

VOLUME 1

*Building
the
American
Republic*

A NARRATIVE
HISTORY TO 1877

Harry L. Watson

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Preface

When Benjamin Franklin left the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in July 1787, a bystander reportedly asked him what sort of government the delegates had created. “A republic,” he replied, “if you can keep it.”

Keeping a republic is no easy task. The most important requirement is the active involvement of an informed people committed to honesty, civility, and selflessness—what the Founders called “republican virtue.” Anchored by its Constitution, the American republic has endured for more than 220 years, longer than any other republic in modern history.

But the road has not been smooth. The American nation came apart in a violent civil war only 73 years after ratification of the Constitution. When it was reborn five years later, both the republic and its Constitution were transformed. Since then, the nation has had its ups and downs, depending largely on the capacity of the American people to tame, as Franklin put it, “their prejudices, their passions, their errors of opinion, their local interests, and their selfish views.”

Our goal in writing *Building the American Republic* has been to craft a clear, engaging, readable, and thoughtful narrative history of the United States. In a world of increasing complexity and danger, America’s civic tradition, both past and present, is a vital public asset and a continuing source of national renewal. Those who want to build a better America, however they define it, must understand the nation’s history, its place in the world, the growth of its institutions, and their own role in preserving and reinvigorating the Republic.

Harry L. Watson
Jane Dailey



MAP 1. North America and its major cultural groups, ca. 1500. Map by Gabriel Moss.

CHAPTER 1

First Americans, to 1550

The island's name was Guanahaní. It shimmered in the sunlight of a calm, fragrant sea, and the sailors gazed on its palms and beaches with unspeakable relief. Their commander undoubtedly shared his men's excitement, but he controlled himself in a dry notation to his diary. "This island is quite big and very flat," the admiral reported. "[It has] many green trees and much water and a very large lake in the middle and without any mountains." Allowing his feelings to escape momentarily, he added, "And all of it so green that it is a pleasure to look at it."

Nor was Guanahaní empty. "These people are very gentle," the admiral marveled. "All of them go around as naked as their mothers bore them. . . . They are very well formed, with handsome bodies and good faces. . . . And they are of the color of the [Canary Islanders], neither black nor white." Certain that he had reached the outer shores of India, the explorer called the people "Indians" and their home the "Indies." His blunder still persists.

It is no wonder that Christopher Columbus rejoiced to see green branches and gentle people on October 12, 1492. Columbus and his crew had been sailing for 33 days, westward from the Canary Islands off the west coast of Africa. They traveled in three small ships, the *Niña*, the *Pinta*, and the *Santa Maria*, and they were searching on behalf of the king and queen of Spain for a western passage to the fabled ports of China. No one had ever done such a thing, and they did not yet know that they had failed at their task, while succeeding at something they had never dreamed of.

The villagers who met the sailors were members of the Taíno, or Arawak, people, who uneasily shared the islands and coastlines of the Caribbean Sea with neighbors they called the Caribs. Their home lay at the eastern edge of an island cluster later called the Bahamas. We can-

not know how they felt when the white sails of the little Spanish fleet loomed out of the sea that fateful morning, nor what they thought of the bearded strangers who cumbered themselves with hard and heavy clothing, and busied themselves with puzzling ceremonies involving banners, crosses, and incomprehensible speeches. The Taínos were certainly curious, however, and gathered around the landing party to receive gifts of red caps and glass beads, and to examine the Spaniards' sharp swords. In return, the Taínos swam out to the boats with parrots and skeins of cotton thread, and then with food and water.

Neither the Taínos nor their visitors could know it, but their exchange of gifts that morning launched the beginning of a long interaction between the peoples of Europe and the Western Hemisphere. Interaction would have profound effects on both sides. The Europeans gained new lands, new knowledge, new foods, and wealth almost without measure. Tragically, the exchange brought pestilence, enslavement, and destruction to the Taínos, but Native Americans managed to survive through a tenacious process of resistance and adaptation. Interaction was unequal, but it also produced a multitude of new societies and cultures, among them the United States of America. For the Taínos as well as the Spanish, therefore, the encounter on that fateful October morning was the beginning of a very new world.

Land, Climate, and First Peoples

The Taínos of Guanahaní were among the thousands of tribes and nations who inhabited the continents of North and South America at the time of Columbus's voyages. The Native Americans were people of enormous diversity and vitality, whose ways of living ranged from migratory hunting and gathering to the complex empires of Mexico and Peru. Each people had its own story to explain its origins, but modern anthropologists have concluded that most of their ancestors crossed a land bridge that connected Siberia and Alaska between 11,000 and 15,000 years ago.

FROM THE LAND BRIDGE TO AGRICULTURE

The earliest Americans traveled widely, eventually spreading across North and South America as they hunted huge mammals that are now mostly extinct: elephant species called mammoths and mastodons, woolly rhinoceroses, giant bison, horses, camels, and musk oxen.

When these animals died out, they turned to other foods, according to their local environments.

Coastal people gathered fish and shellfish. Great Plains hunters stalked a smaller species of bison (often called buffalo), and eastern forest dwellers sought white-tailed deer and smaller game. Women everywhere gathered edible plants and prepared them for meals with special grinding stones. As people adjusted to specific local environments, they traveled less and lost contact with other bands. Individual groups developed their own cultural styles, each with its own variety of stone tools. Linguistic and religious patterns undoubtedly diverged as well, as local populations assumed their own unique identities.

One of the most important adaptations occurred when women searching for a regular supply of seeds began to cultivate productive plants. The earliest Indian farmers grew a wide variety of seed-bearing plants, but those of central Mexico triumphed by breeding maize, or “Indian corn,” from native grasses about 3,000 years before the Common Era (BCE). Mexican Indians also learned to grow beans, squash, and other crops—an important improvement since the combination of corn and beans is much more nutritious than either food alone. Knowledge of corn spread slowly north from Mexico, finally reaching the east coast of North America around the year 200 of the Common Era (CE).

Agriculture brought major changes wherever it spread, and often replaced the older cultures based on hunting and gathering. Farmers had to remain in one place, at least while the crop was growing. Village life became possible, and social structure grew more complex. Artisans began making and firing clay pots to store the harvest. Baskets, strings, nets, and woven textiles made many things easier, from storing food to catching fish to keeping warm. Hunters exchanged their spears for more effective bows and arrows. More elaborate rituals appeared as planting peoples made corn the center of their religious life and made the endless cycles of sun, rain, and harvest the focus of their spiritual lives. In Mexico, farming led to village life by about 2500 BCE and supported a major increase in population.

The new tools did not spread everywhere, but Native American cultures became increasingly diverse. California Indians did not adopt agriculture, for example, but gathered bountiful harvests of wild acorns. In the Pacific Northwest, salmon and other fish were so plentiful that the Haida, Tlingit, and Kwakiutl tribes built elaborate and complex cultures based on the sea. The buffalo herds supported hunting cultures on the Great Plains. After the coming of the Span-

ish, tribes like the Comanche, Lakota (Sioux), Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Kiowa acquired European horses to pursue their prey and their enemies, laying the basis for powerful images of American Indians as mustang-riding warriors who lived in teepees made of buffalo skins.

Living very differently from the Plains Indians, four native North American cultures joined the Taínos in bearing the first brunt of the European encounter. All four depended on farming more than hunting, and all lived in permanent settlements that ranged in size from simple villages to impressive cities. The Pueblo villagers of the area that became the southwestern United States met the Spanish explorer Coronado as he wandered north seeking the mythical Seven Cities of Gold. In the future southeastern states, the mound-building Mississippian people resisted the march of Hernando de Soto, another probing Spaniard. The Woodland peoples of eastern North America received the first English explorers, from Virginians to New Englanders. And south of the future United States, the empires of Central America astonished the Spanish with their wealth and sophistication, and sharpened the invaders' appetites for gold.

PUEBLOAN VILLAGERS, THE FIRST TOWNSPEOPLE

The introduction of agriculture brought permanent villages, with pottery making and extensive systems of irrigation, to the area that would become the southwestern United States. The earliest American townspeople lived in circular pit houses roofed against the elements, but by 700 CE they were building large, multiroom apartment houses out of stone and mud (adobe) brick. The Spaniards would later call these communities pueblos, or villages, and these Puebloan Indians built the largest residential buildings in North America until the construction of modern apartment houses in nineteenth-century cities.

