The European explorers who followed Christopher Columbus to North America in the sixteenth century had no notion of founding a new nation. Neither did the first European settlers who peopled the thirteen English colonies on the eastern shores of the continent in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These original colonists may have fled poverty or religious persecution in the Old World, but they continued to view themselves as Europeans, and as subjects of the English king. They regarded America as but the western rim of a transatlantic European world.

Yet life in the New World made the colonists different from their European cousins, and eventually, during the American Revolution, the Americans came to embrace a vision of their country as an independent nation. How did this epochal transformation come about? How did the colonists overcome the conflicts that divided them, unite against Britain, and declare themselves at great cost to be an “American” people?

They had much in common to begin with. Most were English-speaking. Most came determined to create an agricultural society modeled on English customs. Conditions in the New World deepened their common bonds. Most colonists strove to live lives unfettered by the tyrannies of royal authority, official religion, and social hierarchies that they had left behind. They grew to cherish ideals that became synonymous with American life—reverence for individual liberty, self-government, religious tolerance, and economic opportunity. They also commonly displayed a willingness to subjugate outsiders—first Indians, who were nearly annihilated through war and disease, and then Africans, who were brought in chains to serve as slave labor, especially on the tobacco, rice, and indigo plantations of the southern colonies.

But if the settlement experience gave people a common stock of values, both good and bad, it also divided them. The thirteen colonies were quite different from one another. Puritans carved tight, pious, and relatively democratic communities of small family farms out of rocky-soiled New England. Theirs was a homogeneous world in comparison to most of the southern colonies, where large landholders, mostly Anglicans, built plantations along the coast from which they lorded over a labor force of black slaves and looked down upon the poor white farmers who settled the backcountry. Different still were the middle colonies stretching from New York to Delaware. There
diversity reigned. Well-to-do merchants put their stamp on New York City, as Quakers did on Philadelphia, while out in the countryside sprawling estates were interspersed with modest homesteads. Within individual colonies, conflicts festered over economic interests, ethnic rivalries, and religious practices. All those clashes made it difficult for colonists to imagine that they were a single people with a common destiny, much less that they ought to break free from Britain.

The American colonists in fact had little reason to complain about Britain. Each of the thirteen colonies enjoyed a good deal of self-rule. Many colonists profited from trade within the British Empire. But by the 1760s, this stable arrangement began to crumble, a victim of the imperial rivalry between France and Britain. Their struggle for supremacy in North America began in the late seventeenth century and finally dragged in the colonists during the French and Indian War from 1756 to 1763. That war in one sense strengthened ties with Britain, since colonial militias fought triumphantly alongside the British army against their mutual French and Indian enemies. But once the French were driven from the North American continent, the colonists no longer needed Britain for protection. More important still, after 1763 a financially overstretched British government made the fateful choice of imposing taxes on colonies that had been accustomed to answering mainly to their own colonial assemblies. By the 1770s issues of taxation, self-rule, and trade restrictions brought the crisis of imperial authority to a head. Although as late as 1775 most people in the colonies clung to the hope of some kind of accommodation short of outright independence, royal intransigence soon thrust the colonists into a war of independence that neither antagonist could have anticipated just a few years before.

Eight years of revolutionary war did more than anything in the colonial past to bring Americans together as a nation. Comradeship-in-arms and the struggle to shape a national government forced Americans to subdue their differences as best they could. But the spirit of national unity was hardly universal. One in five colonists sided with the British as “Loyalists,” and a generation would pass before the wounds of this first American “civil war” fully healed. Yet in the end, Americans won the Revolution, with no small measure of help from the French, because in every colony people shared a firm belief that they were fighting for the “unalienable rights” of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” in the words of Thomas Jefferson’s magnificent Declaration of Independence. Almost two hundred years of living a new life had prepared Americans to found a new nation.
Se
eral billion years ago, that whirling speck of
dust known as the earth, fifth in size among the
planets, came into being.

About six thousand years ago—only a minute in
geological time—recorded history of the Western world
began. Certain peoples of the Middle East, developing
a written culture, gradually emerged from the haze of
the past.

Five hundred years ago—only a few seconds figu-
ratively speaking—European explorers stumbled on
the Americas. This dramatic accident forever altered
the future of both the Old World and the New, and of
Africa and Asia as well (see Figure 1.1).

The Shaping of North America

Planet earth took on its present form slowly. Some 225
million years ago, a single supercontinent contained
all the world’s dry land. Then enormous chunks of ter-
rain began to drift away from this colossal landmass,
opening the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, narrowing
the Pacific Ocean, and forming the great continents of
Eurasia, Africa, Australia, Antarctica, and the Americas.
The existence of a single original continent has been
proved in part by the discovery of nearly identical spe-
cies of fish that swim today in long-separated freshwa-
ter lakes throughout the world.

Continued shifting and folding of the earth’s crust
thrust up mountain ranges. The Appalachians were
probably formed even before continental separation,
perhaps 350 million years ago. The majestic ranges
of western North America—the Rockies, the Sierra
Nevada, the Cascades, and the Coast Ranges—arose
much more recently, geologically speaking, some 135
million to 25 million years ago. They are truly “Ameri-
can” mountains, born after the continent took on its
own separate geological identity.

By about 10 million years ago, nature had sculpted
the basic geological shape of North America. The con-
tinent was anchored in its northeastern corner by the
massive Canadian Shield—a zone undergirded by
ancient rock, probably the first part of what became
the North American landmass to have emerged above
sea level. A narrow eastern coastal plain, or “tidewa-
ter” region, creased by many river valleys, sloped gen-
tly upward to the timeworn ridges of the Appalachians.
Those ancient mountains slanted away on their west-
ern side into the huge midcontinental basin that rolled
downward to the Mississippi Valley bottom and then
rose relentlessly to the towering peaks of the Rockies.

