

The Original Inhabitants - What They Lost and What They Retained

Today we begin the second chapter in our story about American history. Our first chapter helped us understand more about the Europeans who immigrated to North America in the 1600s - people who generally chose to leave or who were no longer wanted in Europe, especially in England, because of religious, political, and/or economic reasons. Our second chapter will help us understand the people with whom the Europeans came into contact when they arrived at their colonial destinations - the North American Indian Nations.

Discussion Goal:

The Original Inhabitants:

What They Lost and What They Retained

1. To revise our attitudes about American Indians by debunking several myths:

Land Bridge migration

"New World"

Virgin wilderness

Primitive, heathen, uncivilized savage

Hindrance to progress

Demythifying American Indians

1. Land Bridge Migration: The first American Indians came from Asia to North America between 11-12,000 years ago via a land bridge over the Bering Straits. They made their way through what is now Alaska and then followed an ice-free highway down the continent. Their culture has been named Clovis for their distinctive weapons that have been Map of Land Bridge Migration Theory found in digs nationwide.

Reality: From a strictly scientific viewpoint, we do not know how ancient human remains might be related to contemporary Indian peoples, nor do we know from whence they came. Today, at least three opposing viewpoints exist - the Bering Strait migration theory, the multiple migration theory, and the indigenous origin belief.

Bering Strait Theory - Many American archeologists - and most historians - believe American Indians descended from northern Asians who migrated to North America by crossing over a now-submerged land bridge from Siberia to Alaska somewhere between 11,500 and 20,000 years ago.

Multiple Migrations Theory - American Indians came to North America via several different routes originating from both east to west and west to east. If you examine the map below, you can see the various routes.

Indigenous Origin - Most members of Native American communities believe that they are indigenous to the Americas and have been on the continents "since the first day of light."

So, what are the facts? There are two distinct viewpoints, one from the academic community and one from the Indian community.

Academic Community: Until the summer of 1977, most contemporary archeologists believed American Indians descended from northern Asians and crossed into North America from the Bering Straits. At least four archeological findings have begun to challenge this interpretation.

In the summer of 1977, archaeologists excavated an important new site in Monte Verde, Chile. Map of Multiple Prehistoric Migrations The expedition unearthed organic remains thought to be 12,500 years old and some artifacts thought to be 33,000 years old. Twenty years later in 1997, a group of Paleoindian specialists studied the artifacts and visited the site, making two important conclusions: while the chances are good that human occupation occurred earlier than 12,500 in this region, there is not enough evidence to make this assertion; and

the site indicates occupation 1,000 years before Clovis. Given the fact that Monte Verde is thousands of miles south of the Bering Land Bridge, it puts this theory into grave jeopardy.

In July 1996 at Kennewick, Washington, the skeletal remains of a prehistoric man were found on a bank of the Columbia River. What became known as Kennewick Man is one of the most complete ancient skeletons ever found - dating back perhaps 9,000 years. His anatomical features were quite different from those of modern American Indians suggesting instead that his relatives were Caucasoid peoples. The finding of the skeleton triggered a nine-year legal clash between scientists, the US government and American Indian tribes who claim Kennewick Man as one of their ancestors. In February 2004, the United States Court of Appeals ruled that a cultural link between any of the American Indian nations in that region and the Kennewick Man was not genetically justified, allowing scientific study of the remains to continue.

In late 1998, radiocarbon and DNA experts examined the bones of a woman found on the Channel Islands in 1959. Tests indicate that the bones are probably 13,000 years old - making her the oldest known human skeleton in North America. This finding has bolstered previous theories that the first settlers in North America may have been Polynesian or Southern Asians who came here by boat.

In late 1999, two anthropologists proposed yet another theory - the continent's first inhabitants may have crossed the Atlantic Ocean more than 18,000 years ago from Europe's Iberian Peninsula (present-day Spain, Portugal, and southwestern France.) Called the Solutreans, these explorers are believed to have settled on the east coast. The researchers examined projectile points and other artifacts already discovered on both sides of the Atlantic, concluding that the east coast projectile points and other archaeological clues are "virtually indistinguishable" from those found in Clovis.

American Indian Community: Many members of the American Indian community have long disputed the migration theory as well as the white man's desire to place a time for human habitation. They claim instead that they have been on the North American continents "since the first day of light." Many different tribes have carried down oral histories that tell of sky people falling to earth to bring forth men and women and of ancestors coming from a world below through a vertical tunnel to live in sunlight.

So what does this mean? Today's scientific community cannot say with any certainty who the first settlers in North America were - or how they got here. It also means that in all probability, multiple migrations occurred. And finally, it means that the discussion about the first peoples in America will continue to be both complicated and contentious.

2. "New World" Myth: When the early explorers landed in Map of Indian Naitons at time of Contact North America, they discovered a sparsely populated "New World."