The ancestral Puebloan people built some of their earliest and most elaborate structures in Chaco Canyon, New Mexico, between 900 and 1150 CE. Chaco was a large and well-planned urban community, containing 13 pueblos and numerous small settlement sites, with space for 5,000–10,000 inhabitants. Linked by a network of well-made roads, the people of Chaco drew food from 70 surrounding communities. Farther north, another major Puebloan culture developed around Mesa Verde, in what is now southwestern Colorado. The Mesa Verdeans, perhaps numbering 30,000 people, built elaborate structures under cliffs and rock overhangs and also lived in scattered villages and outposts surrounding the larger settlements.

By 1300 CE, both the Chaco and Mesa Verde communities lay deserted amid evidence of warfare and brutal conflict, but refugees seem to have built new pueblos to the south and west. The Hopi and Zuñi tribes of Arizona and the modern Pueblo people of northern New Mexico are their descendants. One of their settlements, Acoma Pueblo in New Mexico, dates to 1250 CE and is the oldest continuously occupied town in the modern continental United States.

MISSISSIPPIAN CHIEFDOMS

Long before European contact, some North American Indians lived in socially and politically complex societies known as chiefdoms, with hereditary leaders who dominated wide geographical areas. The Mississippian people, as archaeologists call them, built large towns with central plazas and tall, flat-topped earthen pyramids, especially on the rich floodplains adjoining the Mississippi and other midwestern and southern rivers. Now known as Cahokia, their grandest center lay at the forks of the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers. At its height between 1050 and 1200 CE, Cahokia held 10,000–20,000 people in its six square miles, making it the largest town in the future United States before eighteenth-century Philadelphia. Its largest pyramid was 100 feet tall and covered 16 acres, and over 100 other mounds stood nearby. Other large Mississippian complexes appear at Moundville, Alabama; Etowah, Georgia; and Spiro, Oklahoma.

Mississippian mounds contain elaborate burials of high-status individuals, often accompanied by finely carved jewelry, figurines, masks, and other ritual objects made of shell, ceramics, stone, and copper. Long-distance trading networks gathered these raw materials from hundreds of miles away and distributed the finished goods to equally distant sites. With many similar motifs, these artifacts suggest that Mississippians used their trading ties to spread a common set of spiritual beliefs, which archeologists call the Southeastern Ceremonial Cult. With more ritual significance than practical utility, the cult's ceremonial objects were often buried with their owners for use in the next world rather than hoarded and passed through generations as a form of wealth.

Mound construction clearly required a complex social and political order in which a few powerful rulers deployed skilled construction experts and commanded labor and tribute from thousands of distant commoners. The Spanish conqueror, or conquistador, Hernando de Soto encountered many such chiefdoms in his march across the

American southeast between 1539 and 1541. Survivors from his expedition described large towns of thatched houses, surrounded by strong palisades and watchtowers. Borne on a cloth-covered litter, the queen of a major town called Cofitachique showed de Soto her storehouses filled with carved weapons, food, and thousands of freshwater pearls. Almost two centuries later, French colonists in Louisiana described the last surviving Mississippian culture among the Natchez Indians. Their society was divided by hereditary castes, led by a chieftain called the "Great Sun," and included a well-defined nobility, a middling group called "Honored People," and a lower caste called "Stinkards." As in Mexico and Central America, the Natchez pyramids were sometimes the scene of human sacrifice.

Wars and ecological pressures began to undermine the largest Mississippian chiefdoms before de Soto's arrival, and epidemics apparently depleted most of the others by the time English colonizers arrived in the seventeenth century. The survivors lived in smaller alliances or even single towns without large mounds or powerful chiefs, but governed themselves by consensus. They also coalesced in larger confederacies when necessary; Europeans would know them as Creeks or Choctaws.

WOODLAND PEOPLES OF THE EAST

On the Atlantic coast, Eastern Woodland Indians lived by a combination of hunting, fishing, and farming, and dominated the area when the Mississippians declined. Woodland women had developed agriculture independently, by cultivating squash, sunflowers, and other seed-bearing plants as early as 1500 BCE. They adopted corn around 900 CE and added beans and tobacco.

Woodland Indians practiced a slash-and-burn agricultural technique, in which men killed trees by cutting the bark around their trunks and then burned them to clear a field. Women then used stone-bladed hoes and digging sticks to till fertilizing ashes into the soil and to plant a mixed crop of corn and beans in scattered mounds. When the field's fertility declined, the villagers would abandon it and clear another, returning to the original plot when a long fallow period had restored its fertility. Anthropologists have found that slash-and-burn agriculture is very efficient, generating more food calories for a given expenditure of energy than more modern techniques, but it obviously requires ample territory to succeed in the long run.

Woodland Indians lived in semipermanent villages for the growing season. They made houses from bent saplings covered with bark, mats, or hides, and sometimes surrounded their villages with log palisades. During the fall and winter, men frequently left their villages for extended hunting trips. Spring could bring another migration to distant beds of shellfish or to the nearest fishing ground. Coastal peoples developed complex systems of netting, spearing, and trapping fish later copied by Europeans. With appropriate variations according to climate and other conditions, this way of life prevailed extensively up and down the Atlantic coast, from Florida to Maine.

Woodland villages ranged in size from 50 inhabitants to as many as several hundred. Adjacent villages usually spoke the same language, and several large families of languages prevailed across most of eastern North America: Algonquin on the Atlantic coast and around the Great Lakes, Iroquoian in the Hudson River Valley and parts of the south, Muskogean in the southeast. Europeans usually referred to the speakers of a common language as members of a "nation" or "tribe," but the Indians themselves did not feel the same degree of political unity that the Europeans expected of them. Village chiefs normally ruled by custom and consent, and individual clans and families were responsible for avenging any injuries they received. Related tribes might come together in confederacies, like the League of the Iroquois, or Haudenosaunee, in western New York or the Powhatan Confederacy of Chesapeake Bay, but these loose-knit federations needed charismatic leadership and continual diplomacy to hold them together. Each tribe claimed its own territory for hunting and tillage, and specific plots belonged to different families or clans, but tribes owned their lands in common and individuals did not buy or sell land privately. Like the Mississippians and most other Native Americans, Woodland peoples traded raw materials and finished goods, including strings or belts of shell beads called *wampum*, over wide areas, and cherished fine objects for their *manitou*, or spiritual power. These exchanges were not barren commercial transactions but forms of reciprocal gift giving that bound the givers into valued social relationships ranging from loyalty between leaders and their supporters to alliances between towns.

Woodland men were responsible for hunting and war, while women took charge of farming and childcare. Most Woodland Indians practiced matrilineal kinship, which meant that children belonged to the families and clans of their mothers. In contrast to the women of six-

teenth- and seventeenth-century European societies, Indian women took an active role in political decision making and often made critical decisions regarding war or peace as well as the fate of military captives.

Woodland tribes fought frequent wars against one another, but usually not to expand their territories. Instead, warriors gained personal honor by demonstrating bravery and avenging old injuries. They might adopt their captives to replace lost relatives, or torture them to death to satisfy the bereaved. Native warfare changed dramatically after the Europeans arrived, as some Woodland tribes fought for favorable positions in the fur trade or sold their prisoners to the colonists as slaves.

THE EMPIRES OF CENTRAL AND SOUTH AMERICA

The most spectacular civilizations in precolonial North America emerged in Mexico and Central America, also called Mesoamerica. When the Spanish arrived in the sixteenth century, many Mesoamericans lived in cities that dwarfed the capitals of Europe, with stone palaces and pyramids that provoked the newcomers' envy and amazement. Mayas and Aztecs made gold and jeweled objects of exquisite beauty, cloaked their leaders in shimmering feathered robes and luxurious textiles, and recorded their deeds in brilliantly colored books. It was an impressive record of power and material achievement, but the Spanish destroyed most of it in their zeal to stamp out the Indians' religion and amass their treasure. What we now know about these civilizations comes from reports by the conquerors and a few survivors, from archeology, and from the painstaking decoding of surviving inscriptions.

