

American Indians

by Elliott West



Detail from sketch of Secotan Village, published in *Americae pars decima* by Theodor de Bry, 1619, based on a drawing by John White. (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division)

If history is the story of what people have done, then American history began thousands of years ago, and by far most of it is that of Indian peoples and their ancestors before Europeans arrived. Historians, however, disagree over answers to fundamental questions about that long history. Some say the first migrations into the Americas from today's Siberia happened twelve or thirteen thousand years ago, others say as early as twenty-five thousand years ago. That migration continued southward by land along both sides of the Rocky Mountains, according to some, while others lean toward a route down the Pacific coast, partly by boat.

Estimates of the New World population in 1492 range from thirty million to one hundred twenty million, and those for North America above Mexico range from five million to thirteen million. (The best guesses today are around fifty million and seven million respectively.) On some points, however, all agree. In 1492 what is today the United States was home to an extraordinary number of cultures of breathtaking variety. There were more than five hundred peoples, most of them divided into smaller related groups. Each people spoke their own language, many with separate dialects. Many languages were grouped in half a dozen families but many were not, and the difference between, say, the language of the Pomo of California and that of the Chickasaws of Mississippi was as great as the difference between German and Chinese. The disparate peoples expressed themselves in rich artistic traditions—elaborate redwood carvings in the Pacific Northwest; basketry of grasses woven into gorgeous, intricate patterns in the Southwest and California; garments on the plains decorated delicately with shells, porcupine quills, and elk teeth. Indians worshipped by cosmologies as varied as their art and languages. Pawnees believed the stars were living beings who had sung and chanted everything into existence. Hopis could point to a spring where they had emerged from several worlds beneath this one and from which sustaining spirits visited annually.

Each Indian people supported themselves by a savvy and complex use of their particular place, and in America's diverse geography that meant a bewildering array of economies. Those in the wooded East lived in permanent villages and practiced diversified "safety net" economies blending gardening, gathering, hunting, and fishing. Southwestern peoples like the Hopis and Zunis farmed with the help of elaborate irrigation systems. In the Missouri River valley people living in villages of large earth lodges cultivated extensive

gardens and hunted from huge herds of bison to the west. Downstream on the lower Mississippi palisaded cities thrived, fed by great cornfields, fishing, and trade, while on the high plains other peoples lived semi-nomadically in small groups as hunters and gatherers. On the Pacific coast there was virtually no agriculture but dense populations supported themselves by gathering, hunting, and fishing—in the Northwest especially of the salmon that returned annually in unimaginable numbers.

Tying together this splay of cultures and economies was an intricate and well-trafficked trade network. Goods from across the continent and beyond passed through major trading centers and annual rendezvous into a webbing that ultimately reached the remotest villages. Bison meat and hides from the plains were swapped for corn in the Southwest and fish and conch shells in the Southeast. Mica from the Appalachian Mountains made its way to the northern Rocky Mountains, and obsidian from the Rockies traveled to the upper Ohio River and deep into Mexico. From Mexico in turn came a whole array of goods, including colorful bird feathers. Everywhere daily life featured details from hundreds of miles away. Men along the eastern Great Lakes wore necklaces of grizzly claws from the far West, while others on the upper Rio Grande listened to music from flutes fashioned from the leg bones of Gulf coastal whooping cranes.

The first Europeans, then, encountered a land far more culturally varied than the one they had left. They would only gradually realize that variety, however. Early reports from America, whether from the English and French on the Atlantic coast or from the Spanish on the Gulf coast and Southwest, pictured Indians in similar terms that were both clichéd and contradictory. Indians were described as simple, childlike, and innocent but also savage, dangerous, godless, and debased. American Indians' impressions of Europeans are much harder to determine, but natives also misunderstood much of what they saw. Certainly they underestimated the forces about to be unleashed and the changes that would follow.

Indians often were first impressed by what they might gain from the newcomers. A pictograph from the Lene Lenape (later called the Delawares) expresses their initial response to whites who had come “from north and south.” It shows a ship, and its accompanying memory is, “They are peaceful; they have great things; who are they?” Indians took in much that was immaterial. European contact brought an expanded view of the world's expanse and new notions of people's relations to God, the Great Mystery. The most immediate effects, however, came from the “great things” changing their daily lives. Metal goods ranked high among them. Iron pots and axe heads, a point for a lance or arrow, and something as simple as a metal awl to replace a sharpened piece of bone to punch a hole in an animal hide—these were near miraculous advances that eased the labors and heightened the comforts of Native peoples. Such items coursed through the long-established trading network linking coast to coast and the Arctic to tropical rainforests. This initial European impact, the vigorous spout of life-transforming goods, preceded the Europeans themselves into much of the interior. Impressions of the newcomers traveled with the pots and spearpoints. In 1542 Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo, the first European to sail along the Pacific coast, heard from Indians that to the east “men like us were traveling about, bearded, clothed and armed . . . killing many native Indians.”[1]

That would have been the expedition of Francisco Vasquez de Coronado (1540–1542) or Hernando de Soto (1539–1542), maybe both. Coronado's rode out of Mexico into Arizona and New Mexico, with a thrust through modern-day Texas up into Kansas. De Soto's landed in Florida and marched through what is today Georgia, the Carolinas, Alabama, Mississippi, and Arkansas, with an offshoot to eastern Texas. Both epitomized Spain's two dominant motives—wealth and souls—and the Native response to them. Both Coronado and de Soto hoped to find opulent cities and storehouses of wealth like those conquered in Mexico and Peru. The second motive was religious. Columbus's first voyage was in the same year that Spain finally expelled Muslim forces that had occupied part of Iberia for nearly eight centuries. Fired by that victory, the Spanish saw the unexpected revelation of the Americas as a duty to save its peoples' souls through conversion to Roman Catholicism.