From the Rocky Mountain crest—the “roof of Amer-
ica”—the land fell off jaggedly into the intermountain
Great Basin, bounded by the Rockies on the east and
the Sierra and Cascade ranges on the west. The valleys
of the Sacramento and San Joaquin Rivers and the Wil-
lamette–Puget Sound trough seamed the interiors of
present-day California, Oregon, and Washington. The
land at last met the foaming Pacific, where the Coast
Ranges rose steeply from the sea.

Nature laid a chill hand over much of this ter-
rain in the Great Ice Age, beginning about 2 million
years ago. Two-mile-thick ice sheets crept from the
polar regions to blanket parts of Europe, Asia, and the
Peopling the Americas

The Great Ice Age shaped more than the geological history of North America. It also contributed to the origins of the continent’s human history. Though recent (and still highly controversial) evidence suggests that some early peoples may have reached the Americas in crude boats, most probably came by land. Some 35,000 years ago, the Ice Age congealed much of the world oceans into massive ice-pack glaciers, lowering the level of the sea. As the sea level dropped, it exposed a land bridge connecting Eurasia with North America in the area of the present-day Bering Sea between Siberia and Alaska. Across that bridge, probably following migratory herds of game, ventured small bands of nomadic Asian hunters—the “immigrant” ancestors of the Native Americans. They continued to trek across the Bering isthmus for some 250 centuries, slowly peopling the American continents (see Map 1.1).

As the Ice Age ended and the glaciers melted, the sea level rose again, inundating the land bridge about 10,000 years ago. Nature thus barred the door to further immigration for many thousands of years, leaving this part of the human family marooned for millennia on the now-isolated American continents.

Time did not stand still for these original Americans. The same climatic warming that melted the ice and drowned the bridge to Eurasia gradually opened ice-free valleys through which vanguard bands groped their way southward and eastward across the Americas. Roaming slowly through this awesome wilderness, they eventually reached the far tip of South America, some 15,000 miles from Siberia. By the time Europeans arrived in America in 1492, perhaps 54 million people
inhabited the two American continents.* Over the centuries they split into countless tribes, evolved more than 2,000 separate languages, and developed many diverse religions, cultures, and ways of life.

Incas in Peru, Mayans in Central America, and Aztecs in Mexico shaped stunningly sophisticated civilizations. Their advanced agricultural practices, based primarily on the cultivation of maize, which is Indian corn, fed large populations, perhaps as many as 20 million in Mexico alone. Although without large draft

Making Sense of the New World

Gradually the immense implications of the New World’s existence began to impress themselves on Europe, with consequences for literature, art, politics, the economy, and, of course, cartography. Maps can only be representations of reality and are therefore necessarily distortions. This map bears a recognizable resemblance to modern mapmakers’ renderings of the American continents, but it also contains gross geographic inaccuracies (note the location of Japan—Zipangri—relative to the North American west coast) as well as telling commentaries on what sixteenth-century Europeans found remarkable (note the Land of Giants—Regio Gigantum—and the indication of cannibals—Canibali—in present-day Argentina and Brazil, respectively). What further clues to the European mentality of the time does the map offer? In what ways might misconceptions about the geography of the Americas have influenced further exploration and settlement patterns?
animals such as horses and oxen, and lacking even the simple technology of the wheel, these peoples built elaborate cities and carried on far-flung commerce. Talented mathematicians, they made strikingly accurate astronomical observations. The Aztecs also routinely sought the favor of their gods by offering human sacrifices, cutting the hearts out of the chests of living victims, who were often captives conquered in battle. By some accounts more than 5,000 people were ritually slaughtered to celebrate the crowning of one Aztec chieftain.

The Earliest Americans

Agriculture, especially corn growing, accounted for the size and sophistication of the Native American civilizations in Mexico and South America. About 5000 B.C.E. hunter-gatherers in highland Mexico developed a wild grass into the staple crop of corn, which became their staff of life and the foundation of the complex, large-scale, centralized Aztec and Incan civilizations that eventually emerged. Cultivation of corn spread across the Americas from the Mexican heartland. Everywhere it was planted, corn began to transform nomadic hunting bands into settled agricultural villagers, but this process went forward slowly and unevenly.

Corn planting reached the present-day American Southwest as early as 2000 B.C.E. and powerfully molded Pueblo culture. The Pueblo peoples in the Rio Grande valley constructed intricate irrigation systems to water their cornfields. They were dwelling in villages of multi-storied, terraced buildings when Spanish explorers made contact with them in the sixteenth century. (Pueblo means “village” in Spanish.)

Corn cultivation reached other parts of North America considerably later. The timing of its arrival in different localities explains much about the relative rates of development of different Native American peoples (see Map 1.2). Throughout the continent to the north and east of the land of the Pueblos, social life was less elaborately developed—indeed “societies” in the modern sense of the word scarcely existed. No dense concentrations of population or complex nation-states comparable to the Aztec empire existed in North America outside of Mexico at the time of the Europeans’ arrival—one of the reasons for the relative ease with which the European colonizers subdued the native North Americans.

The Mound Builders of the Ohio River valley, the Mississippian culture of the lower Midwest, and the desert-dwelling Anasazi peoples of the Southwest did sustain some large settlements after the incorporation of corn planting into their ways of life during the first millennium C.E. The Mississippian settlement at Cahokia, near present-day East St. Louis, was at one time home to as many as twenty-five thousand people. The Anasazis built an elaborate pueblo of more than six hundred interconnected rooms at Chaco Canyon in modern-day New Mexico. But mysteriously, perhaps due to prolonged drought, all those ancient cultures fell into decline by about 1300 C.E.