Mesoamericans began living in cities as early as 1200 BCE, but the cultures who met the Spanish had appeared more recently. In Yucatán and adjoining areas of Central America, the Mayan people built numerous city-states between 300 and 900 CE, with a total population of some five million. Each city featured one or more stone temples and a hereditary nobility supported by tribute from peasants. The Mayan city-states made frequent wars on their neighbors to obtain more tribute and to capture victims for sacrifice atop their dizzying pyramids. They also devised the only written language in the Americas before European contact and used a precise calendar to record key dates from the reigns of their kings. Unlike the ancient Romans, Mayan mathematicians used a zero in their calculations and accurately measured the movement of heavenly bodies. Though remnants of elite Mayan cul-

ture persisted until the era of the Spanish conquest, the Mayas abandoned most of their cities for unknown reasons by about 950 CE.

The Aztecs (or Mexica) were the most powerful people the Spanish conquerors met in the sixteenth century. About 1325 CE, ancestors of the Aztecs migrated to the central valley of Mexico and founded the city of Tenochtitlán on an island in a lake there. By 1434, Tenochtitlán had become the dominant power in a coalition of three city-states that eventually collected tribute from 10 million subjects who lived across 125,000 square miles. The city of Tenochtitlán held 200,000 people, more than any city in Spain and five times the population of sixteenth-century London. Its largest pyramid was 200 feet high and crowned by temples to the gods of rain and war. Highly skilled artisans created a wide array of luxury goods and ordinary consumer items that wealthy merchants traded all over Mesoamerica, and a powerful army made almost perpetual war on surrounding peoples. Successful warfare provided the Aztecs with an endless stream of sacrificial victims, whose blood, they believed, was essential nourishment for the sun god. Endless raiding made many enemies, however, and the Aztecs' victims would later become indispensable Spanish allies in the conquest of 1521.

Farther to the south, in the Andean region of South America, large chiefdoms and city-states had emerged even earlier than in Mexico, and a succession of powerful empires had ruled for many centuries. The Andean Indians cultivated maize and potatoes, domesticated herds of llamas and related animals, wove complex wool and cotton fabrics, and became expert artisans in gold, silver, copper, and bronze. Early in the fifteenth century, the Incas created a powerful chiefdom in southern Peru, with its capital city at Cuzco. A century later, their empire extended more than 2,500 miles along the crest of the Andes Mountains, from northern Ecuador to central Chile, and contained 6–12 million people. A sophisticated bureaucracy and almost 19,000 miles of stone highways held the empire together. Like their Aztec contemporaries, however, the Incas did not remain in power for long. A war between rival claimants to the throne divided and weakened their government just as the Spanish approached in 1525, with fateful consequences for their empire.

The Expanding Nations of Europe

As the Incas and Aztecs rose and flourished, forces were stirring across the Atlantic that would utterly transform the society of the Americas.

Fifteenth-century Europe slowly emerged from poverty and isolation to launch a wave of expansion into Africa, Asia, and finally America. Europe's invasion of the Western Hemisphere would devastate Native American cultures and create a set of colonial societies ruled and largely populated by newcomers from across the ocean. Thousands of the immigrants were Europeans, but thousands more were African slaves. Interacting together, Indians, Europeans, and Africans created new American societies that borrowed heavily from their old customs but sharply differed from what had come before.

POPULATION GROWTH AND PROSPERITY

The first Europeans to reach America were almost certainly Scandinavian Vikings from medieval Iceland and Greenland. According to Viking epic poetry, Leif Erikson sailed west from Greenland about the year 990 CE and established a small settlement in a distant land he called Vinland. His relatives sustained the outpost for about two decades. Archeologists in the 1960s confirmed this story by recovering Viking artifacts from a small excavation at L'Anse aux Meadows on the northeastern coast of Canada. The Vikings' toehold remained unknown to the rest of Europe and had no major impact on the Native Americans.

The contact between Europe and America that would transform both continents grew out of deep social and economic changes. Earlier, a social and economic system known as feudalism had dominated most of medieval Europe. In feudal society, a king parceled out lands to his leading noblemen, or vassals, and they subdivided it among vassals of their own in a descending series of ranks that followed the allotment of land. At the bottom, impoverished serfs or peasants lacked freedom of movement, toiled by compulsion, and split their crops and their labor with their lords. In theory, every vassal owed loyalty, obedience, and service to his lord and protection to his own dependents in a long chain of mutual obligations. In practice, leading noblemen maintained private armies of vassals and waged nearly endless warfare with other nobles or even the king. By comparison to later periods, towns were small, trade was limited, and economic change came very slowly.

In the mid-fourteenth century, Europe suffered a devastating epidemic of bubonic plague, or the Black Death, which killed as many as one-third to one-half of its people, and contributed to the breakup of feudal society. Noblemen's armies were decimated, allowing fifteenth-

century kings to assert their own authority and restrain the private wars that had devastated the medieval countryside. Surviving peasants escaped serfdom and gained land through a combination of rental and individual or common ownership. Artisans turned out plentiful goods like woolen cloth and metalwork in growing numbers of market towns, selling to merchants who shipped crops and handicrafts to distant consumers by pack trains and sailing vessels. Responding to prosperity, Europe's population rebounded between 1400 and 1500. Most of its inhabitants still struggled against poverty, famine, and early death, but greater stability and prosperity encouraged the daring to look for further improvements.

Europe's expanding economy fed a parallel cultural change, a rebirth of art and learning following the end of feudalism that historians call the Renaissance. Newly rich rulers, merchants, and churchmen celebrated their ascent with displays of beautiful and costly goods that ranged from silks and spices to stunning works of painting, sculpture, and architecture. Their patronage encouraged a dramatic outpouring of artistic achievement that started in Italian city-states like Florence and Venice but spread across the Alps into northern courts and cities. Successful princes supported intellectuals who could recover the lost learning of the ancient Greeks and Romans, often by studying with Arab or Turkish scholars and copying manuscripts from their libraries. Broader knowledge led scholars from the study of theology to the nature and needs of humanity, a movement historians have called humanism. More practical experts struggled to learn the secrets of mathematics, navigation, metallurgy, and cannon making. Perhaps their most significant innovations were movable type and the printing press, which made books cheaper and spread the new learning widely. Europe's new hunger for luxurious goods, new information, and, above all, the money to buy these things would soon power its seemingly insatiable drive for overseas expansion.

RELIGIOUS RIVALRY AND TRADE

Christianity was the professed religion of almost all Europeans of the fifteenth century, and most in western Europe were Roman Catholics who acknowledged the spiritual leadership and worldly power of the pope in Rome. The Catholic Church owned extensive lands throughout the continent and collected substantial taxes from the population. An elaborate hierarchy of bishops, archbishops, and cardinals gov-

erned the church, while thousands of men and women devoted their lives to its service as priests, monks, and nuns. Princes might struggle with the papacy's worldly power, and moralists might condemn its corruption, but the truth of the Gospels and the spiritual authority of the church were deeply venerated, even where magic and the remnants of pre-Christian religions continued to coexist with orthodoxy in popular culture.

On its southern and eastern borders, Christendom faced Islam, its powerful rival for spiritual and material supremacy. Expanding from the Arabian Peninsula in the eighth and ninth centuries CE, Muslims had conquered all the lands from Mesopotamia to North Africa. Known as Moors, Muslim Arabs from North Africa then crossed the Mediterranean and captured the Iberian Peninsula, now the location of Spain and Portugal. Embracing and protecting the secular scholarship of the ancient world, Islamic civilization far outshone Europe in wealth, technology, science, mathematics, and commerce with India and East Asia. Crucial navigational instruments like the magnetic compass, for example, and the astrolabe (used for measuring latitude) probably reached medieval Europe from the Muslim world.

Arab advances had frightened Christians as early as the eleventh century, when Pope Urban II first called for a massive campaign, or crusade, to free the holy places of Jerusalem from Muslim "infidels." The crusaders founded a temporary Christian kingdom in Palestine, and there the roughhewn knights of medieval Europe first met the luxuries of the distant Orient. Silk for the warrior's body, perfume for his nostrils, spices for his meat, and sugar for his sweet tooth were all part of the successful crusader's experience, and he brought home an enduring taste for such finery. Even when Muslims retook the Kingdom of Jerusalem, a hunger for the exports of Asia still persisted among the European upper classes.

