

Resource 2: America Before Columbus

What About America? What Was America Like Before Columbus Arrived?

Now that you have a sense of what Africa was like before Columbus and other Europeans arrived, let us turn our attention to America. What was it like approximately 600 years ago - before 1492?

Historians have suggested that when people imagine what America was like before Columbus arrived, they recall what they read in school. They read that there were few people who lived far apart in poorly organized groups. And they moved frequently across a huge wilderness hunting for food. People often name a few exceptions, notably very developed cities in Central and South America. But mostly, they imagine America as one big, unsettled wilderness.

Recent research, however, leads historians to conclude that the Americas were home to more people than Europe and that most of those people lived in highly organized societies, just like those that existed in Europe and Africa. (Source [here](#)) But by suggesting that America was one big unsettled wilderness, Europeans believed that they could claim it. (Calloway, 15)



Discuss: What was America Like Before Columbus Arrived?

How Many People Were There and When did they Get Here?

Shortly after the Europeans first arrived in what came to be called America, they realized that they landed in a place that people in Europe did not know existed. They named the land "America" and referred to it as "the New World." In their minds, Europe, Africa, and Asia were part of the "Old World" that Europeans knew about for hundreds of years. America was a "New World" to them.

But the idea that America was a "New World" is misleading and somewhat insulting to the descendants of the First People who live on the continents. Why? Because researchers have found evidence (e.g., bones and tools) that people lived in America for at least 12,000 and perhaps as many as 50,000 years before Columbus arrived! Researchers also estimate that there may have been as many as 100 million people living in the Americas by 1492! That is twice as many people as were living in Europe at that time.

One reason the population of America grew as well as it did is because, as one historian has suggested, the people had created a "disease free paradise. This did not mean that there were no diseases. There were. But the people ate healthy food and, as one observer wrote, "Men, women, and children from early infancy, are in the habit of bathing." (Dunbar-Ortiz, 17) By eating healthy foods and taking regular baths the population of America grew to a pretty incredible size.



Discuss: How many people were in America and when did they get here?

How Did the First People in America Get Here?

There is agreement among most researchers that human life began in Africa because bones of human ancestors have been found in Africa that are much older than bones found anywhere else on earth. The bones found in Africa are approximately 230,000 years old. So, the widely accepted theory is that life began in Africa then people moved out and around the world over thousands of years.

Actually, there may be more than one explanation for how the First People got to America. The theory held by most experts is that the first Americans traveled by foot from Asia to America across a land bridge that connected Asia to what is now Alaska. See the route they took on the map to the right.

They then moved south on foot and possibly on boats along the coast looking for better sources of food and warmer climates. Some of the spear tips that they used to hunt have been found in a place out west called Clovis, New Mexico. The land bridge no longer exists because water covered it up and is now the Bering Sea which separates Russia and Alaska.



More recently, researchers found human artifacts further east in Virginia and Pennsylvania, and in places like South America that are just as old or older than the ones in New Mexico. So, the question remains - might America's First People have come a few different ways (e.g., by foot across ice that connected Europe and America, or by boat across the Pacific or Atlantic Oceans)? More evidence is needed to answer this question and support conclusions other than the land bridge theory.

While researchers suggest that the First People to set foot in America came across a land bridge that connected Asia and America, you should be aware that "many Native people" do not accept the idea that they came here from Asia. As historian Colin Calloway states, "Native traditions say the ancestors have always been here." (Calloway, 16) Some American Indians point out that the idea that American Indians came from Asia has been used by Europeans to weaken their claim to the land.



Discuss: How did the First People in America get here?

What Was America Like When Columbus Arrived?

Remember, the First People to arrive in America probably got here at least 12,000 years ago. Meanwhile, Columbus and his fellow Europeans did not "discover" America until 1492. That means that people were living in America 10,500 years before Columbus arrived! If you think about it, there is another way of thinking about America before Columbus arrived - it was actually an "Ancient World," not a "New World."

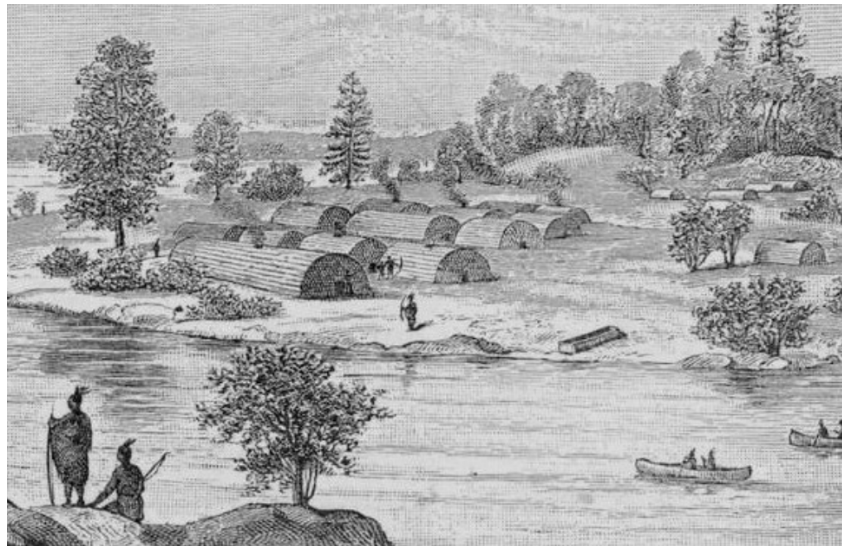
Just as there was a lot of differences in Europe and Africa, there were just as many if not more in America. The people had very different lifestyles, spoke hundreds of different languages, belonged to many different nations and called themselves by very different names such as Taino, Carib, Aztec, Lenape etc. They were not all alike and did not call themselves Indians or Native Americans. As you will soon learn, Columbus and other Europeans gave them those names.

Some American Indians lived in large cities that look like the one illustrated below. It is an artist's vision of the city of Tenochtitlan in Mexico where 100,000 people may have lived.



Source: [here](#)

Others like the American Indians who lived on the land we call Delaware today settled in smaller villages. Their “longhouses” were built along rivers and other waterways like the one illustrated below.



Source [here](#).



Discuss: What was America like before Columbus arrived?

Was America as Developed as Europe and Africa?

Just like Africa, much of America was surprisingly well-developed at the time. The people living here were doing some amazing things including:

- They figured out how to grow corn - a crop that now feeds much of the world's people today. No one else knew how to do that.
- They built irrigation systems that delivered water to the corn farms 2,000 years before the Europeans arrived
- They built enormous dams and canals. One canal was 20 miles long! And they did this without machines!
- They created art, architecture, sculptures, paintings using gold and silver
- They invented the rubber ball and a game that is similar to soccer
- They developed the concept of zero



- They created an incredibly accurate calendar that stretched into the future
- They built enormous pyramids and observatories that allowed them to study the stars and planets
- They could chart the movements of the planets and predict eclipses (Dunbar-Ortiz, 16-23)



Discuss: Was America as developed as Europe and Africa?

References

- Calloway, Colin G. (2012). *First Peoples: A Documentary Survey of American Indian History* (Fourth Edition).
- Dunbar-Ortiz, Roxanne (2014). *An Indigenous People's History of the United States*. Beacon Press.
- Recorded NPR Interview with Charles C. Mann [here](#).
- Map of land bridge accessed [here](#).