

Overview of Native American and Colonial Relations

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"An Oasis in the Badlands, South Dakota." This photograph was taken in 1905 by Edward Curtis, whose work has recently been criticized for portraying unrealistic and romanticized Native American subjects. Curtis requested that any sign of modernity be hidden, and introduced clothing that belonged to thousand-year-old traditions. Despite its controversial setting, Curtis' work is an invaluable record which testifies to the complicated relationship between real and imagined portrayals of Native American culture.

Many European countries — Spain, France, England, the Netherlands and Sweden — competed with each other to colonize North America in the 16th and 17th centuries. Each of them had particular goals, methods and geographical interests, which shaped Native American history.

From the Native American point of view, it wasn't always immediately clear what the Europeans were after. Some Native communities were approached with respect, and they in turn greeted the odd-looking visitors as guests. For many indigenous nations, however, the first contact with Europeans was marked by extreme violence.

Spain and Native Americans in the Southwest and Southeast

After defeating the indigenous nations of Mexico and Peru, the conquistadors of Spain turned their attention to Northern America in the mid-16th century.

In 1540, Francisco Vázquez de Coronado began the exploration and conquest of the Pueblo natives of the Southwest. The Spanish troops were brutal, typically camping outside a town and forcing the native groups to give food, slave laborers and women, some of whom they forced to serve as slave wives. The missionaries who accompanied the troops beat, dismembered, tortured and executed Pueblo people who attempted to maintain traditional religious practices. The Spanish also punished natives severely for civil offenses.



Some Pueblo families fled their homes and joined the Apaches, influencing the Navajo and Apache cultures up through modern times. Other Puebloans maintained their traditional cultural and religious practices by hiding some and merging others with Christian rites.

Meanwhile, in the Southeast, Natives experienced their first sustained contact with Europeans during the expedition led by Hernando de Soto from 1539 to 1542. As the conquistadors moved inland, tribes at first treated the Spanish like any large group of visitors, providing gifts to the leaders and supplies to their troops. However, the Spaniards either misread or ignored the intentions of their hosts and often forced natives into slavery.

France and the Iroquoians of Huronia

The French claimed dominion over most of the Northeast, Southeast and American Subarctic. France's North American empire was, however, contested: Spain, England and Native nations claimed portions of their territory. In particular, the area was a site of contention between two of the major indigenous alliances, the Huron confederacy and the Five Tribes, or Iroquois Confederacy.

The Huron were an alliance of perhaps 20,000 to 30,000 people who lived between Hudson Bay and the St. Lawrence River, in what is now Eastern Canada. The Huron relied mainly on trade for food and resources.

The Five Tribes of the Iroquois Confederacy lived south of the St. Lawrence River and Lake Erie, in the present-day state of New York, and were more agricultural. The alliance comprised the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga and Seneca peoples. Later the alliance was joined by the Tuscarora, and became the Six Tribes.

The Northeast was crisscrossed by an extensive series of trade routes that consisted of rivers and short portages. The Huron used these routes to travel to the Cree and Innu peoples, while the Iroquois used them to travel to the Iroquoians on the Atlantic coast. The French claimed the more northerly area and built a series of trading posts near Huron communities.

By about 1615, the conflict between the two Native alliances became heated. The Huron joined with the French and the Iroquois with the English, for control of the trade routes. Eventually, a smallpox epidemic killed as many as two-thirds of the Huron alliance between 1634 and 38. At about the same time, it became increasingly clear that beavers, the region's most valuable fur-bearing animals, had been overhunted to the point of extinction in the home territories of both groups.

The combination of smallpox, the collapse of the beaver population and the end of trade precipitated an economic crisis for the Huron. Decades of intermittent warfare culminated in fierce battles in 1648 and 1649, during which the Iroquois defeated the Huron confederacy.

The Subarctic Indians and the Arctic peoples

The Huron alliance had maintained a virtual lock on trade in the region between Hudson Bay and the French trading posts to the south until about 1650. This area was explored by Europeans for the first time in 1610, under the guidance of the English navigator Henry Hudson. English expeditions in the following decades were well received by the resident Cree, who had relied upon the Hurons for trade goods and found their supply greatly diminished in the wake of the Beaver Wars.