The cultivation of maize, as well as of high-yielding strains of beans and squash, reached the southeastern Atlantic seaboard region of North America about 1000 C.E. These plants made possible three-sister farming, with beans growing on the trellis of the cornstalks and squash covering the planting mounds to retain moisture in the soil. The rich diet provided by this environmentally clever farming technique produced some of the highest population densities on the continent, among them the Creek, Choctaw, and Cherokee peoples.

The Iroquois in the northeastern woodlands, inspired by a legendary leader named Hiawatha, created in the sixteenth century perhaps the closest North American approximation to the great empires of Mexico and Peru. The Iroquois Confederacy developed the political and organizational skills to sustain a robust military alliance that menaced its neighbors, Native American and European alike, for well over a century (see “Makers of America: The Iroquois,” pp. 36–37).

But for the most part, the native peoples of North America were living in small, scattered, and impermanent settlements on the eve of the Europeans’ arrival. In more settled agricultural groups, women tended the crops while men hunted, fished, gathered fuel, and cleared fields for planting. This pattern of life frequently conferred substantial authority on women, and many North American native peoples, including the Iroquois, developed matrilineal cultures, in which power and possessions passed down the female side of the family line.
MAP 1.2 North American Indian Peoples at the Time of First Contact with Europeans  Because this map depicts the location of various Indian peoples at the time of their first contact with Europeans, and because initial contacts ranged from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, it is necessarily subject to considerable chronological skewing and is only a crude approximation of the “original” territory of any given group. The map also cannot capture the fluidity and dynamism of Native American life even before Columbus’s “discovery.” For example, the Navajo and Apache peoples had migrated from present-day northern Canada only shortly before the Spanish first encountered them in the present-day American Southwest in the 1500s. The map also places the Sioux on the Great Plains, where Europeans met up with them in the early nineteenth century—but the Sioux had spilled onto the plains not long before then from the forests surrounding the Great Lakes. The indigenous populations of the southeastern and mid-Atlantic regions are especially difficult to represent accurately in a map like this because pre-Columbian intertribal conflicts had so scrambled the native inhabitants that it is virtually impossible to determine which groups were originally where. © Cengage Learning.
Unlike the Europeans, who would soon arrive with the presumption that humans had dominion over the earth and with the technologies to alter the very face of the land, the Native Americans had neither the desire nor the means to manipulate nature aggressively. They revered the physical world and endowed nature with spiritual properties. Yet they did sometimes ignite massive forest fires, deliberately torching thousands of acres of trees to create better hunting habitats, especially for deer. This practice accounted for the open, parklike appearance of the eastern woodlands that so amazed early European explorers.

But in a broad sense, the land did not feel the hand of the Native Americans heavy upon it, partly because they were so few in number. They were so thinly spread across the continent that vast areas were virtually untouched by a human presence. In the fateful year 1492, probably no more than 4 million Native Americans paddled through the whispering, primeval forests and paddled across the sparkling, virgin waters of the continent north of Mexico. They were blissfully unaware that the historic isolation of the Americas was about to end forever, as the land and the native peoples alike felt the full shock of the European “discovery.”

**Indirect Discoverers of the New World**

Europeans, for their part, were equally unaware of the existence of the Americas. Blond-bearded Norse seafarers from Scandinavia had chanced upon the northeastern shoulder of North America about 1000 C.E. They landed at a place near L’Anse aux Meadows in present-day Newfoundland that abounded in wild grapes, which led them to name the spot Vinland. But no strong nation-state, yearning to expand, supported these venturesome voyagers. Their flimsy settlements consequently were soon abandoned, and their discovery was forgotten, except in Scandinavian saga and song.

For several centuries thereafter, other restless Europeans, with the growing power of ambitious governments behind them, sought contact with a wider world, whether for conquest or trade. They thus set in motion the chain of events that led to a drive toward Asia, the penetration of Africa, and the completely accidental discovery of the New World.

Christian crusaders must rank high among America’s indirect discoverers. Clad in shining armor, tens of thousands of these European warriors tried from the eleventh to the fourteenth century to wrest the Holy Land from Muslim control. Foiled in their military assaults, the crusaders nevertheless acquired a taste for the exotic delights of Asia. Goods that had been virtually unknown in Europe now were craved—silk for clothing, drugs for aching flesh, perfumes for unbathed bodies, colorful draperies for gloomy castles, and spices—especially sugar, a rare luxury in Europe before the crusades—for preserving and flavoring food. Europe’s developing sweet tooth would have momentous implications for world history.

The luxuries of the East were prohibitively expensive in Europe. They had to be transported enormous distances from the Spice Islands (Indonesia), China, and India, in creaking ships and on swaying camel back. The journey led across the Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf, and the Red Sea or along the tortuous caravan routes of Asia or the Arabian Peninsula, ending at the ports of the eastern Mediterranean (see Map 1.3).
stimulated European desires for a cheaper route to the treasures of the East. Before the mid-sixteenth century, European sailors refused to sail southward along the coast of West Africa because they could not beat their way home against the prevailing northerly winds and south-flowing currents. About 1450, Portuguese mariners overcame those obstacles. Not only had they developed the caravel, a ship that could sail more closely into the wind, but they had discovered that they could return to Europe by sailing northwesterly from the African coast toward the Azores, where the prevailing westward breezes would carry them home.

MAP 1.3 The World Known to Europe and Major Trade Routes with Asia, 1492

Goods on the early routes passed through so many hands along the way that their ultimate source remained mysterious to Europeans. Muslim middlemen exacted a heavy toll en route. By the time the strange-smelling goods reached Italian merchants at Venice and Genoa, they were so costly that purchasers and profits alike were narrowly limited. European consumers and distributors were naturally eager to find a less expensive route to the riches of Asia or to develop alternate sources of supply.

