

Lesson 2: America Before Columbus

Unit 2
Grade 4

Fill out this chart about American Indians.

Draw what the homes of American Indians look like today on the back of the paper.

Today they wear

We are now going to read about America and the people who lived on the continents (North and South) before Europeans “discovered” it in 1492.

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?

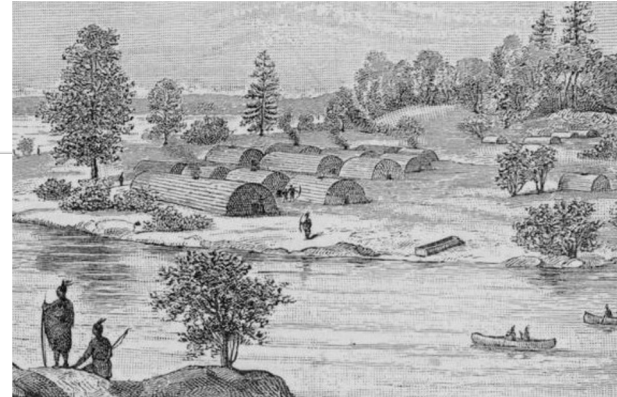
What Was America Like When Columbus Arrived?

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.

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.



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?

Show me what you know - Check for Understanding

Resource 3: Checks for Understanding

Name _____

1. Use the blank boxes on one timeline below to show the order in which each of the following events occurred.
- First people set foot in America
 - American Indians built cities with pyramids
 - Columbus landed in America
 - First humans appeared in Africa

Timeline of America Before 1492

2. **Identify an EFFECT:** According to the reading, what effect did the ideas that America was a wilderness and American Indians came from Asia have?
- a. They made Europeans believe that they would not catch diseases
 - b. They made Europeans believe that they could claim land in America
 - c. They made Europeans believe that America was an "Ancient World"
 - d. They made Europeans believe that Columbus discovered a "New World"
3. **Identify a CAUSE:** According to the reading, which of the following **BEST** explains why the number of people living in America before Columbus grew as large as it did?
- a. The people ate healthy food and took baths
 - b. The people were peaceful and did not have wars
 - c. The people lived in longhouses and along waterways
 - d. The people had antibodies that prevented the spread of diseases

4. Place a check next to any of the following that describe a conclusion that can be drawn from the reading about America before 1492

_____ there were more people living in America than in Europe

____ American Indians lived in a wilderness that was not very well developed

_____ people lived in America thousands of years before Columbus arrived

_____ people who lived in America called themselves Indians and their land America

_____ Europeans were more advanced than American Indians in every way

_____ American Indians now believe that they came from Asia

5. **Recognize POINTS OF VIEW:** Read the list of statements below. Then write TWO statements that describe an American Indian point of view in Column 1, and TWO statements that describe European point of view in Column 2.

- America was an "Ancient World"
- American Indians always lived in America
- Europe was more advanced than America
- Land in America could be taken because it was a wilderness

American Indian Point of View	European Point of View

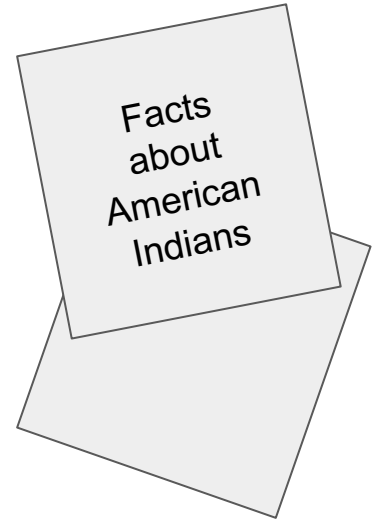
6. Think back to the warm-up for this lesson. What ideas that you had about American Indians change as a result of this lesson?

Make the Mis Dis

We are going to play a game where we are going to try and identify misconceptions about American Indians and make the misconceptions disappear.

I will present one statement about American Indians.

1. Partner 1 is assigned to the first statement and the rest of the odd statements.
2. If the statement is a misconception or false about American Indians, turn it over, so it disappears. If you do not think it is a misconception and is true, keep it face up.
3. After Partner 1 shares their answer, Partner 2 can agree or disagree and try to talk Partner 1 out of their conclusion if they do not agree.
4. Partner 2 is assigned to the second statement and all even statements.
5. Repeat steps 1-4 for all 10 statements.



Is this a misconception?

Statement #1

Native Americans live in tipis.

Is this a misconception?

Statement #2

**American Indians all have
red skin and long black hair.**

Is this a misconception?

Statement #3

**American Indians all belong
to the same tribe.**

Is this a misconception?

Statement #4

American Indians want to be called Native Americans.

Is this a misconception?

Statement #5

American Indians are all dead.

Is this a misconception?

Statement #6

**Native Americans sold Manhattan
for \$24 worth of trinkets.**

Is this a misconception?

Statement #7

**American Indians' government
pays for things that Native
Americans need.**

Is this a misconception?