Happy to oblige, Muslim merchants disregarded religious rivalries to trade extensively with Venice, Genoa, Pisa, and other city-states of northern Italy. The most popular commodities were silk from China and pepper, cloves, cinnamon, ginger, and nutmeg from the coasts of India and the islands of what is now Indonesia. Aromatic spices were immensely prized in Europe, where salted and tasteless meat and fish were staples of even the most opulent tables. Passing through the hands of countless middlemen as they passed from Sumatra to India to Arabia to Syria and finally to Italy, these lightweight and compact cargoes were the most profitable commodities of international trade. Merchants were as eager to join this commerce as monarchs were to

tax it, and the spice trade became one of the most important aspects of the fifteenth-century economy. At the same time, the need for something to offer in exchange for spices gave European traders a special incentive to find new sources of gold and silver to spend in eastern markets.

PORTUGAL'S FIRST STEPS

Hunger for Asian riches and rivalry with Islam drove the first expansion of Europe across the oceans. One motive fed on the other, since campaigns for the Christian faith would require funds, while displacing Muslim states and merchants might be the fastest way to get rich. These dual motives kindled expansionist dreams in the poor and tiny kingdom of Portugal, which bordered the Atlantic Ocean, along the western edge of Spain. Once Portugal succeeded in its drive for wealth and Christian victories, international rivalry tempted the other Atlantic powers to imitate it.

Medieval Christian kings had fought a long and bitter *reconquista* to retake the Iberian Peninsula from its Muslim rulers. Their struggle was almost complete in the fifteenth century, with only a single Moorish enclave, the kingdom of Granada, still remaining in southern Spain. Determined to continue the war against Islam, Portugal seized the city of Ceuta in northern Morocco in 1415 and followed this with a series of penetrating voyages along the west coast of Africa.

A younger brother of the king of Portugal, known in English as Prince Henry the Navigator, became the principal sponsor of Portuguese voyages to Africa. After distinguishing himself for valor at the capture of Ceuta, Henry became intrigued with Africa, especially in the possibility of harassing the Muslims from its western side. He considered forging an anti-Muslim alliance with Prester John, the mythical king of a Christian realm beyond the Sahara. More practically, Henry wanted to follow the African coastline southward to find the source of the gold Arab camel caravans had long carried north across the desert.

Though he did not set sail personally, Henry used his considerable wealth to send a series of small fleets down the west coast of Africa. His mariners faced considerable difficulties, because prevailing winds in the eastern Atlantic made it easy to sail away from Portugal but very hard to get back. Henry's role in solving such nautical problems by founding a special school of ship design, mapmaking, and navigation has been exaggerated. Instead, the Portuguese relied on a series of

small practical refinements of existing knowledge, especially in adapting a traditional vessel, the caravel, to the demands of Atlantic sailing. Using these means, Henry's men successfully located and colonized the uninhabited island clusters of the Madeiras and the Azores. By 1434, they had returned safely from farther south than traditional Arab and Christian authorities ever thought possible. A decade later, the voyagers finally passed the southern border of the Sahara and located traders who would barter with them for gold. More ominously for the future, they also returned with cargoes of human slaves.

The World of West Africa

To the south of the Sahara, Africa contained a wide range of climates and natural environments. The desert gave way to a band of semiarid grasslands near the mouth of the Senegal River, at about the 15th parallel. Tropical forests began farther to the south, where the African coast turns eastward. The 2,600-mile Niger River bends across the entire region, beginning in the highlands of modern Guinea, then flowing northeastward toward the heart of the Sahara before turning southeastward and entering the Atlantic Ocean through a fan-shaped delta in modern Nigeria. The Senegal and Gambia Rivers arise nearby but flow roughly westward to the sea, creating three major water highways that tie interior districts to each other and to the coast.

West Africa contained a diverse assembly of peoples, cultures, languages, and religions with their own long and complex histories. Kinship knit together most of its societies, and some sustained no governments larger than their own villages, but large and prosperous empires also flourished in the area, complete with complex economies, populous cities, powerful armies, and well-developed bureaucracies. Elaborate trade routes crossed the Sahara, tying southern parts of the continent with the Arab north. Islam spread southward along these connections, but traditional African religions were also widespread. Indigenous African languages remained unwritten, but especially under Islam, religious and political elites used written Arabic much as contemporary Europeans used Latin as their international scholarly language.

THE PEOPLE OF WEST AFRICA

Most West African cultures shared features that underlay their diversity. Cattle herders dominated the northern grasslands, while the for-

est people practiced agriculture. The farmers tilled their fields with hoes instead of plows, since draft animals were likely to die from diseases carried by the tsetse fly. Residents of both regions were very familiar with metalworking and used iron tools. In some areas such as the kingdom of Benin in modern Nigeria, artists created magnificent portraits and bas-relief sculptures in iron and bronze.

Extensive trading networks had shaped the creation of African states. Treacherous winds and currents hampered the development of ocean navigation, so commerce traveled inland toward overland routes that began along the Niger and stretched across the Sahara. Whoever controlled the upper Niger and the nearby headwaters of the Senegal and Gambia Rivers could dominate the region, so from as early as the ninth to the seventeenth centuries CE ambitious rulers made this area the seat of three extensive empires: Ghana, Songhai, and Mali. Their princes embraced Islam and made lavish pilgrimages to Mecca, and also fostered a famous center of trade and Muslim learning in the ancient trading city of Timbuktu. Farther south and west, smaller kingdoms lined the coasts of the Atlantic and the Gulf of Guinea, some the size of England or France and others no larger than city-states. Farther south, in West Central Africa, the coastal kingdoms of Loango and Kongo dominated a cluster of smaller states around the mouth of the Zaire (Congo) River from modern Gabon to Angola.

The gold sought by the Portuguese came from inland deposits in the forested coastal region that runs roughly parallel to the equator between modern Sierra Leone and the Bight of Benin. Local rulers sent it north to trading centers such as Timbuktu where they exchanged it for salt with Arab and Berber merchants, whose camels then carried it to Mediterranean ports. Coined by Continental monarchs, West African gold supplied the currency for Europe's growing trade and inspired Prince Henry to find its source.

SUGAR AND SLAVES

Europeans first came to Africa for gold, but they kept coming back for slaves. The colonization of America gave rise to an international traffic in human beings that saw the capture, deportation, and exploitation of millions of African people. The cost in human suffering was immense, and the impact on the history of Africa and the Americas was equally profound.

Slavery had been the fundamental economic institution of the

ancient world, but it had given way to serfdom in northern Europe without disappearing from the Mediterranean basin. Unlike American slavery, however, ancient and medieval slavery had no connection with modern concepts of race. Greek and Roman slaves had been military captives of every color. Medieval Europeans had hesitated to enslave their fellow Christians, but Muslims and other non-Christians were fair game. In the tenth century, German emperor Otto the Great sold his pagan Slavic captives into slavery, giving us the word “slave.” Arab Muslims also seized white Slavic people from the Black Sea region to sell throughout the Mediterranean basin.

The revival of human slavery, and the exclusive targeting of Africans as its victims, grew out of the culture of sugarcane, a plant that Crusaders had learned about from the Arabs. The tantalizing crystals of the sugarcane plant produced a far sweeter taste sensation than honey, the strongest sweetener known to medieval Europeans, and sugar had joined the other spices as an expensive and exotic item of eastern trade. Crusaders grew sugar on the islands of the eastern Mediterranean, and knowledge of the crop spread westward in the Middle Ages, gradually coming to the western Mediterranean and the southern tip of the Iberian Peninsula. Fifteenth-century Spaniards found that sugar grew well on the Canary Islands off the coast of Morocco. The same was true on the islands the Portuguese found and claimed on their way to West Africa, beginning with the Madeiras, the Azores, and the Cape Verdes, and later São Tomé, Fernando Po, and Príncipe farther south.

Sugar was not easy to make. Cane required enormous amounts of very hard labor to grow and especially to harvest, when workers had to cut and process the crop very quickly, using expensive machinery to grind the stalks and boil the juice. Free workers often refused this drudgery, so many sugar growers used forced labor. The need for costly equipment and a bound workforce kept small farmers out of the sugar business, moreover, and encouraged the rise of plantations, or large estates that often used unfree workers to concentrate on a single commercial crop. Mediterranean sugar planters used slaves. Off the coasts of West Africa, the Spanish and Portuguese did likewise.

