

Three Worlds Meet (Beginnings to 1620)

ERA 1: Overview

The study of American history properly begins with the first peopling of the Americas more than 30,000 years ago. Students will learn about the spread of ancient human societies in the Americas, North and South, and their adaptations to diverse physical and natural environments. This prepares students to address the historical convergence of European, African, and Native American people starting in the late 15th century when the Columbian voyages began. In studying the beginnings of North American history, it is important for students to understand that Indian societies, like peoples in other parts of the world, were experiencing change--political, economic, and cultural--on the eve of the arrival of Europeans. The history of the Native Americans was complex, and it was continuing even as European settlers landed on South and North American shores.

European mariners were the agents of the encounters among these many peoples of the late 15th and early 16th centuries. To understand why the trans-oceanic voyages took place students must gain an appreciation of Europe's economic growth, the rise of bureaucratic states, the pace of technological innovation, intellectual and religious ferment, and the continuing crusading tradition in the late medieval period. Students' grasp of the encounters of diverse peoples in the Americas also requires attention to the history of West and Central Africa. This study will prepare students to investigate the conditions under which the Atlantic slave trade developed.

By studying the European colonization--and partial conquest--of the Americas to 1620, mostly played out in Central and South America, students will embark upon a continuing theme—the making of the many American people of the Western Hemisphere. As a people, we were composed from the beginning of diverse ethnic and linguistic strains. The nature of these manifold and uneven beginnings spawned issues and tensions that are still unresolved. How a composite American society was created out of such human diversity was a complicated process of cultural transformation that unfolded unevenly and unremittingly, as the following eras will address.

By studying early European exploration, colonization, and conquest, students will learn about five long-range changes set in motion by the Columbian voyages. First, the voyages initiated a redistribution of the world's population. Several million voluntary European immigrants flocked to the Americas; at least 10-12 million involuntary enslaved Africans relocated on the west side of the Atlantic, overwhelmingly to South America and the Caribbean; and indigenous peoples experienced catastrophic losses. Second, the arrival of Europeans led to the rise of the first trans-oceanic empires in world history. Third, the Columbian voyages sparked a worldwide commercial expansion and an explosion of European capitalist enterprise. Fourth, the voyages led in time to the planting of English settlements where ideas of representative government and religious toleration would grow and, over several centuries, would inspire similar transformations in other parts of the world. Lastly, at a time when slavery and serfdom were waning in Western Europe, new plantation economies were emerging in the Americas employing forced labor on a large scale.