Statement #8

**Native Americans have gotten
rich off of casinos.**

Is this a misconception?

Statement #9

**Native Americans have/wear
headdresses.**

Is this a misconception?

Statement #10

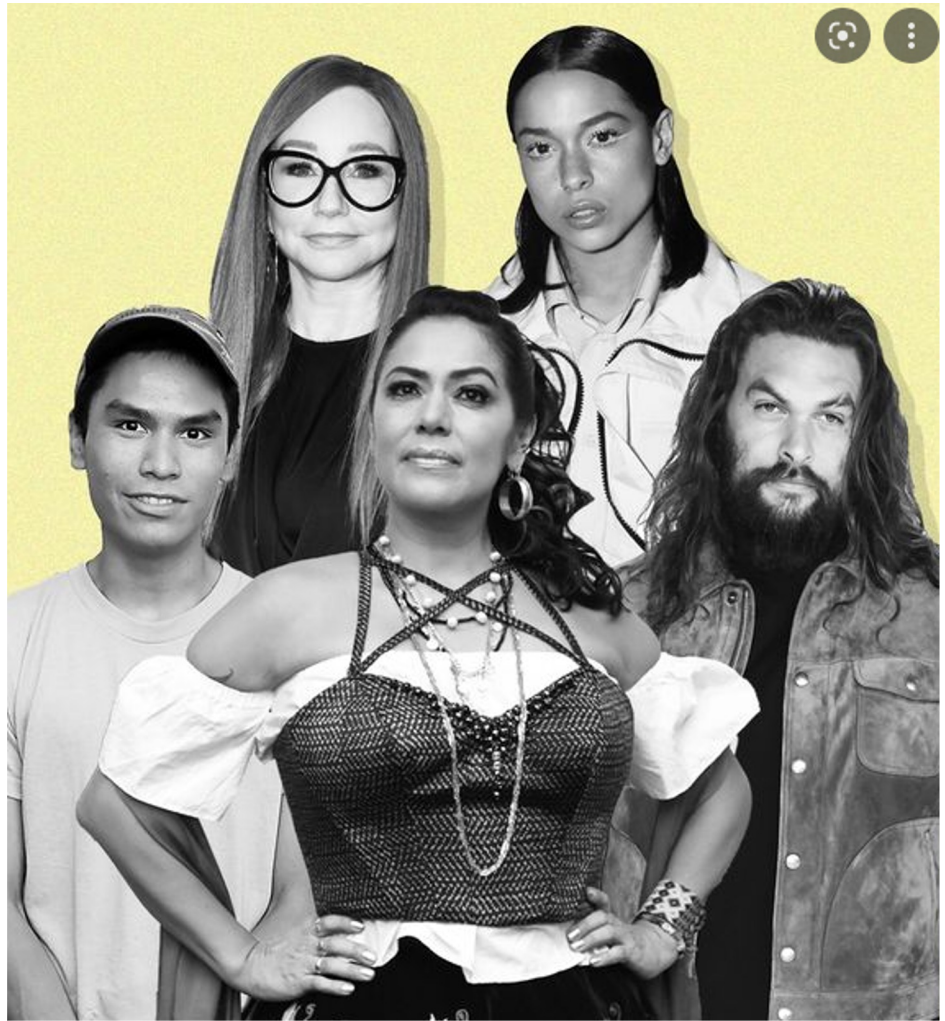
**Native Americans live on
reservations.**

Misconception!

Even when you search Google for images of Native American homes you will be directed to traditional shelters such as tipis and longhouses. Today, while some American Indians own tipis, they live in a range of homes that are similar to ones that other Americans live in.

Misconception!

Native American's skins are not red, and they sport a wide range of hair styles - some more traditional, others more modern. Traditionally, American Indians have viewed hair as a symbol of spiritual health and strength, hence the disposition to have longer hair.



Misconception!

There are 574 different American Indians tribes that are officially recognized by the United States government - all with different cultures.



Misconception!

The Native Knowledge
360 website hosted by the
National Museum of the
American Indian posts the
following (see right):

“What is the correct terminology: American Indian, Indian, Native American, Indigenous, or Native?”

All of these terms are acceptable. The consensus, however, is that whenever possible, Native people prefer to be called by their specific tribal name. In the United States, Native American has been widely used but is falling out of favor with some groups, and the terms American Indian or Indigenous American are preferred by many Native people. Native peoples often have individual preferences on how they would like to be addressed. When talking about Native groups or people, use the terminology the members of the community use to describe themselves collectively.”

Misconception!

