by sheets of elm bark. Each was home to as many as twenty families. Each family had its own apartment on either side of a central hall.

The Iroquois were fierce warriors. They were as feared by their neighbors as the Apache of the western deserts were feared by theirs. Around their huts they built strong wooden stockades to protect their villages from enemies. Eager to win glory for their tribe and fame and honor for themselves, they often fought one another. From boyhood on, male Iroquois were taught to fear neither pain nor death. Bravery in battle was the surest way for a warrior to win respect and a high position in his tribe.

Many miles to the west, on the vast plains of grass that stretched from the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains, there was another warrior nation. This group called themselves Dakota, which means “allies.” But they were better known by the name which other Amerindians gave to them – Sioux, which means “enemies.”

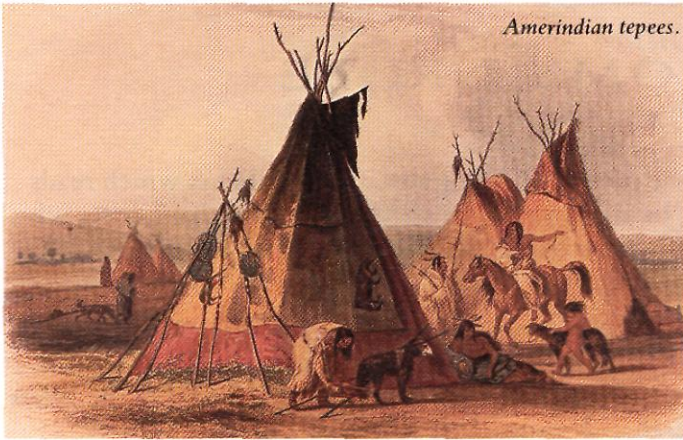
The Sioux grew no crops and built no houses. For food, for shelter and for clothing they depended upon the buffalo. Millions of these large, slow-moving animals wandered across the western grasslands in vast herds. When the buffalo moved, the Sioux moved. The buffalo never remained on one pasture for long, so everything the Sioux owned was designed to be carried easily. Within hours they could take down the tipis, the conical buffalo-skin tents that were their homes, pack their belongings in lightweight leather bags – “parfleches” – and move off after the buffalo. They even carried fire from one camp to the next. A hot ember would be sealed inside a buffalo horn filled with rotted wood. There it would smolder for days, ready to bring warmth from the old village to the new.

The Sioux Creation

In 1933 a Sioux Chief named Luther Standing Bear wrote down some of the ancient legends of his people. This one tells how the Sioux people began:

“Our legends tell us that it was hundreds and perhaps thousands of years ago that the first man sprang from the soil in the great plains. The story says that one morning long ago a lone man awoke, face to the sun, emerging from the soil. Only his head was visible, the rest of his body not yet being shaped. The man looked about, but saw no mountains, no rivers, no forests. There was nothing but soft and quaking mud, for the earth itself was still young. Up and up the man drew himself until he freed his body from the clinging soil. At last he stood upon the earth, but it was not solid, and his first few steps were slow and uncertain. But the sun shone and the man kept his face turned toward it. In time the rays of the sun hardened the face of the earth and strengthened the man and he ran and leaped about, a free and joyous creature. From this man sprang the Dakota nation and, so far as we know, our people have been born and have died upon this plain; and no people have shared it with us until the coming of the European. So this land of the great plains is claimed by the Dakotas as their very own.”

To many people the tepee is a symbol of the Amerindian way of life. This large cone-shaped tent was invented by the buffalo hunters of the western grasslands. It was built round a framework of about twelve slim, wooden poles approximately twenty feet long. The thin ends of the poles were tied together with strips of buffalo hide and the poles were raised and spread until their bottom ends formed a circle about fifteen feet in diameter. As many as forty buffalo hides were sewn together then spread over the frame, their ends fastened to the ground by pegs. A doorway covered with a flap of skin was left in the side and an opening at the top acted as a chimney. The outside of the tepee was decorated with painted designs that had religious or historical meanings.



The lifestyle of the people of North America's northwest coast was different again. They gathered nuts and berries from the forests, but their main food was fish, especially the salmon of the rivers and the ocean. Each spring hundreds of thousands of salmon swam in from the Pacific and fought their way up the

fast-flowing rivers to spawn. A few months' work during this season provided the people of the Pacific coast with enough food to last a whole year.

This abundance of food gave the tribes of the Pacific coast time for feasting, for carving and for building. Tribes like the Haida lived in large houses built of wooden planks with elaborately carved gables and doorposts. The most important carvings were on totem poles. These were specially decorated tree trunks which some tribes placed in front of their houses, but which the Haida made part of the house itself. The carvings on the totem pole were a record of the history of the family that lived in the house.

The Amerindian peoples of North America developed widely varied ways of life. All suited the natural environments in which the tribes lived, and they lasted for many centuries. But the arrival of Europeans with their guns, their diseases and their hunger for land would eventually destroy them all.