THE EARLY SLAVE TRADE

While many of the slaves who toiled in Mediterranean cane fields were white, some also came from West Africa. Like many ancient and medieval societies, the African kingdoms commonly enslaved their military

captives. It did not occur to the enslavers that they were victimizing their “own people,” just because both parties were black, any more than Russians or Italians used skin color as an excuse to refrain from enslaving alien whites. African captives could become laborers or domestic servants. They might be adopted by their masters’ families, and their children might go free, but some were sold to the caravans heading north. Those who somehow survived the march across the desert were important articles of trade in the markets of North Africa. Purchased there by Europeans, African slaves became commonplace in fifteenth-century Italy, Spain, and Portugal, usually as domestic servants. When the Turks took Constantinople in 1453, the trade in Black Sea slaves declined, with the fateful result that western slavery became closely associated with Africans alone.

The mariners of Prince Henry the Navigator readily joined the slave trade when they rounded the capes of West Africa, initially seizing their own captives and later purchasing them from local kings. European involvement increased dramatically when the Portuguese began to grow sugarcane on their offshore African islands and purchased their workforce from local traders. Sugar was so profitable that planters could pay top prices for slaves and make exorbitant profits for chieftains whose only expense was the cost of capturing and transporting the victims. Some rulers declined the bargain, so European slavers avoided their domains. Others found the opportunity irresistible, but strictly controlled the trade by limiting sales to enemy captives, collecting stiff taxes from European captains, insisting on high-quality textiles, alcohol, and guns in exchange, and imposing their own conditions on prospective buyers. West African warfare inevitably escalated as rival rulers raided each other’s villages to supply more captives to the traders on the coast.

The slave trade flourished as sugar culture spread, and soon it outpaced the export of gold from West Africa. As early as 1482, the Portuguese built a massive fort at Elmina (“the mine”) in modern Ghana, complemented by a massive sugar colony on the offshore island of São Tomé. Elmina’s first purpose was protecting the gold trade, but its dungeons soon became holding pens for slaves as well. Other forts and markets soon sprouted along the West African coast, and Europeans began calling its different stretches by their major exports: the Grain Coast, the Ivory Coast, the Gold Coast, the Slave Coast.

Once established on São Tomé and other islands, the Spanish and Portuguese might have expanded their sugar plantations eastward to

the African mainland, but its powerful rulers strictly confined them to coastal trading posts. Plantations in the Americas were an obvious alternative. When Spain and Portugal established their American colonies in the sixteenth century, the transplantation of slavery and the sugar plantation became an easy, almost automatic extension of their activities on the eastern side of the Atlantic. In America, European colonizers readily imposed terms of forced labor on captives, convicts, and paupers from their own societies, but reserved lifetime slavery for Africans and some Indians. Their African victims were enslaved already and apparently seemed so alien that harsh treatment came easily. Masters also found that Africans were somewhat resistant to Eurasian diseases like smallpox, and also to malaria and the other tropical fevers that proved so fatal to Europeans. Every colonizing nation in the Western Hemisphere would eventually follow the Spanish and Portuguese example, and African slavery became a deeply entrenched institution of colonial America. In the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, enslaved Africans were by far the largest group of people who crossed the Atlantic to America, possibly numbering as many as 10 million people over four centuries.

Europe Comes to America

Portugal was not alone in seeking new wealth from overseas. Searching for an alternate route to the Indies, the king and queen of Spain financed the voyages that led Columbus to America, where the Spanish built an empire that soon eclipsed the achievements of its Portuguese rival. Spain's successes brought more imitators, as England, France, the Netherlands, and other rivals scrambled to match its conquests.

Like Columbus himself, Spain's American empire mixed high adventure and breathtaking ambitions with cruelty and exploitation. The invaders overwhelmed most of the Indian societies they confronted, from the Taínos of the Caribbean to the civilizations of Mexico and Peru. Obsessed with finding gold and silver, the Spanish forced the Indians to mine these metals wherever they could. If local Indians died out, and especially where plantations seemed more profitable than mines, slaves from Africa took their places. The Spanish investigated North America but mostly abandoned it when their search for precious metals yielded nothing. These lands remained available to Spain's competitors.

THE VOYAGES OF COLUMBUS

The Portuguese did not halt their voyages when Prince Henry died in 1460. In 1488, a captain named Bartolomeu Dias finally reached the southernmost tip of Africa, which he called the Cape of Good Hope, and safely returned to Portugal. Nine years later, in 1497, Vasco da Gama led a fleet around this cape and did reach India, finally returning home with a fabulously profitable cargo of pepper. Others quickly followed, and soon the tiny kingdom of Portugal had established a line of forts and trading posts around the west and east coasts of Africa, to India, to the Spice Islands, and on to China and Japan. It was a stunning imperial achievement, and wealth from the royal monopoly on the spice trade made the kings of Portugal the envy of all their neighbors.

Portugal's success invited competition, but opportunities for direct trade with the East remained limited. The Italians controlled direct contact with the Middle East, and Portugal would not tolerate rivals in Africa, so challengers needed to find an alternative. Since the time of the Greeks, all educated Europeans had known that the earth was round, and that it was theoretically possible to make direct contact with Asia by sailing west across the Atlantic Ocean. Most experts believed, however, that the size of the earth made such a voyage impractical and that any sailor who foolishly attempted to cover the immense distance between Europe and China would surely perish in the attempt.

Christopher Columbus was an Italian sailor who disagreed. The son of a weaver and wool merchant of Genoa, Columbus had become an experienced mariner in the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, ranging as far south as Elmina on the Gold Coast and north to England and possibly Iceland. He was fascinated by sailors' tales of land in the western Atlantic, and convinced that Japan lay no more than 2,400 nautical miles west of Spain's colony in the Canary Islands. In fact, Japan is 10,600 nautical miles from the Canaries, so the experts were much closer to the truth than Columbus. The determined sailor could not be dissuaded, however, and he begged a number of European monarchs for ships and men to test his theories.

Rejected by Portugal, Columbus approached King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain. Isabella was an especially pious Catholic who was determined to increase the power and extent of the church, and in 1492 Spanish armies had just conquered Granada, the last Muslim

foothold in Spain. In the same year, she and Ferdinand demanded the conversion or expulsion of all Jews from their dominions, and later extended the order to Muslims. When Columbus came to them with a plan to enrich the monarchy and spread Christianity by a westward voyage to China, the sovereigns were reluctant at first, but Isabella became more and more interested. In 1492, she granted Columbus three ships and permission to sail west in search of unknown islands or continents, naming him “Admiral of the Ocean Sea” and governor and viceroy of any lands he might claim for Castile. Not expecting him to claim China itself, she also gave him a letter of introduction to its emperor. In return, Isabella asked for 90 percent of the voyage’s profits.

Admiral Columbus set out in two caravels, the *Ninã* and the *Pinta*, and a larger flagship, the *Santa Maria*. His little fleet stopped for fresh food and water in the Canary Islands, and then caught the trade winds for a relatively quick and uneventful 33-day voyage across the Atlantic. Toward the end of the journey, the sailors began to grumble, not because they were afraid of falling off the edge of the earth, but because they did not know how they would ever get home in the teeth of such a steady eastern breeze. To cheer them on, Columbus pointed to the driftwood and shorebirds around them and predicted that land could not be far distant. Guanahaní came into sight soon afterward, and Columbus quickly claimed the island for the crown of Castile. Ignoring its Taíno name, he rechristened it San Salvador, or “Holy Savior,” in honor of Jesus Christ.

Almost immediately, Columbus and his men began to mingle arrogance and violence with piety and garbled good intentions in a pattern that scarred European relations with Native Americans for centuries. The Taínos puzzled the voyagers, for they bore no resemblance to travelers’ descriptions of the Chinese, but Columbus thought they could make good Christians and perhaps good slaves as well. He was even more interested in the Taínos’ golden ornaments and longed to find their source. He needed interpreters, moreover, so he did not hesitate to kidnap six islanders to teach them Spanish. On his next voyage, Columbus sought to cover his expenses by seizing Indians for sale in Seville.

The admiral completed his first voyage with a series of exploratory cruises that took him to Cuba, Hispaniola (now divided between Haiti and the Dominican Republic), and to numerous other islets in the eastern Caribbean. Everywhere he looked for signs of India, China, or Japan, or at least for some valuable commodity to make his voy-

age worthwhile. Asia proved maddeningly elusive, but gold turned up on Hispaniola, and Columbus began to realize that colonizing these islands might yield just as much wealth as direct trade with China. Leaving a contingent of men behind him, he turned back to Spain and arrived in the spring of 1493 after a long and very difficult passage.