The manner in which the story of American Indians has been taught includes what has been described as a “terminal narrative.” This narrative suggests that there has been excessive attention to the histories of Indigenous people that focus on their removal, “cultural death, or disappearance” with little if any attention to recent American Indian history and experiences. It is as if they no longer exist. (Dunbar-Ortiz, 39-41)

The 2010 Census showed that the U.S. population on April 1, 2010, was 308.7 million. Out of the total U.S. population, 2.9 million people, or 0.9 percent, reported American Indian or Alaska Native alone. In addition, 2.3 million people or another 0.7 percent, reported American Indian or Alaska Native in combination with one or more other races. Together, these two groups totaled 5.2 million people. Thus, 1.7 percent of all people in the United States identified as American Indian or Alaska Native, either alone or in combination with one or more other races.

Today, most American Indians live in western parts of the United States, including Alaska.



India Colon Diaz (Taíno of Borikén Nation of Puerto Rico) lives in Wilmington, Delaware
Photographer: Andre' L. Wright Jr.

Misconception!

“According to a letter to Dutch officials, the settlers offered representatives of local Lenape groups 60 guilders, about \$24, in trade goods for their homeland, Manahatta. The best insight we have into what the Lenape received comes from a later 17th-century deed for the Dutch purchase of Staten Island, also for 60 guilders, which lists goods "to be brought from Holland and delivered" to the Indians, including shirts, socks, cloth, muskets, bars of lead, powder, kettles, axes, awls, adzes and knives.

But it is unlikely that the Lenape saw the original transaction as a sale. Although land could be designated for the exclusive use of prominent native individuals and families, the idea of selling land in perpetuity, to be regarded as property, was alien to native societies. Historians who try now to reconstruct early transactions between Europeans and Native Americans differ over whether the Lenape considered it an agreement for the Dutch to use, but not own, Manahatta (the majority view), or whether even as early as 1626, Indians had engaged in enough trade to understand European economic ideas. Source [here](#)



Misconception!

Some American Indians receive
government aid, just like other
Americans but just

Misconception!

The idea that money just flows freely into Indian people's hands is pure fantasy.” According to one website, less than half of federally recognized tribes have casinos (474 gaming facilities in 28 states) and there are strict regulations on how gaming money can be used. Moreover, the unemployment rate for American Indians is double that for other Americans and up to 75% of the jobs created by casinos go to people who are not American Indians.



Misconception!

“War bonnets (also called warbonnets or headdresses) are feathered headgear traditionally worn by male leaders of the American Plains Indians Nations who have earned a place of great respect in their tribe. Originally they were sometimes worn into battle, but they are now primarily used for ceremonial occasions. In the Native American and First Nations communities that traditionally have these items of regalia, they are seen as items of great spiritual and political importance, only to be worn by those who have earned the right and honour through formal recognition by their people.”

Source [here](#).

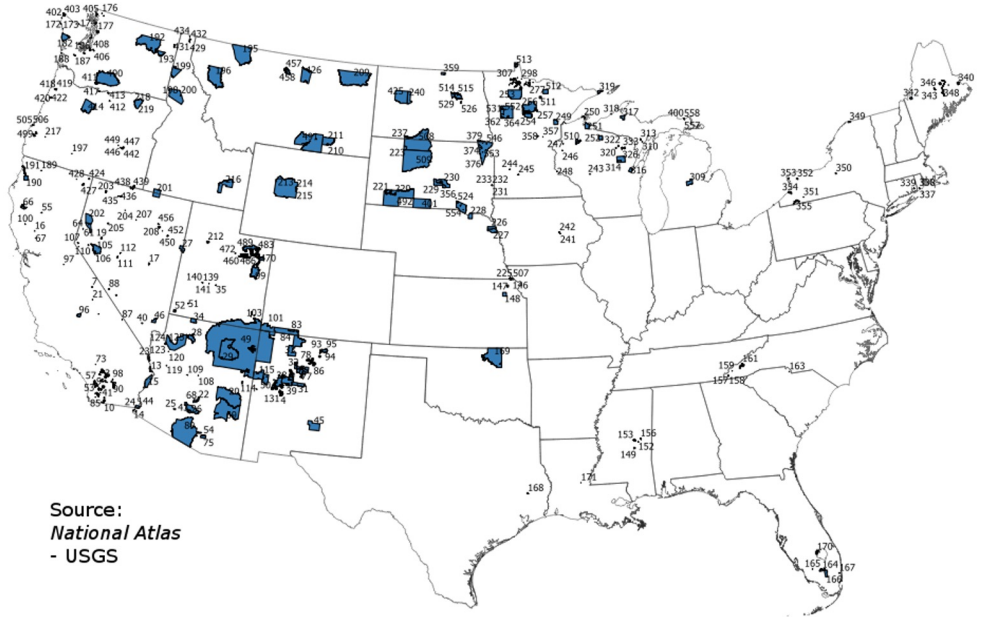
For many Native Americans, it is offensive and disrespectful for anyone who has not earned the honor to wear a headdress.



Misconception!

Only 25-30% of
Native Americans
in the United
States live on
reservations.

Native American Reservations in the Continental United States





teenVOGUE

Let's Reflect

1. What was America like before Columbus arrived in 1492?
1. What are some misconceptions that people have about American Indians today?