Potlatches

The "potlatch" was a popular ceremony amongst the wealthy Pacific coast tribes of North America. The word means "gift giving." A modern potlatch is a kind of party at which guests are given gifts, but the original potlatch ceremonies went much further. A chief or head of a family might give

away everything that he owned to show how wealthy he was and gain respect. To avoid disgrace, the person receiving the gifts had to give back even more. If he failed to do so his entire family was disgraced.



A Haida potlatch.

EXPLORERS FROM EUROPE

If you ask “Who discovered America?”, the answer that you will usually receive is “Christopher Columbus.” But did he? We have seen that the Asian ancestors of the Amerindians arrived in America long before Columbus. Was Columbus the next to arrive?

In the centuries after 1492 stories and legends grew up about other adventurous seamen having reached the New World long before Columbus. One legend tells how a Buddhist monk named Hœi-Shin sailed from China to Mexico in AD 459. Another claims that an Irish monk named Brendan the Bold landed in America in AD 551. Yet another says that the first European to reach the New World was Leif Ericson, “Lucky Leif,” a Viking sailor from Iceland. And as recently as 1953 a plaque was set up at Mobile Bay in

the modern American state of Alabama which reads “In memory of Prince Madoc, a Welsh explorer who landed on the shores of Mobile Bay in 1170 and left behind, with the Indians, the Welsh language.”

All these stories have their supporters. But only in the case of the Vikings have modern scholars found firm evidence to support the old legends. In the 1960s archaeologists uncovered traces of Viking settlements in both Newfoundland and New England.

In Newfoundland the archaeologists found the foundations of huts built in Viking style. They also found iron nails and the weight, or “whorl,” from a spindle. These objects were important pieces of evidence that the Vikings had indeed reached



Leif Ericson sighting America. An impression by a nineteenth-century artist.



An Aztec drawing of the Spanish conquest.

America. Until the arrival of Europeans none of the Amerindian tribes knew how to make iron. And the spindle whorl was exactly like those used in known Viking lands such as Iceland.

The Vikings were a sea-going people from Scandinavia in northern Europe. They were proud of their warriors and explorers and told stories called “sagas” about them. The saga of Leif Ericson tells how he sailed from Greenland to the eastern coast of North America in about the year AD 1000. When he found vines with grapes on them growing there, he named the place where he landed “Vinland the Good.”

Other Vikings followed Leif to Vinland. But the settlements they made there did not last. The hostility of the local Amerindians and the dangers of the northern seas combined to make them give up their attempt to colonize Vinland. The Vikings sailed away and their discovery of Vinland was forgotten except by their storytellers.

It was the Spanish who began the lasting European occupation of America. When Columbus returned to Spain he took back with him some jewelry that he had obtained in America. This jewelry was important because it was made of gold. In the next fifty years thousands of treasure-hungry Spanish

Why is America called “America”

Why did European geographers give the name America to the lands that Columbus discovered? Why did they not name them instead after Columbus?

The reason is that to the end of his life Columbus believed that his discoveries were part of Asia. The man who did most to correct this mistaken idea was Amerigo Vespucci. Vespucci was an Italian sailor from the city of Florence. During the late 1490s he wrote some letters in which he described two voyages of exploration that he had made along the coasts of South America. He was sure, he wrote, that these coasts were part of a new continent.

Some years later Vespucci’s letters were read by a German scholar who was revising an old geography of the world. The letters convinced the scholar that Vespucci was correct, and that the lands beyond the Atlantic were a new continent. To honor Vespucci the scholar named them America, using the feminine form of Vespucci’s first name as the other continents had female names.

The Fountain of Youth

To sixteenth century Europeans America was a land of marvels, a place where nothing was impossible. Some even believed that there they might discover a way to regain their lost youth.

Ponce de León was a Spanish conquistador who came to the New World with Columbus on the explorer's second voyage. He became the governor of the Caribbean island of Puerto Rico. The Amerindian people of Puerto Rico told de León that to the north lay a land rich in gold. This northern land, they said, also had an even more precious treasure—a fountain whose waters gave everlasting youth to all those who drank from it. In the spring of 1513 de León set off in search of the magic fountain. He landed in present day Florida and sailed all round its coast searching for the miraculous waters.