In both cases some American Indians welcomed the newcomers at first, hoping to obtain Spanish goods and to acquire whatever spiritual powers they thought useful. Soon, however, the *conquistadors'* demands, abuses, and intolerance soured relations. De Soto's large command, about seven hundred men at the outset, was

especially brutal, and Indians put up stiff resistance, killing as many as two hundred in one battle. De Soto died of a fever, and the accounts brought back by the expedition's survivors, like those of Coronado on his return from the Southwest, discouraged further expeditions. In 1565 Pedro Menendez de Aviles founded San Augustine on the Atlantic coast of Florida, and thirty-three years later Juan de Onate established missions and military outposts among the Pueblo peoples along the upper Rio Grande in New Mexico. Now Spain's purpose was religious and strategic—to spread the faith and to protect more valuable holdings to the south in the Indies and Mexico from imperial competition.

Spain's first competitors were the French, who explored the Atlantic coast and attempted to colonize present-day South Carolina, from which they also preyed on the treasure fleets bearing gold and silver back to Spain. Menendez destroyed one colony and set out as well to dominate Indians of the Southeast, but the isolated, thinly garrisoned outposts held only a tenuous toehold in Florida in 1620. By then the English also were making their bid for the Atlantic coast. Their colony at Roanoke in North Carolina, begun in 1585, vanished during a long delay in resupplying it. In 1607 England tried again, landing 105 colonists on the James River in Virginia. Unlike those of the Spanish, English goals were mainly commercial, with plans for Indians to supply labor and support for the production of such big-ticket items as wine, silk, and caviar. Native Virginians, a confederation numbering perhaps twenty thousand persons, had little interest in that, however. As had others elsewhere, their leader, Powhatan, at first courted English trade, but, also as elsewhere, English demands and cultural misunderstandings soon brought conflict. In 1620 Jamestown, like Spanish St. Augustine, was barely hanging on. In that year another English colony, Plymouth, with another motive, to be a religious refuge for radical English Protestants, was planted on Massachusetts Bay.

With a few isolated exceptions, Indian peoples in what is today the United States were firmly in command of their world in 1620. They vastly outnumbered Europeans. In many ways they had benefited from goods Europeans offered, and they were increasingly savvy to the newcomers' ways and how to deal with them to their advantage. By then, however, their vulnerabilities to the new arrivals were clear. In time those vulnerabilities would undermine their independence, cripple their economies and threaten their cultures and even their very existence.

The greatest threat came from diseases—smallpox, typhus, influenza, measles, malaria, and others. With no earlier exposure, Indians had little resistance to them, and the toll was horrific. Pathogens brought by de Soto's expedition apparently swept away vast numbers of southeastern natives and led to the abandonment of many cities described by the invaders. The terrible losses from diseases were followed by economic disruption, which brought hunger, social disarray, and further deaths. Like trade goods, epidemics often moved in advance of Europeans themselves. Traders, fishermen and privateers infected Indians along the North Atlantic coast on the eve of the first colonies. Plymouth was founded on the ruins of a Wampanoag village abandoned after a pestilence, possibly typhus, had swept away its peoples in 1616–1617. More than fifty New England settlements rose from other devastated villages. Diseases would move in waves across the continent, eventually reducing the overall Indian population by 80 percent or more.

Europeans brought domesticated animals that Indians had never known. Some were welcomed. Especially in the far West after 1680, horses would revolutionize Native life. Initially, however, horses were hugely helpful in subduing Indians and in maintaining European settlements. Animals introduced diseases—de Soto's herds of pigs may have carried dangerous contagions—and pigs, cattle, horses, sheep and goats threatened Indian economies by destroying their crops and competing with game animals for forage. The effects of Europe's technology, like its animals, cut both ways. While trade goods offered great advantages, the more Indians used them, the more reliant on them they became, and thus the more leverage Europeans had in economic exchanges. As the newcomers' numbers grew and Indians were less able to supply what they wanted, that disparity would prove deeply troubling.

The greatest threats to Indian peoples in 1620 were so fundamental they are easy to miss. Europe held far more people than did North America—and in fact the Indian population was shrinking due to epidemics. European nations could focus resources and power against Native American divided into hundreds of different societies.

European nations were highly motivated to invade and exploit a continent brimming with resources, and they looked upon its natives not as partners but as people to convert or to conquer. The Indians' firm command of what is now the United States was not to last. By 1820 they had lost control of land east of the Mississippi River, and a mere sixty years later the descendants of those newcomers perched so precariously on the Atlantic in 1620 dominated the continent all the way to the Pacific. The ways of life of all American Indian peoples were under siege.

[1] "Translation from the Spanish of the Account by the Pilot Ferrel of the Voyage of Cabrillo along the West Coast of North America in 1542," in *Report upon United States Geographical Surveys West of the One Hundredth Meridian*, George Montague Wheeler, et al. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1879), 7:305. Available on Google Books.

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