Reality: When Columbus landed in Hispaniola in 1492 he did not discover this land. Columbus could not discover what another people already knew and owned. Rather than finding a "New World," Columbus established contact with a very old world and initially facilitated the meeting of two ancient cultures - European and Indian. With the arrival of the slave trade, the Spanish facilitated the meeting of three ancient cultures - African, European, and Indian.

So, what are the facts? By the time European explorers landed in North America, the inhabitants of the native communities comprised somewhere between 5 and 10 million people who belonged to between 500-600 different tribal societies - the largest of which are shown in the map above.

It is believed that on the northwest coast alone, over 130,000 American Indians lived in hundreds of communities.

When Columbus landed in Hispaniola, it is believed that somewhere between 1-3 million American Indians lived on the island. When compared with the population of Spain - about 6-10 million in an area seven times as large - North America appears quite populous.

Another comparison finds that the Aztec capital had about 165,000 to 250,000 occupants which was larger than many of the great European cities of the day: Constantinople, Naples, Venice, Milan, and Paris. Map of Indian languages spoken before colonization

The tribal peoples of North America spoke more than 700 different languages - many of which can be found on this map illustrating the major languages spoken prior to European settlement - and made their livings in a wide array of different environments.

3. Virgin Wilderness Myth: When the European settlers arrived, they found a pristine, virgin wilderness and a people untouched by white civilization.

Reality: When Europeans arrived, American Indians had already altered their various environments to fit their cultural needs, and their numbers had been dramatically decimated by earlier contact with European disease.

So, what are the facts? Before Europeans arrived, the indigenous peoples had already altered the environment in at least four ways.

Agriculture. Across the continent, thousands of acres of trees were cleared for the purpose of raising crops. In the Southwest and in the Ohio and Mississippi River Valleys, tribes created a vast and sophisticated system of irrigation ditches and dams that dramatically altered the natural course of rivers and streams.

They grew crops about which the Europeans knew nothing: corn, peanuts, squash, peppers, tomatoes, pumpkins, papayas, avocados, and cacao. Today, plants that were originally cultivated by American Indians make up about 1/3 of the world's food supply.

The white potato migrated to Europe from South America in the 1600s. It came to No. America in the 1700s with the Irish.

Fire. Many tribes used fires to communicate, to clear fields for agriculture, to drive away unwanted insects, to push smaller animals out of the soil, to remove cover for potential enemies, to kill deer by encircling them with fire, and to force deer to go for food where the Indians could control them.

Pre-horse hunting practices. The Plains Indians sometimes caught buffalo by stampeding them over cliffs or into rude corrals which killed many more buffalo than were needed.

Mound building. About 800 years ago, the lower Mississippi Delta was home to some of the most highly organized civilizations in the world - civilizations that lived in cities anchored by incredible earthen monuments which we now call mounds. If you look at this Map of Mississippian Culturesmap of the confluence of the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers, you can see the large number of regional settlements with mounds that existed by the 1200s.

The Mississippians who lived in this region built dozens - and perhaps thousands - of earthworks across the Delta and the southeast when Europeans were living through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

Sometimes one large flat-topped mound dominated a village or ceremonial center. More often, several mounds were arranged around a rectangular plaza with the village at its edges. Structures atop the plaza - temples or official residences - sat on large four-sided flat-topped mounds. All of these mounds dramatically changed the nature of the North American environment as tons of dirt and gravel were moved by hand from riverbeds.

The largest and most sophisticated of this mound building societies was Cahokia - located in the 80-mile long floodplain at the confluence of the Mississippi and Missouri rivers.

Between 800-600 BC, hunter-gatherers set up temporary camps or seasonal villages in the region. Between 600 BC - AD 800, the agricultural settlement of Cahokia - located about 8 miles east of present-day St. Louis - gradually came into existence.

As more intense farming methods and diverse crops were grown between AD 1050-1150, its population soared to around 20,000. By 1250, Cahokia was larger than London. There was no larger North American city until 1800 when Philadelphia's population reached 30,000.

Cahokia was twice as densely populated (about 4,000 persons per square mile) as current day Los Angeles County (2,200 per square mile.)

Archaeological studies suggest that at the height of its influence, Cahokia was the largest and most important settlement north of Mexico. Cahokian artifacts and pottery found in many regions indicate that merchants traded with cultures extending from the Gulf Coast to the Great Lakes, and from the Atlantic coast to Oklahoma. At its peak, the city spread for more than five square miles. The city center was Monk's Mound.

Cahokia Covering 14 acres at the base (covering more ground than the largest Egyptian pyramid), it rises in terraces 10 stories high to a height of 100 feet. It is the largest prehistoric earthen structure in the "New World." To build it, inhabitants hauled basket after basket of dirt on their backs, each weighing about 60 pounds. It is estimated that some 15 million trips were required to excavate, carry, and deposit the 22 million cubic feet of earth needed to build it. It probably took 300 years to build and was constructed between 900 and 1200.

Within the entire city, over 120 mounds existed, but the locations of only 109 have been recorded. Many were altered or destroyed by modern farming; about 69 are preserved in the historic site boundaries

Around AD 1200, Cahokia began a decline, most likely due to urban stress, deforestation and destruction of wildlife, and overpopulation. It was abandoned by 1400.