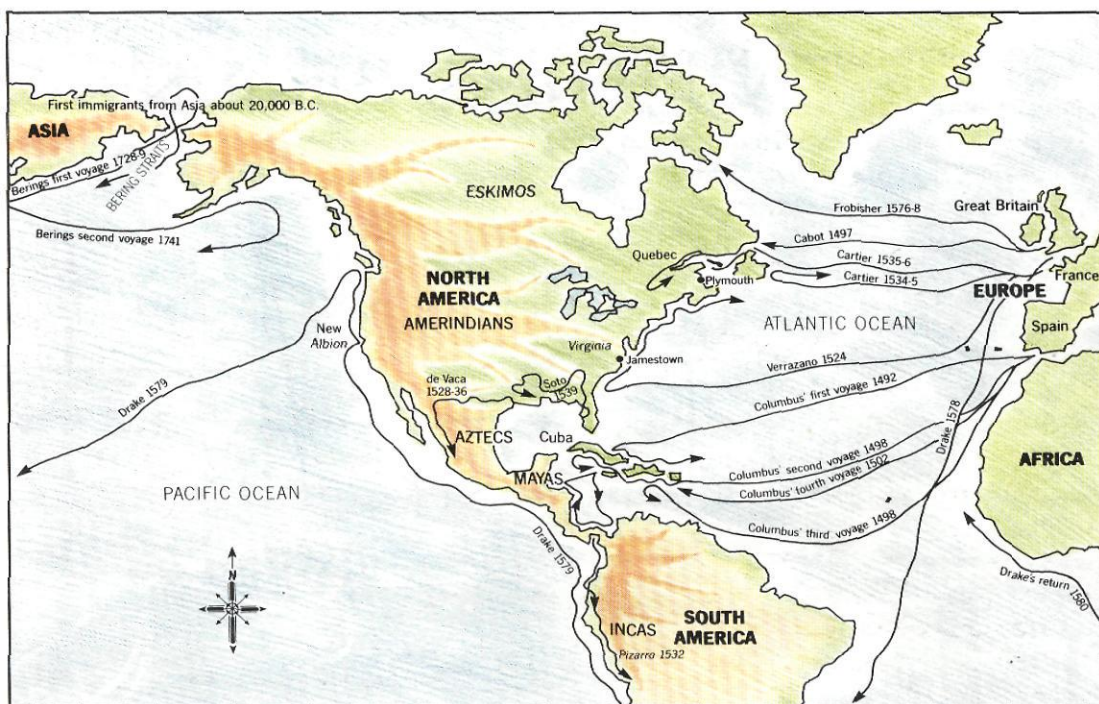
Ponce de León never found the Fountain of Youth. But he did claim Florida for Spain. In 1565 Spanish settlers founded St. Augustine there, the first permanent European settlement on the mainland of North America.

adventurers crossed the Atlantic Ocean to search for more of the precious metal. It was a lust for gold that led Hernán Cortés to conquer the Aztecs in the 1520s. The Aztecs were a wealthy, city-building Amerindian people who lived in what is today Mexico. In the 1530s the same lust for gold caused Francisco Pizarro to attack the equally wealthy empire of the Incas of Peru. A stream of looted treasure began to flow across the Atlantic to Spain from a new empire built up by such conquerors—“conquistadores”—in Central and South America.

In the years that followed, other Spanish conquistadores took the search for gold to North America. Between 1539 and 1543 Hernando de Soto and Francisco Coronado, working separately, explored much of the southern part of what is now the United States. De Soto landed in Florida from Cuba. He led his expedition westward, discovering the Mississippi River and traveling beyond it into Texas and Oklahoma. Coronado traveled north from Mexico, searching for the “Seven Cities of Gold” that Amerindian legends said lay hidden somewhere in the desert. He never found them. But he and his men became the first Europeans to see the Grand Canyon of the Colorado River and they journeyed as far east as Kansas before returning to Mexico.



Discovery of the Mississippi, a romanticized nineteenth-century painting by William H. Powell. De Soto and his followers are shown displaying their cannon and a cross to a group of frightened Amerindians.



The exploration and settlement of America.

The journeys of men such as de Soto and Coronado gave Spain a claim to a large amount of land in North America. They also led to the founding of some of the earliest permanent European settlements there. In 1565 Spanish settlers founded St. Augustine on the coast of present-day Florida. In 1609 other settlers founded Santa Fe in New Mexico.

The growing wealth of Spain made other European nations envious. They became eager to share the riches of the New World. In 1497 King Henry VII of England hired an Italian seaman named John Cabot to explore the new lands and to look again for a passage to Asia. Cabot sailed far to the north of the route Columbus had followed. Eventually he reached the rocky coast of Newfoundland. At first Cabot thought that this was China. A year later he made a second westward crossing of the Atlantic. This time he sailed south along the coast of North America as far as Chesapeake Bay.

Cabot found no gold and no passage to the East. But his voyages were valuable for the English. In later years English governments used them to support their claims to own most of the east coast of North America.

The French also sent explorers to North America. In 1524 the French king, Francis I, sent an Italian sailor named Giovanni Verrazano for the same purpose as

Columbus and Cabot—to find lands rich in gold and a new sea route to Asia. Verrazano sailed the full length of the east coast of America, but found neither. However, he anchored his ship in what is now the harbor of New York. Today a bridge which carries his name, the Verrazano Narrows Bridge, is one of the city's most impressive sights.

Ten years later another French explorer, a fisherman from Normandy named Jacques Cartier, discovered the St. Lawrence River. He returned to France and reported that the forests lining the river's shores were full of fur-bearing animals and that its waters were full of fish. The next year he sailed further up the river, reaching the site of the present-day city of Montreal. Cartier failed to find the way to Asia that he was looking for, but he gave France a claim to what would later become Canada.

Claiming that you owned land in the New World was one thing. Actually making it yours was something quite different. Europeans could only do this by establishing settlements of their own people. By the seventeenth century plenty of people in Europe were ready to settle in America. Some hoped to become rich by doing so. Others hoped to find safety from religious or political persecution. In the hundred years after 1600, Europeans set up many colonies in North America for reasons like these.