Ferdinand and Isabella were so pleased by Columbus's voyage that they sent him back with 17 ships and 1,200 men, clearly intending to add his "discoveries" to their realm. Arriving at Hispaniola, the admiral discovered that the Tainos had killed the men he left behind and destroyed their fort, acts which he punished by attacking and enslaving the supposed perpetrators. He followed his second voyage with two more, eventually sailed as far as the coasts of Central and South America, and founded Spain's Caribbean empire. Until his death, the admiral remained convinced that he had found a water route to the Orient. A clumsy administrator, he quarreled with his subordinates and brooded on the religious implications of his travels, hoping to find the original Garden of Eden and to finance the recapture of Jerusalem. On one occasion, when Columbus interfered too much in the work of other officials, he had to be arrested and returned to Spain in chains and disgrace. Though he managed to regain the confidence of the king and queen, Columbus proved to be a courageous but eccentric and intransigent visionary rather than a level-headed colonial governor. Consumed with boundless ambition, passionate curiosity, and a thirst for personal advancement, he was also capable of heedless brutality to the people he encountered. The conquerors who followed him—English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese—would all share many of the same characteristics.

Spanish authorities attempted to displace Columbus himself, but they clearly saw the value of his discoveries and quickly took possession of the largest Caribbean islands. Technically, the conquistadors were not supposed to enslave the Indians they controlled, but they did confine them to private estates called *encomiendas* and forced them to work as a form of tribute. Priests and friars arrived to convert the natives, and those who resisted faced terrible tortures. When tales of cruelty reached the queen, Isabella ordered that her newest subjects must not be mistreated, but her directives proved impossible to enforce. As the Caribbean Indians succumbed to mistreatment and alien diseases, the Spanish replaced them with Africans.

SPAIN'S RIVALS AND IMITATORS

The news of Columbus's voyages touched off a burst of European exploration. The volume of international commerce had grown all over Europe, feeding the appetites of monarchs for more trade, more profits, more islands, and more gold. Columbus had proved there were riches in the west; if he had failed to find China, the next voyager might succeed. Suddenly, almost every kingdom on Europe's Atlantic coast showed interest in exploration.

English, French, and Basque mariners had been catching codfish in the northwest Atlantic for several decades before Columbus's voyages. They may even have made a landfall in Newfoundland as early as 1480, but if so, they did not share their secret with the world. In 1497, the English king supported a voyage to the same region by the Italian Giovanni Caboti, known to the English as John Cabot, once more looking for a passage to Asia. When Caboti returned empty-handed, the English went back to fishing and made no further efforts in America for almost a century.

The Portuguese were still deeply interested in the African route to India, though da Gama would not return with his cargo of pepper until 1499. When Columbus proclaimed that he had found a western route to the Indies, the Portuguese hastened to protect their own outposts from Spanish incursions. With papal approval, the two kingdoms negotiated the Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494, agreeing that all new lands more than 1,100 miles west of the Canary Islands would belong to Spain, while lands to the east would go to Portugal. Unknown to the negotiators, their line crossed eastern Brazil, so Portugal gained its own American colony when a storm-tossed vessel reached its shores. Soon afterward, a Florentine geographer named Amérigo Vespucci visited the area, and later declared in print that the lands that Columbus had called the Indies were actually a continent previously unknown to Europe. Mapmaker Martin Waldseemüller promptly suggested that the continent bear Amérigo's name and "America" it has been ever since.

Geographers did not begin to realize just how big this continent really was, however, until Ferdinand Magellan led a Spanish fleet around the tip of South America in 1519. Magellan himself died in the Philippine Islands, but survivors of his expedition brought home a single ship around the coast of Africa, becoming the first men to circumnavigate the globe. The length of their trip across the Pacific

proved that older ideas about the size of the earth had been fairly accurate, and that Asia was indeed much farther from Europe than Columbus had ever imagined.

In 1524, shortly after the return of Magellan's last ship, Giovanni da Verrazzano, an Italian sailing for France, became the first European to explore the coast of North America, tracing the shoreline from North Carolina to Cape Cod, fruitlessly searching for a northwest passage that would break through the continent to the ocean beyond. In 1534 and 1535, another French explorer, Jacques Cartier, continued the search in Canadian waters and spent a winter at the head of navigation on the St. Lawrence River, but to no avail. Slowly, Atlantic captains absorbed the reality that an immense tract of territory barred their way to Asia, but that the riches of this new world might actually surpass those of the old.

THE CONQUEST OF MEXICO AND PERU

As the Spanish established themselves in the Caribbean, they expanded their American empire with astonishing rapidity. After securing the main islands, they sent exploring parties to the surrounding mainland, perhaps as far as Chesapeake Bay, often in search of Indian slaves. Juan Ponce de León visited the mainland north of Cuba in 1513, naming it La Florida on account of its flowers. In the same year, Vasco Núñez de Balboa crossed the Isthmus of Panama and became the first European to view the Pacific Ocean.

The most momentous probe took Hernán Cortés to the coast of Mexico in 1519. Resentful local Indians complained to him of the oppressive empire of the Aztecs, or Mexicas, and Cortés marched inland to find it. Accompanied by 1500 Spanish men-at-arms, prancing horses, snarling war dogs, a handful of cannon, and an army of several thousand allies from the Tlaxcalan Indians, Cortés entered the city of Tenochtitlán as a guest, but quickly subdued its ruler, the emperor Montezuma II, and attempted to use him as a Spanish puppet. After several months of uneasy standoff, angry Aztecs attacked the Spanish and murdered Montezuma as a traitor. Fighting his way out of Tenochtitlán in a desperate midnight battle, Cortés regrouped with his Indian allies and besieged, captured, and destroyed the city in 1521. The remainder of the Aztec Empire fell quickly thereafter.

The spectacular conquest of Mexico stemmed partly from Spanish advantages in armor, firearms, and horses, partly from Cortés's own

brilliance as a leader, partly from the assistance of Indian allies, and partly from an epidemic of smallpox that decimated Aztecs and Tlaxcalans alike. The victorious conquistadors placed themselves atop the Aztecs' existing system of tribute and forced labor and made themselves the rulers of an Indian empire. They called it the Viceroyalty of New Spain, and they built its capital, Mexico City, on the ruins of Tenochtitlán.

Eleven years later, in 1532, a similar conquest by Francisco Pizarro gave the Spanish control of the South American realm of the Inca. The Aztecs and Incas had possessed great quantities of gold and silver, and the Spanish promptly melted all the sacred and precious objects they could find. By the 1540s, they had finally located the rich deposits they had longed for, and put the Indians to work in the silver mines of Zacatecas and Potosí. During the second half of the sixteenth century, an immense American treasure flowed steadily into the coffers of Spain, and its sovereigns used its buying power to make Spain the mightiest kingdom in Europe.

SPAIN IN NORTH AMERICA

Discoveries of gold and silver did not halt the Spanish search for wealth. Intoxicated by the vision of personal enrichment and the glory of expanding the power of their king and church, conquistadors probed every accessible corner of the Americas in hopes of replicating the deeds of Cortés and Pizarro. Most of their North American efforts proved unsuccessful. In 1527, Pánfilo de Narváez attempted the conquest of Florida with 600 men, but most of them died in shipwrecks and Indian attacks. Only four survivors, who included the officer Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca and an African slave named Estaban, stumbled back to Mexico in 1536, after years of wandering and Indian captivity. They bore fantastic tales of the Seven Cities of Cíbola, made entirely of gold and located somewhere to the north. In 1540, guided by Estaban, Francisco Vásquez de Coronado pursued the rumor with an expedition to the southwestern region of the future United States. Instead of golden cities, Coronado found the Zuñi pueblos.

Coronado easily captured these villages and his men raped and pilaged their inhabitants, but they could not find any gold. Refusing to give up, Coronado kept searching. On a side trip, one of his lieutenants gazed into the vast depths of the Grand Canyon. Coronado himself reached Kansas and witnessed the Great Plains, the buffalo herds, and

the teepee-dwelling Indians who hunted them, but finally returned to Mexico empty-handed. It would be more than half a century before Juan de Oñate successfully followed up Coronado's expedition by founding New Mexico in 1598, in the northern valley of the Rio Grande, but his settlement remained small and isolated, focused on farming and converting the Pueblo Indians, not gold mining.