4. The Primitive, Uncivilized, Heathen Savage Myth: Ancient American Indian tribes were so primitive that they never attained the agricultural or technological sophistication of other ancient peoples. Thus, when European settlers arrived in the "New World", they encountered bands of primitive, uncivilized, heathen savages.

Reality. Historical evidence indicates that many Indian tribes had attained impressive levels of agricultural, cultural, and/or technological sophistication prior to the "discovery" of the "New World" by Europeans. Indeed, when European settlers arrived, between 500-600 separate tribal societies existed in North America, most of which were highly civilized in terms of their political, economic, social, and spiritual development. Each society had developed the capacity for unified action, had learned how to adapt to their natural environment, had achieved some sense of group identity and ethnic pride, and had created its own system of family and social organization.

So, what are the facts? Most tribes were, in fact, technologically, agriculturally, and politically sophisticated. Most lived in settled (rather than nomadic) communities that were highly developed. Such tribes shared the following characteristics:

Division of labor among men and women

Solid subsistence base.

Economic, social, cultural, political, and spiritual diversity.

Hierarchical organization

Environmental adaptation to their natural environments.

5. The "Hindrance to Progress" Myth: In order to ensure the survival and progress of the civilized, European, Christian settlers, it was inevitable that the Indians be defeated.

Reality. European progress was impeded not because the indigenous peoples were uncivilized and incapable of living harmoniously with the settlers, but because Europeans were unwilling and incapable of accepting the American Indians' political, social, economic, and spiritual traditions as civilized. The real obstacles that got in the way of European acceptance of Indian peoples were that they were not Christians and no visible forms of worshipping God; they made no effort to subdue the land and make it profitable; they had no understanding of the importance of private property; and they were not willing to give up their land and submit to English rule.

So what are the facts?

Many first hand accounts describe the Indians of the North continent and of the West Indies as friendly, peaceful, and welcoming.

Juan Rodriquez Cabrillo, when writing about his voyage along the Southern California coast in 1542, observed, "very fine valleys [with] maize and abundant food ... many savannahs and groves" that were "densely populated" and "thickly settled" when Indians who often greeted the Spanish ships in friendship and traded with them of peaceful ceremonies. (Stannard, 1992:23.)

If such communities were not comprised of uncivilized savages who threatened European settlement and white progress, why has the myth persisted? Several historians have flatly stated that the image of native barbarism and savagery serves to rationalize European conquest. (Francis Jennings, *The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cost of Conquest*. Chapel Hill: Univ. of No. Carolina Press, 1975; Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present*. NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978; and David Stannard, *American Holocaust*. NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992.)

What, then, were the obstacles that got in the way of European acceptance of the indigenous peoples:
The Indians were not Christians nor did they have any visible forms of worshipping God.
The Indians had made no effort to subdue the land - to make it profitable.
The Indians had no understanding of private property.
The Indians were not willing to be ignored.

Discussion:

How did your reading in Chapter 1 of *Voices of a People's History* help to debunk these myths?

In the Crash Course video, what did you learn to help you debunk these myths?

What is the Black Legend?

Conclusions

It is unclear how and when American Indians came to be living on the North American continent. Controversy exists between the academic community that supports a migration from Asia theory, and the majority of Native American communities that believe they are indigenous to the land.

When Columbus landed in Hispaniola in 1492, he did not find a "New World" or virgin wilderness. Instead, he entered an old world that, in some native societies, was as densely populated as Europe, had already been environmentally altered, and was as highly developed as any western nation at the time. The Moundbuilders of Cahokia are an example of such a society.

North America's sovereign Indian nations were technologically, agriculturally, and politically sophisticated. Most lived in settled communities that had the following characteristics of a highly civilized society: division of labor among men and women; solid subsistence base; economic, social, cultural, political, and spiritual diversity; hierarchical organization; and environmental adaptation to their natural environments.

American Indians did not comprise a single, unified entity; rather, they consisted of many complex cultures, egalitarian societies, and political systems that had adapted to the natural environment.

Because of the sharp contrast between European and American Indian spiritual, cultural, political, and economic values, white settlement was destined to result in great conflict between the new settlers and the indigenous peoples.

While such conflict was inevitable, it was not inevitable that Europeans defeat, conquer, and decimate the indigenous peoples in order to ensure European survival and progress. European progress was impeded not because the American Indians were uncivilized and incapable of living harmoniously with European settlers, but because the majority of Europeans were unwilling and incapable of accepting American Indians as political, economic, social, and spiritual equals.

The myths about the indigenous peoples of North America have persisted largely because of the desire by the conquering Europeans to justify and rationalize the consequences of their actions.

The years between 1621 and 1775 were a model of what America might have been. They were filled with struggle and compromise between two peoples - a continuous process of give and take. As long as both sides recognized that they needed one another, a precarious peace existed.