Europeans Enter Africa

European appetites were further whetted when footloose Marco Polo, an Italian adventurer, returned to Europe in 1295 and began telling tales of his nearly twenty-year sojourn in China. Though he may in fact never have seen China (legend to the contrary, the hard evidence is sketchy), he must be regarded as an indirect discoverer of the New World, for his book, with its descriptions of rose-tinted pearls and golden pagodas,
CHAPTER 1 New World Beginnings, 33,000 B.C.E.–1769 C.E.

Slave trading became a big business. Some forty thousand Africans were carried away to the Atlantic sugar islands in the last half of the fifteenth century. Millions more were to be wrenched from their home continent after the discovery of the Americas. In these fifteenth-century Portuguese adventures in Africa were to be found the origins of the modern plantation system, based on large-scale commercial agriculture and the wholesale exploitation of slave labor. This kind of plantation economy would shape the destiny of much of the New World.

The seafaring Portuguese pushed still farther southward in search of the water route to Asia. Edging cautiously down the African coast, Bartholomeu Dias rounded the southernmost tip of the “Dark Continent” in 1488. Ten years later Vasco da Gama finally reached India (hence the name “Indies,” given by Europeans to all the mysterious lands of the Orient) and returned home with a small but tantalizing cargo of jewels and spices.

Meanwhile, the kingdom of Spain became united—an event pregnant with destiny—in the late fifteenth century. This new unity resulted primarily from the marriage of two sovereigns, Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile, and from the brutal expulsion of the “infidel” Muslim Moors from Spain after centuries of Christian-Islamic warfare. Gloriing in their sudden strength, the Spaniards were eager to outstrip their Portuguese rivals in the race to tap the wealth of the

Sea travel down the African coast had been virtually impossible, Africa south of the forbidding Sahara Desert barrier had remained remote and mysterious. African gold, perhaps two-thirds of Europe’s supply, crossed the Sahara on camelback, and shadowy tales may have reached Europe about the flourishing West African kingdom of Mali in the Niger River valley, with its impressive Islamic university at Timbuktu. But Europeans had no direct access to sub-Saharan Africa until the Portuguese navigators began to creep down the West African coast in the middle of the fifteenth century.

The Portuguese promptly set up trading posts along the African shore for the purchase of gold—and slaves. Arab flesh merchants and Africans themselves had traded slaves for centuries before the Europeans arrived. The slavers routinely charged higher prices for captives from distant sources, because they could not easily flee to their native villages or be easily rescued by their kin. Slave brokers also deliberately separated persons from the same tribes and mixed unlike people together to frustrate organized resistance. Thus from its earliest days, slavery by its very nature inhibited the expression of regional African cultures and tribal identities.

The Portuguese adopted these Arab and African practices. They built up their own systematic traffic in slaves to work the sugar plantations that Portugal, and later Spain, established on the African coastal islands of Madeira, the Canaries, São Tomé, and Principe. The Portuguese appetite for slaves was enormous and dwarfed the modest scale of the pre-European traffic. Slave trading became a big business. Some forty thousand Africans were carried away to the Atlantic sugar islands in the last half of the fifteenth century. Millions more were to be wrenched from their home continent after the discovery of the Americas. In these fifteenth-century Portuguese adventures in Africa were to be found the origins of the modern plantation system, based on large-scale commercial agriculture and the wholesale exploitation of slave labor. This kind of plantation economy would shape the destiny of much of the New World.

This illustration, from the first printed edition of The Travels of Marco Polo in 1477, shows the traveler crossing the Persian Gulf between the Arabian Peninsula and Persia (present-day Iran).

Marco Polo Passing Through the Strait of Hormuz
The Impact of Discovery

In Spain a modern national state was taking shape, with the unity, wealth, and power to shoulder the formidable tasks of discovery, conquest, and colonization. The dawn of the Renaissance in the fourteenth century nurtured an ambitious spirit of optimism and adventure. Printing presses, introduced about 1450, facilitated the spread of scientific knowledge. The mariner’s compass, possibly borrowed from the Arabs, eliminated some of the uncertainties of sea travel. Meanwhile, across the ocean, the unsuspecting New World innocently awaited its European “discoverers.”

Onto this stage stepped Christopher Columbus. This skilled Italian seafarer persuaded the Spanish monarchs to outfit him with three tiny but seaworthy ships, manned by a motley crew. Daringly, he unfurled the sails of his cockleshell craft and headed westward. His superstitious sailors, fearful of venturing into the oceanic unknown, grew increasingly mutinous. After six weeks at sea, failure loomed until, on October 12, 1492, the crew sighted an island in the Bahamas. A new world thus swam within the vision of Europeans.

Columbus’s sensational achievement obscures the fact that he was one of the most successful failures in history. Seeking a new water route to the fabled Indies, he in fact had bumped into an enormous land barrier blocking the ocean pathway. For decades thereafter explorers strove to get through it or around it. The truth gradually dawned that sprawling new continents had been discovered. Yet Columbus was at first so certain that he had skirted the rim of the “Indies” that he called the native peoples Indians, a gross geographical misnomer that somehow stuck.

Indies. To the south and east, Portugal controlled the African coast and thus controlled the gateway to the round-Africa water route to India. Of necessity, therefore, Spain looked westward.

Columbus Comes upon a New World

The stage was now set for a cataclysmic shift in the course of history—the history not only of Europe but of all the world. Europeans clamored for more and cheaper products from the lands beyond the Mediterranean. Africa had been established as a source of cheap slave labor for plantation agriculture. The Portuguese voyages had demonstrated the feasibility of long-range ocean navigation. In Spain a modern national state was taking shape, with the unity, wealth, and power to shoulder the formidable tasks of discovery, conquest, and colonization. The dawn of the Renaissance in the fourteenth century nurtured an ambitious spirit of optimism and adventure. Printing presses, introduced about 1450, facilitated the spread of scientific knowledge. The mariner’s compass, possibly borrowed from the Arabs, eliminated some of the uncertainties of sea travel. Meanwhile, across the ocean, the unsuspecting New World innocently awaited its European “discoverers.”