Most Spanish expeditions to southeastern North America were even less rewarding. After surveying the shores of modern Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina in 1525, Lucas Vázquez de Allyón established a small settlement on what became the Carolina coast, but died with most of his companions a year later. In 1539, Hernando de Soto led over 600 men into Florida, determined to find the rumored riches of the Indian city of Cofitachique. When Cofitachique disappointed him, de Soto kept marching from one Mississippian chiefdom to the next, fighting several pitched battles and kidnapping Indians at the slightest provocation, but never finding the gold he longed for. Death overtook him on the banks of the Mississippi River, and his survivors committed his body to its waters before retreating hastily to the Caribbean.

In succeeding decades, other Spaniards made intermittent efforts to occupy the southern Atlantic coast. In 1565, Pedro Menéndez de Avilés wiped out a French settlement on the northern coast of modern Florida and replaced it with a post he called San Agustín. Known in English as St. Augustine, this settlement has become the oldest continuously occupied European town in what is now the United States. In 1566, Juan Pardo reached farther with a fort at Santa Elena, on what is now Parris Island, South Carolina, followed by six inland garrisons along a route to the Appalachian Mountains. Indians burned these forts and killed their residents two years later. In 1570, a party of Spanish Jesuits established a mission to the Indians at Ajacán by Chesapeake Bay, and sent "Don Luis," a local Indian youth, to Spain for education. On his return, "Don Luis" turned on his patrons and helped his people kill them. Santa Elena did not survive past 1587.

Over the course of the sixteenth century, the Spanish gradually realized that their greatest interests in America lay to the south. The mines of Peru and Mexico were phenomenally successful, and a combination of Indian labor and African slavery supported a growing colonial economy elsewhere in their dominions. Though the Indian population declined drastically, it did not disappear. Spanish men made marriages and informal unions with Indian women, giving rise to a

large mixed, or *mestizo*, population, particularly in Mexico. The wealth of New Spain gave the colonial authorities every incentive to maintain tight control, so colonial Latin America developed without the tradition of local self-government that would prevail in North America.

Spain made only limited efforts to carry its colonial system north of Mexico. Until the founding of California in 1769, only New Mexico, St. Augustine, and even smaller stations in Arizona and Texas remained as small but enduring beachheads of Hispanic culture in North America. Spain took over New Orleans and nearby districts from France in the eighteenth century, and claimed the entire Mississippi basin, but French influence still dominated the region's European culture. In the following century, the conquest and colonization of this portion of the Americas would mostly fall to kingdoms in northern Europe: the Dutch, the French, and especially the English.

After Columbus

Human affairs changed dramatically after Christopher Columbus came ashore on Guanahani. People had long interacted across cultural and geographical distances, but the pace and intensity of worldwide interactions radically increased in the aftermath of the Columbian encounter. And despite the first peaceful exchanges between Columbus and the Indians, the encounter soon became a conquest, as the Native Americans proved vulnerable to foreign weapons and diseases, and the Europeans pressed their advantages. The most obvious result was the eventual colonization of the Western Hemisphere and the creation of new nations in North and South America. In addition, the transfer of plants and animals across the Atlantic in both directions changed economies, environments, and daily life in both hemispheres. Eventually, Europeans and their descendants would extend their power across the globe, directly colonizing Africa and much of Asia, while dominating most of the rest of the world. Less tangibly, the encounter brought cultural changes to every society it touched, from the Aztecs to the Guineans to the Chinese.

As they contemplated their conquests and struggled with their numerous failures, moreover, Europeans struggled to understand what they had started. Was America a place of moral and physical peril, or a providential opportunity to create a new and better world? How should the colonizers carry out that task? A struggle to answer these questions would preoccupy the colonizers and the colonized for centuries to come.

MODES OF CONQUEST

Native Americans had developed the bow and arrow, pottery making, weaving, agriculture, metalworking, irrigation, and vast construction projects. They domesticated a wide variety of plants that human beings use heavily today, including maize, potatoes, beans, tomatoes, peanuts, squash, gourds, cassava, chocolate, and—less happily—tobacco. From elaborate empires to small villages, the Indians displayed a sensitive and intelligent adaptation to their various surroundings and sustained complex and populous cultures. Demographers now estimate that at least 10 million and perhaps as many as 18 million people lived north of the Rio Grande in 1492, while the more urban civilizations to the southward may have supported as many as 25 million people in central Mexico alone.

Paradoxically, the Aztec and Inca Empires proved more vulnerable to foreign conquest than the smaller, decentralized tribes of North America. The Spanish could take over Mexico and Peru by destroying the Indian leadership and placing themselves at the top of an existing imperial structure. In North America, Europeans confronted a large number of distinct Indian societies, each composed of mobile and semiautonomous villages that could only be taken individually. Their skilled warriors could attack without warning at any time and then slip away to fight again later. European military commanders consistently reported that Indian archers could fire deadly arrows faster and more accurately than the clumsy matchlock guns of the explorers. Cortés could thus conquer and keep the Aztec Empire relatively quickly, but Juan Pardo could not preserve his forts in the Carolina backcountry. The arrival of Europeans did not mean instant defeat, therefore, but the beginning of a long continental struggle. North American Indians would hold their own for centuries by adopting European military methods such as guns and horses, and by pitting one imperial power against another.

Native Americans suffered a massive loss of life from their encounters with Europeans, though exact numbers and proportions are very hard to determine. Twentieth-century estimates of North America's Indian population ranged from 1 million to 18 million, with suggestions that their numbers fell by as much as 90 percent by the mid-seventeenth century. More recent estimates of peak Indian population fall between two and seven million. Thereafter, scholars now stress, mortality was serious, but varied by time, place, and circumstances.

Epidemic diseases certainly played an enormous role in decimating

Native Americans. Europeans and Africans lived in very close quarters, with poor sanitation, and often side by side with domestic animals. Germs spread quickly in these environments, often from livestock to people, so epidemics of smallpox, bubonic plague, cholera, and other deadly maladies repeatedly appeared and took millions of lives. Native Americans also suffered from diseases, but they had no prior exposure to the germs brought by the newcomers. Smallpox was certainly a serious killer. It appeared on Hispaniola in 1518 and quickly swept through the Caribbean, possibly killing a majority of the native Carib and Taíno people in a decade or two. The epidemic reached Mexico within a year and devastated the Aztecs, including the heir to the throne and his most talented generals, while leaving the Spanish invaders relatively unscathed. The Incas suffered a similar fate, and the same smallpox epidemic may have spread as far as California before subsiding. By 1548, a veteran Spanish colonist estimated that the population of Hispaniola had fallen from as many as 300,000 Indians to no more than 500.

Disease was not the only cause, however, for wars between Europeans and Native Americans also took countless lives. Anxious for labor and profits, colonists subjected survivors to cruelty, malnutrition, and overwork, leading to even more casualties. As late as 1715, a flourishing Indian slave trade spread deadly violence through southeast North America. Disease and exploitation could work together, moreover, since people weakened by hunger and overwork were more likely to get sick and die. It is quite possible that trade, slaving, and warfare conducted or inspired by English settlers spread far more germs among Indians than the marches of Spanish conquistadors. Over time, moreover, some Indian groups would begin to grow again, and keep a large presence in eastern North America well into the nineteenth century.

Experts dispute whether the transfer of diseases worked in reverse, bringing new ailments from America to Europe. Syphilis may have crossed the Atlantic with the crews of Columbus, for its first European outbreak coincided with their return in 1494. Contemporary physicians thought it came from America, and there is archaeological evidence that the disease had long existed among the Indians. The infection quickly spread along routes of commerce and warfare, and like smallpox among the Indians, it brought agony and relatively rapid death to previously unexposed populations.

For centuries after the arrival of Columbus, epidemic diseases re-

peatedly swept through Indian communities, often far in advance of the Europeans themselves. Smallpox was the worst killer, but waves of measles, influenza, typhus, cholera, scarlet fever, diphtheria, and even bubonic plague were almost as bad. The epidemics played a crucial role in sweeping native peoples from the colonists' path and breaking the morale of the survivors. In the southeastern United States, most of the chiefdoms visited by de Soto had vanished by the time Europeans revisited his line of march, while the Pilgrims discovered that a deadly plague had almost wiped out the Indians of coastal Massachusetts shortly before their arrival in 1620. "They not being able to bury one another," reported William Bradford, governor of the Plymouth colony, "their skulls and bones were found in many places lying still above the ground where their houses and dwellings had been, a very sad spectacle to behold."