English expeditions in the following decades led to the creation of the Hudson's Bay Company in 1670. Company traders spent the remainder of the 17th century building relationships with the local Cree, Innu and Inuit peoples. The Hudson's Bay Company eventually became one of the most dominant forces of colonialism in Northern America.

Many of these native nations had chosen not to form an official alliance with colonial powers. Instead, they played the French and the English against one another in order to gain trade advantages.



England and the mid-Atlantic Algonquians

Meanwhile, England's conquest of North America was focused on territorial expansion, particularly along the Atlantic coast from New England to Virginia.

Initially, the local tribes had entered into early agreements with the English; however these agreements were undermined by a fundamental philosophical difference. The English held that it was possible to own land outright, while the indigenous American peoples believed that only use rights could be granted. The situation was further complicated by the French custom, soon adopted by the English, of providing native communities with gifts on a seasonal or annual basis. What the colonizers intended as a relatively inexpensive method for creating goodwill, the indigenous peoples interpreted as something akin to rent.

The mid-Atlantic groups that spoke Algonquian languages were among the largest and best organized indigenous nations in Northern America. The earliest conflict between these Algonquians and the colonizers occurred near Chesapeake Bay, where the first permanent English settlement in the Americas, the Jamestown Colony, had been established in 1607.

A group of Native peoples, called the Powhatan alliance, were initially friendly to the people of Jamestown, providing them with food and the use of land for farming crops. By 1609, however, all friendly relations had ended. The region was in its third year of severe drought. The English began stealing food, and Powhatan, the leader of the Algonquian alliance, prohibited trading food to the colonists. These actions contributed to a period of starvation for the colony from 1609 to 1611.

Fights between the two groups erupted, and the so-called Powhatan War continued sporadically until 1644, eventually resulting in a new boundary agreement. However, the fighting ended only after a series of epidemics decimated the region's native population.

The Plains and Plateau culture areas

A slow influx of European trade goods, along with epidemics of foreign diseases, had reached into the Plains and the Plateau peoples of the interior since the early colonial period. However, direct interaction didn't pick up until the 18th century.



Before the Spanish conquistadors brought horses to the Americas, the Plains and Plateau peoples traveled by foot or in small boats. As horses became common, the southwestern Plains quickly adopted them to hunt bison more effectively.

Trade with European colonists also saw the introduction of Native cultures to new forms of weaponry. Spanish law explicitly forbade giving firearms to indigenous groups, but the English and Dutch traded them freely. The northeastern Plains started using guns in battle, and quickly integrated them in hunting large game.

From the mid-18th century to the first part of the 19th century, horses and guns enabled the indigenous nations of the North American interior to enjoy an unprecedented level of prosperity.

The history of Native American and colonial relations is mostly founded on territorial and commercial conquest. It is, however, a long and complicated history, dictated by differences among the European powers, and also among the richly diverse Native communities that occupied North America.

Quiz

- 1 How does the article develop the idea that Native Americans were mistreated by Europeans?
- (A) by describing the reasons Europeans came to America and what happened when they met Native Americans
 - (B) by giving examples of interactions between various Native American communities and different Europeans
 - (C) by analyzing the actions of Europeans and giving data reflecting the impact on Native Americans
 - (D) by providing statements from Native Americans describing their encounters with Europeans
- 2 Which of the following statements BEST represents Spain's approach toward colonizing North America?
- (A) They forced natives to welcome them and give them gifts.
 - (B) They participated in fair trade of goods and services.
 - (C) They were violent and abused the local populations.
 - (D) They lived harmoniously with the native populations.

- 3 Read the paragraph from the section "England and the mid-Atlantic Algonquians."

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Why does the author include this paragraph in the article?

- (A) to provide an example of how the Europeans and Native Americans had friendly relationships
 - (B) to explain the differences in how Europeans and Native Americans felt about the right to own land
 - (C) to describe the types of agreements the English and Native Americans worked out initially
 - (D) to reveal the reasons that led the English and Native Americans to go to war over land ownership
- 4 What is the relationship between the introduction [paragraphs 1-2] and the conclusion [last paragraph]?
- (A) Both mention how several groups of Europeans participated in the colonization of North America.
 - (B) Both give examples of the way Europeans interacted with native populations in North America.
 - (C) Both provide explanations for why the Europeans colonized and conquered North America.
 - (D) Both present evidence of how the Europeans mistreated the native populations of North America.