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Columbus's discovery would eventually convulse four continents—Europe, Africa, and the two Americas. Thanks to his epochal voyage, an interdependent global economic system emerged on a scale undreamed-of before he set sail. Its workings touched every shore washed by the Atlantic Ocean. Europe provided the markets, the capital, and the technology; Africa furnished the labor; and the New World offered its raw materials, especially its precious metals and its soil for the cultivation of sugar cane. For Europeans as well as for Africans and Native Americans, the world after 1492 would never be the same, for better or worse.

**When Worlds Collide**

Two ecosystems—the fragile, naturally evolved networks of relations among organisms in a stable environment—commingled and clashed when Columbus waded ashore. The reverberations from that historic encounter—often called the **Columbian exchange** (see Figure 1.2)—echoed for centuries after 1492. The flora and fauna of the Old and New Worlds had been separated for thousands of years. European explorers marveled at the strange sights that greeted them, including exotic beasts such as iguanas and “snakes with castanets” (rattlesnakes). Native New World plants such as tobacco, maize, beans, tomatoes, and especially the lowly potato eventually revolutionized the international economy as well as the European diet, feeding the rapid population growth of the Old World. These foodstuffs were among the most important Indian gifts to the Europeans and to the rest of the world. Perhaps three-fifths of the crops cultivated around the globe today originated in the Americas. Ironically, the introduction into Africa of New World foodstuffs like maize, manioc, and sweet potatoes may have fed an African population boom that numerically, though not morally, more than offset the losses inflicted by the slave trade.

In exchange the Europeans introduced Old World crops and animals to the Americas. Columbus returned to the Caribbean island of Hispaniola (present-day Haiti and the Dominican Republic) in 1493 with seventeen ships that unloaded twelve hundred men and a virtual Noah’s Ark of cattle, swine, and horses. The horses soon reached the North American mainland through Mexico and in less than two centuries had spread as far as Canada. North American Indian tribes like the Apaches, Sioux, and Blackfeet swiftly adopted the horse, transforming their cultures into highly mobile, wide-ranging hunter societies that roamed the grassy Great Plains in pursuit of the shaggy buffalo. Columbus
arrival, the population of the Taino natives in Hispaniola dwindled from some 1 million people to about 200. Enslavement and armed aggression took their toll, but the deadliest killers were microbes, not muskets. The lethal germs spread among the New World peoples with the speed and force of a hurricane, swiftly sweeping far ahead of the human invaders; most of those afflicted never laid eyes on a European. In the centuries after Columbus’s landfall, as many as 90 percent of the Native Americans perished, a demographic catastrophe without parallel in human history. This depopulation was surely not intended by the Spanish, but it was nevertheless so severe that entire cultures and ancient ways of life were extinguished forever. Baffled, enraged, and vengeful, Indian slaves sometimes kneaded tainted blood into their masters’ bread, to little effect. Perhaps it was poetic justice that the Indians unintentionally did take a kind of revenge by infecting the early explorers with syphilis, injecting that lethal sexually transmitted disease for the first time into Europe.

**The Spanish Conquistadors**

Gradually, Europeans realized that the American continents held rich prizes, especially the gold and silver of the advanced Indian civilizations in Mexico and Peru. Spain secured its claim to Columbus’s discovery in the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494), dividing with Portugal the “heathen lands” of the New World (see Map 1.4). The lion’s share went to Spain, but Portugal received compensating territory in Africa and Asia, as well as title to lands that one day would be Brazil.

Spain became the dominant exploring and colonizing power in the 1500s. In the service of God, as well as in search of gold and glory, Spanish conquistadores (conquerors) fanned out across the Caribbean and eventually onto the mainland of the American continents (see “Makers of America: The Spanish Conquistadores,” pp. 18–19). On Spain’s long roster of notable deeds, two spectacular exploits must be headlined. Vasco Nuñez Balboa, hailed as the discoverer of the Pacific Ocean, waded into the foaming waves off Panama in 1513 and boldly claimed for his king all the lands washed by that sea (see Map 1.5). Ferdinand Magellan started from Spain in 1519 with five tiny ships. After beating through the storm-lashed strait off the tip of South America that still bears his name, he was slain by the inhabitants of the Philippines. His one remaining vessel creaked home in 1522, completing the first circumnavigation of the globe.

Other ambitious Spaniards ventured into North America. In 1513 and 1521, Juan Ponce de León explored Florida, which he at first thought was an island. Seeking gold—and probably not the mythical...
Meanwhile in South America, the ironfisted conqueror Francisco Pizarro crushed the Incas of Peru in 1532 and added a huge hoard of booty to Spanish coffers. By 1600 Spain was swimming in New World silver, mostly from the fabulously rich mines at Potosí in present-day Bolivia, as well as from Mexico. This flood of precious metal touched off a price revolution in Europe that increased consumer costs by as much as 500 percent in the hundred years after the mid-sixteenth century. Some scholars see in this ballooning European money supply the fuel that fed the growth of the economic system known as **capitalism**. Certainly, New World bullion helped transform the world economy. It swelled the vaults of bankers from Spain to Italy, laying the foundations of the modern commercial banking system. It clinked in the purses of merchants in France and Holland, stimulating the spread of commerce and manufacturing. And it paid for much of the burgeon-
Cortés Conquers Mexico

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distance farther on, he picked up the female Indian slave Malinche, who knew both Mayan and Nahuatl, the language of the powerful Aztec rulers of the great empire in the highlands of central Mexico. In addition to his superior firepower, Cortés now had the advantage, through these two interpreters, of understanding the speech of the native peoples whom he was about to encounter, including the Aztecs. Malinche eventually learned Spanish and was baptized with the Spanish name of Doña Marina.