The statistics of Native American population and depopulation have very important implications. North America was not an empty continent in 1492, waiting to be filled by European colonizers. Instead, its population density probably exceeded the definition of "frontier" later adopted by the US Census Bureau. The drama of the earliest "frontier," therefore, was not acted out between civilized Europeans and an empty wilderness, but in a vibrant zone of interaction between diverse cultures. Without knowing the true cause of infection, moreover, less vulnerable Europeans readily attributed the Indians' decline to divine providence, and Native Americans at times feared that their own gods had deserted them.

THE COLUMBIAN EXCHANGE

Deadly germs were not the only organisms to follow Columbus across the Atlantic, for a "Columbian exchange" of living things brought many varieties of plants and animals from each hemisphere to the farmers and consumers of the other. As food for people and animals alike, maize began spreading across southern Europe in the sixteenth century and soon reached Africa before expanding worldwide. Domesticated by Andean Indians, white potatoes fed millions of Europeans from Ireland to Russia by the eighteenth century and kept expanding thereafter. Sweet potatoes from South America spread almost as widely. The manioc root (also called cassava or tapioca) migrated from South America to the fields of Africa, India, and Indonesia, as farmers carefully copied the technique for removing its deadly poison first de-

veloped by Amazonian Indians. The world's cooks embraced American varieties of beans and also took up peanuts, squash, pumpkins, and tomatoes, together with delicacies like pineapple and chocolate. Native Americans also gave the world tobacco and the most widely cultivated variety of cotton.

In the opposite direction, the Western Hemisphere imported major species of domestic animals from the east. Native Americans kept dogs, llamas, turkeys, and guinea pigs, but Europeans added cows, horses, pigs, and sheep. The availability of horses especially transformed the lives of buffalo hunters on the North American Great Plains and strengthened many tribes militarily. Rats were far less welcome immigrants.

Colonists also brought their favorite plants to America, especially wheat and sugarcane, and both became very profitable staples. They also planted European fruits and vegetables in their American gardens. Bananas spread from Asia to Africa and followed the slave trade to the Caribbean. Rice took a similar path from Africa to South Carolina and Georgia, and southeastern Indians learned to plant peach orchards. Inedible plants crossed the Atlantic as well, from grasses and ornamental flowers to dandelions. The vast transfer of organisms from each hemisphere greatly increased the world's production of food, providing essential nutrition as human population doubled between 1650 and 1800, and radically altering ecosystems throughout the planet.

UNDERSTANDING AMERICA

The encounter with America presented learned Europeans with a series of profound intellectual challenges. The scholars of medieval Europe had little direct contact with the outside world, but they knew about Africans and Asians and argued theology with Muslims and Jews, so these different societies puzzled them far less than reports of an entirely "new world." They wondered why America was completely unmentioned in the Bible, the foundation of all human knowledge. Why had God allowed almost 1,500 years to pass before permitting its inhabitants to hear the Christian gospel? Observers of the natural world likewise wondered at the enormous diversity of American plants and animals, and the differences between the species of each hemisphere. They noticed that the commonest animals of Europe—from chickens to war-horses—were completely unknown in America, but America contained an astonishing variety of species that seemed completely new. Had all these creatures wandered from the landing

place of Noah's ark to different continents without leaving any traces along the way?

The biological questions would puzzle Europeans for centuries, until Charles Darwin proposed his answers. More urgent questions concerned the American Indians. Theologians seriously debated whether Indians were truly human beings with souls who could convert to Christianity, or animals or devils in human form. If they were indeed human, should they be forced to accept Christianity, as Ferdinand and Isabella had demanded of the Jews and Muslims of Spain? Were compulsory labor and the seizure of Indian lands necessary for spreading the Christian faith? The conquistadors themselves spent little time on such issues. They were already accustomed to combatting and enslaving non-Christian peoples, and they did not question their rights to American land and gold. Some of the Catholic clergy who came with them were more sensitive, however, and pushed for answers to difficult questions.

As early as 1511, the Dominican monk Fray Antonio de Montesinos had outraged the rulers of Hispaniola by denouncing their treatment of the Indians. "Are these not men?" he demanded. "Have they not rational souls? Must you not love them as you love yourselves?" Pope Paul III agreed, and declared in 1537 that "the Indians are truly men and that they are not only capable of understanding the Catholic Faith but, according to our information, they desire exceedingly to receive it." But what if the Indians rejected Christianity? Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, who grew up on Hispaniola and became the bishop of Chiapas, Mexico, denounced the use of violence and the *encomienda* system to force the conversion of Indians. In his voluminous writings, Las Casas protested Spanish cruelty to Native Americans so powerfully that King Charles I (also known as Emperor Charles V of the Holy Roman Empire) convened a special council in 1550 to thrash out the lawfulness of compulsory labor and conversion. Held in the Spanish city of Valladolid, this extraordinary debate over Indian policy pitted Las Casas against another monk, Fray Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, but ended inclusively. As a practical matter, the Spanish government halted the worst abuses of the *encomienda* system but still required labor tribute from conquered Indians. When Spanish demands for labor exceeded the local supply, they substituted African slaves for Indian workers, a policy Las Casas first supported but later opposed. Since the Spanish had long bought and sold Africans at home, their enslavement in America apparently touched fewer consciences.

Las Casas was not alone in defending the humanity of Native Ameri-

cans. Some Renaissance thinkers praised the Indians as innocent “noble savages” whose natural virtues mocked the vices of civilized Christians, though exaggerated accounts of Indian innocence were as unrealistic as contrasting reports of Indian savagery. In a famous book of essays published in 1580, Frenchman Michel de Montaigne described Brazilian Indians who lived in a land of plenty, shared all their possessions in common, and spent their days hunting and dancing. Europeans called these Indians barbarous, he observed, but only because their customs were unfamiliar. Montaigne admitted that visitors called the Brazilians cannibals, but he mocked the moral pretensions of Europe by dryly observing that eating prisoners was kinder than torturing them, as Europeans did in their wars of religion. “We may then call these people barbarous, in respect to the rules of reason,” he concluded, “but not in respect to ourselves, who in all sorts of barbarity exceed them.”

Few Europeans were willing to go so far as Montaigne in comparing themselves to alleged cannibals, but America still challenged their sense of superiority and forced them to reckon with a vaster range of human possibilities than they had ever known before. If America was inferior to Europe, then the empire builders felt obliged to uplift it, perhaps by civilizing and Christianizing the Indians. If the Indians were somehow superior to their conquerors, then Europeans might justify their conquest by the creation of new societies that corrected the deficiencies of Europe and America. The Spanish responded to the moral challenge of America with fervent efforts to convert the Indians, but they were not the only colonizers to feel a moral imperative. English religious reformers revealed similar emotions when they chose a symbol for their colony on Massachusetts Bay: the image of a half-naked Indian calling, “Come over and help us.” The utopian pressure represented by that symbol would continue its potent influence on the nation that the English colonists created.

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The Native Americans were complex and diverse peoples whose histories were 15,000 years old in 1492. Their lifestyles ranged from simple hunting and gathering to large urban civilizations, and they had developed a wide variety of cultural practices, from archery to agriculture to building stone pyramids. Most North American social structures were less complex than those of Mexico and Peru, but from the

Pueblos to the Mississippians, many of its people created impressive urban settlements and intricate social hierarchies.

The European explorers who first encountered these Indians came from other complex cultures that suddenly expanded in the fifteenth century. Driven by a craving for Asian luxuries, a lust for gold, an immense curiosity, a yearning to save souls, and a fierce competition with each other and their Muslim rivals, European Christians began the voyages to West Africa that eventually led them to America. Soon after their arrival, Europeans combined slavery with plantation agriculture in a system that would profoundly shape the history of America, Europe, and Africa.

The invasion of Indian societies, the enslavement of Africans, and the founding of colonial empires was not a one-sided process of subjugation. The experience brought Europeans, Indians, and Africans close together for the first time and launched a course of interaction and exchange that would create new societies with fundamental contributions from all three. It was a highly unequal development in which Europeans benefited from stronger governments and economic systems, as well as superior weapons, and resistance to deadly epidemics. But Native Americans exerted their own pressures on Europeans and did not leave the colonists unmoved or unscathed. When Columbus died in 1506, the physical and cultural demands of empire building had just begun.