Near present-day Veracruz, Cortés made his final landfall. Through his interpreters he learned of unrest within the Aztec empire among the peoples from whom the Aztecs demanded tribute. He also heard alluring tales of the gold and other wealth stored up in the legendary Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán. He lusted to tear open the coffers of the Aztec kingdom. To quell his mutinous troops, he boldly burned his

ing international trade with Asia, whose sellers had little use for any European good except silver.

The islands of the Caribbean Sea—the West Indies as they came to be called, in yet another perpetuation of Columbus’s geographic confusion—served as offshore bases for the staging of the Spanish invasion of the mainland Americas. Here supplies could be stored, and men and horses could be rested and acclimated, before proceeding to the conquest of the continents. The loosely organized and vulnerable native communities of the West Indies also provided laboratories for testing the techniques that would eventually subdue the advanced Indian civilizations of Mexico and Peru. The most important such technique was the institution known as the encomienda. It allowed the government to “commend,” or give, Indians to certain colonists in return for the promise to try to Christianize them. In all but name, it was slavery. Spanish missionary Bartolomé de Las Casas, appalled by the encomienda system in Hispaniola, called it “a moral pestilence invented by Satan.”

The Conquest of Mexico

In 1519 Hernán Cortés set sail from Cuba with sixteen fresh horses and several hundred men aboard eleven ships, bound for Mexico and for destiny. On the island of Cozumel off the Yucatán Peninsula, he rescued a Spanish castaway who had been enslaved for several years by the Mayan-speaking Indians. A short

Bartolomé de Las Casas (1474–1566), a reform-minded Dominican friar, wrote The Destruction of the Indies in 1542 to chronicle the awful fate of the Native Americans and to protest Spanish policies in the New World. He was especially horrified at the catastrophic effects of disease on the native peoples:

“Who of those in future centuries will believe this? I myself who am writing this and saw it and know the most about it can hardly believe that such was possible.”
In 1492, the same year that Columbus sighted America, the great Moorish city of Granada, in Spain, fell after a ten-year siege. For five centuries the Christian kingdoms of Spain had been trying to drive the North African Muslim Moors (“the Dark Ones,” in Spanish) off the Iberian Peninsula, and with the fall of Granada they succeeded. But the lengthy Reconquista had left its mark on Spanish society. Centuries of military and religious confrontation nurtured an obsession with status and honor, bred religious zealotry and intolerance, and created a large class of men who regarded manual labor and commerce contemptuously. With the Reconquista ended, some of these men turned their restless gaze to Spain’s New World frontier.

At first Spanish hopes for America focused on the Caribbean and on finding a sea route to Asia. Gradually, however, word filtered back of rich kingdoms on the mainland. Between 1519 and 1540, Spanish conquistadores swept across the Americas in two wide arcs of conquest—one driving from Cuba through Mexico into what is now the southwestern United States, the other starting from Panama and pushing south into Peru. Within half a century of Columbus’s arrival in the Americas, the conquistadores had extinguished the great Aztec and Incan empires and claimed for church and crown a territory that extended from Colorado to Argentina, including much of what is now the continental United States.

The military conquest of this vast region was achieved by just ten thousand men, organized in a series of private expeditions. Hernán Cortés, Francisco Pizarro, and other aspiring conquerors signed contracts with the Spanish monarch, raised money from investors, and then went about recruiting an army. Only a small minority of the conquistadores—leaders or followers—were nobles. About half were professional soldiers and sailors; the rest comprised peasants, artisans, and members of the middling classes. Most were in their twenties and early thirties, and all knew how to wield a sword.

Diverse motives spurred these motley adventurers. Some hoped to win royal titles and favors by bringing new peoples under the Spanish flag. Others sought to ensure God’s favor by spreading Christianity to the pagans. Some men hoped to escape dubious pasts, and others sought the kind of historical adventure experienced by heroes Conquistadores, ca. 1534   This illustration for a book called the Köhler Codex of Nuremberg may be the earliest depiction of the conquistadores in the Americas. It portrays men and horses alike as steadfast and self-assured in their work of conquest.

ships, cutting off any hope of retreat. Gathering a force of some twenty thousand Indian allies, he marched on Tenochtitlán and toward one of history’s most dramatic and fateful encounters.

As Cortés proceeded, the Aztec chieftain Moctezuma sent ambassadors bearing fabulous gifts to welcome the approaching Spaniards. These only whetted the conquistador’s appetite. “We Spanish suffer from a strange disease of the heart,” Cortés allegedly informed the emissaries, “for which the only known remedy is gold.” The ambassadors reported this comment to Moctezuma, along with the astonishing fact that the newcomers rode on the backs of “deer” (horses). The superstitious Moctezuma also believed that Cortés was the god Quetzalcoatl, whose return from the eastern sea was predicted in Aztec legends. Expectant yet apprehensive, Moctezuma allowed the conquistadores to approach his capital unopposed.

As the Spaniards entered the Valley of Mexico, the sight of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán amazed them. With 300,000 inhabitants spread over ten square miles, it rivaled in size and pomp any city in contemporary Europe. The Aztec metropolis rose from an island in the center of a lake, surrounded by floating gardens of
of classical antiquity. Nearly all shared a lust for gold. As one of Cortés’s foot soldiers put it, “We came here to serve God and the king, and also to get rich.” One historian adds that the conquistadores first fell on their knees and then fell upon the aborigines.

Armed with horses and gunpowder and preceded by disease, the conquistadores quickly overpowered the Indians. But most never achieved their dreams of glory. Few received titles of nobility, and many of the rank and file remained permanently indebted to the absentee investors who paid for their equipment. Even when an expedition captured exceptionally rich booty, the spoils were unevenly divided: men from the commander’s home region often received more, and men on horseback generally got two shares to the infantryman’s one. The conquistadores lost still more power as the crown gradually tightened its control in the New World. By the 1530s in Mexico and the 1550s in Peru, colorless colonial administrators had replaced the freebooting conquistadores.

Nevertheless, the conquistadores achieved a kind of immortality. Because of a scarcity of Spanish women in the early days of the conquest, many of the conquistadores married Indian women. The soldiers who conquered Paraguay received three native women each, and Cortés’s soldiers in Mexico—who were forbidden to consort with pagan women—quickly had their lovers baptized into the Catholic faith. Their offspring, the “new race” of mestizos, formed a cultural and a biological bridge between Latin America’s European and Indian races.

extraordinary beauty. It was connected to the mainland by a series of causeways and supplied with fresh water by an artfully designed aqueduct.

Moctezuma treated Cortés hospitably at first, but soon the Spaniards’ hunger for gold and power exhausted their welcome. “They thirsted mightily for gold; they stuffed themselves with it; they starved for it; they lusted for it like pigs,” said one Aztec. On the noche triste (sad night) of June 30, 1520, the Aztecs attacked, driving the Spanish down the causeways from Tenochtitlán in a frantic, bloody retreat. Cortés then laid siege to the city, and it capitulated on August 13, 1521. That same year a smallpox epidemic burned through the Valley of Mexico. The combination of conquest and disease took a grisly toll. The Aztec empire gave way to three centuries of Spanish rule. The temples of Tenochtitlán were destroyed to make way for the Christian cathedrals of Mexico City, built on the site of the ruined Indian capital. And the native population of Mexico, winnowed mercilessly by the invader’s diseases, shrank from some 20 million to 2 million people in less than a century.

Yet the invader brought more than conquest and death. He brought his crops and his animals, his
CHAPTER 1 New World Beginnings, 33,000 B.C.E.–1769 C.E.

Artist’s Rendering of Tenochtitlán Amid tribal strife in the fourteenth century, the Aztecs built a capital on a small island in a lake in the central Valley of Mexico. From here they oversaw the most powerful empire yet to arise in Mesoamerica. Two main temples stood at the city’s sacred center, one dedicated to Tlaloc, the ancient rain god, and the other to Huitzilopochtli, the tribal god, who was believed to require human hearts for sustenance.

language and his laws, his customs and his religion, all of which proved adaptable to the peoples of Mexico. He intermarried with the surviving Indians, creating a distinctive culture of mestizos, people of mixed Indian and European heritage. To this day Mexican civilization remains a unique blend of the Old World and the New, producing both ambivalence and pride among people of Mexican heritage. Cortés’s translator, Malinche, for example, has given her name to the Mexican language in the word malinchista, or “traitor.” But Mexicans also celebrate Columbus Day as the Dia de la Raza—the birthday of a wholly new race of people.

The Spread of Spanish America

Spain’s colonial empire grew swiftly and impressively. Within about half a century of Columbus’s landfall, hundreds of Spanish cities and towns flourished in the Americas, especially in the great silver-producing centers of Peru and Mexico. Some 160,000 Spaniards, mostly men, had subjugated millions of Indians. Majestic cathedrals dotted the land, printing presses turned out books, and scholars studied at distinguished universities, including those at Mexico City and Lima, Peru, both founded in 1551, eighty-five years before Harvard, the first college established in the English colonies.

But how secure were these imperial possessions? Other powers were already sniffing around the edges of the Spanish domain, eager to bite off their share of the promised wealth of the new lands. The upstart English sent Giovanni Caboto (known in English as John Cabot) to explore the northeastern coast of North America in 1497 and 1498. The French king dispatched another Italian mariner, Giovanni da Verrazano, to probe the eastern seaboard in 1524. Ten years later the Frenchman Jacques Cartier journeyed hundreds of miles up the St. Lawrence River.

To secure the northern periphery of their New World domain against such encroachments and to convert more Indian souls to Christianity, the Spanish began to fortify and settle their North American borderlands. In a move to block French ambitions and to protect the sea-lanes to the Caribbean, the Spanish erected a fortress at St. Augustine, Florida, in 1565, thus founding the oldest continually inhabited European settlement in the future United States.

In Mexico the tales of Coronado’s expedition of the 1540s to the upper Rio Grande and Colorado River regions continued to beckon the conquistadores northward. A dust-behemed expeditionary column, with eighty-three rumbling wagons and hundreds of grumbling men, traversed the bare Sonora Desert from Mexico into the Rio Grande valley in 1598. Led by Don Juan de Oñate, the Spaniards cruelly abused the Pueblo
peoples they encountered. In the **Battle of Acoma** in 1599, the Spanish severed one foot of each survivor. They proclaimed the area to be the province of New Mexico in 1609 and founded its capital at Santa Fé the following year (see Map 1.6).

The Spanish settlers in New Mexico found a few furs and precious little gold, but they did discover a wealth of souls to be harvested for the Christian religion. The Roman Catholic mission became the central institution in colonial New Mexico until the missionaries’ efforts to suppress native religious customs provoked an Indian uprising called **Popé’s Rebellion** in 1680.

The Pueblo rebels destroyed every Catholic church in the province and killed a score of priests and hundreds of Spanish settlers. In a reversal of Cortés’s treatment of the Aztec temples more than a century earlier, the Indians rebuilt a *kiva*, or ceremonial religious chamber, on the ruins of the Spanish plaza at Santa Fé. It took...
they also lost contact with their native cultures and often lost their lives as well, as the white man’s diseases doomed these biologically vulnerable peoples.

The misdeeds of the Spanish in the New World obscured their substantial achievements and helped give birth to the Black Legend. This false concept held that the conquerors merely tortured and butchered the Indians (“killing for Christ”), stole their gold, infected them with smallpox, and left little but misery behind. The Spanish invaders did indeed kill, enslave, and infect countless natives, but they also erected a colossal empire, sprawling from California and Florida to Tierra del Fuego. They grafted their culture, laws, religion, and language onto a wide array of native societies, laying the foundations for a score of Spanish-speaking nations.

Clearly, the Spaniards, who had more than a century’s head start over the English, were genuine empire builders and cultural innovators in the New World. As compared with their Anglo-Saxon rivals, their colonial establishment was larger and richer, and it was destined to endure more than a quarter of a century longer. And in the last analysis, the Spanish paid the Native Americans the high compliment of fusing with them through marriage and incorporating indigenous culture into their own, rather than shunning and eventually isolating the Indians as their English adversaries would do.

nearly half a century for the Spanish fully to reclaim New Mexico from the insurrectionary Indians.

Meanwhile, as a further hedge against the ever-threatening French, who had sent an expedition under Robert de La Salle down the Mississippi River in the 1680s, the Spanish began around 1716 to establish settlements in Texas. Some refugees from the Pueblo uprising trickled into Texas, and a few missions were established there, including the one at San Antonio later known as the Alamo. But for at least another century, the Spanish presence remained weak in this distant northeastern outpost of Spain’s Mexican empire.

To the west, in California, no serious foreign threat loomed, and Spain directed its attention there only belatedly. Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo had explored the California coast in 1542, but he failed to find San Francisco Bay or anything else of much interest. For some two centuries thereafter, California slumbered undisturbed by European intruders. Then in 1769 Spanish missionaries led by Father Junipero Serra founded at San Diego the first of a chain of twenty-one missions that wound up the coast as far as Sonoma, north of San Francisco Bay. Father Serra’s brown-robed Franciscan friars toiled with zealous devotion to Christianize the three hundred thousand native Californians. They gathered the seminomadic Indians into fortified missions and taught them horticulture and basic crafts. These “mission Indians” did adopt Christianity, but

**Chapter Review**

**KEY TERMS**

Canadian Shield (4)
Incas (6)
Aztecs (6)
nation-states (8)
Cahokia (8)
three-sister farming (8)
middlemen (11)
caravel (11)
plantation (12)
Columbian exchange (14)

Tordesillas, Treaty of (15)
conquistadores (15)
capitalism (16)
encomienda (17)
noche triste (19)
mestizos (20)
Acoma, Battle of (21)
Popé’s Rebellion (21)
Black Legend (22)

**PEOPLE TO KNOW**

Ferdinand of Aragon
Isabella of Castile
Christopher Columbus
Francisco Coronado
Francisco Pizarro
Bartolomé de Las Casas
Hernán Cortés
Malinche (Doña Marina)
Moctezuma
Giovanni Caboto (John Cabot)
Robert de La Salle
Father Junipero Serra

**TO LEARN MORE**

Alfred W. Crosby, Jr., *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (1972)

1513–1521
Ponce de León explores Florida

1519–1521
Cortés conquers Mexico for Spain

1522
Magellan’s vessel completes circumnavigation of the world

1524
Verrazano explores eastern seaboard of North America for France

1532
Pizarro crushes Incas

1534
Cartier journeys up the St. Lawrence River

1539–1542
De Soto explores the Southeast and discovers the Mississippi River

1540–1542
Coronado explores present-day Southwest

1542
Cabrillo explores California coast for Spain

1565
Spanish build fortress at St. Augustine

late 1500s
Iroquois Confederacy founded, according to Iroquois legend

ca. 1000–1300 C.E.
Christian crusades arouse European interest in the East

1295
Marco Polo returns to Europe

1488
Dias rounds southern tip of Africa

1492
Columbus lands in the Bahamas

1494
Treaty of Tordesillas between Spain and Portugal

1498
Da Gama reaches India

Cabot explores northeastern coast of North America for England

1513
Balboa claims all lands touched by the Pacific Ocean for Spain

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A complete, annotated bibliography for this chapter—along with brief descriptions of the People to Know—may be found on the American Pageant website. The Key Terms are defined in a Glossary at the end of the text.

Go to the CourseMate website at www.cengagebrain.com for additional study tools and review materials—including audio and video clips—for this chapter.

Chapter Review

• Andrés Reséndez, A Land So Strange: The Epic Journey of Cabeza de Vaca (2007)
• David J. Weber, Bárbaros: Spaniards and Their Savages in the Age of Enlightenment (2005)

Steven W. Hackel, Children of Coyote, Missionaries of Saint Francis: Indian-Spanish Relations in Colonial California, 1769–1850 (2005)
Alice Beck Keyhoe, America Before the European Invasions (2002)


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AP* Review Questions for Chapter 1

1. The first European explorers reached the region that would become the Americas
   (A) more than 300 years ago.
   (B) about 400 years ago.
   (C) more than 500 years ago.
   (D) at least 600 years ago.
   (E) more than 600 years ago.

2. What proof has led researchers to conclude that the earth once contained a single continent?
   (A) There are identical species of fish in freshwater lakes across the globe.
   (B) There are similar types of mountain ranges around the world.
   (C) All the areas that are now separate regions were similarly impacted by the glaciers 10 million years ago.
   (D) Ethnic groups in one part of the world can trace their ancestry to people in completely different countries.
   (E) There are similar forms of vegetation in many nations.

3. What is the dominant theory about how the first people arrived in what we now call North America?
   (A) Native peoples long existed here.
   (B) They traveled in rafts and simple boats.
   (C) They walked as far as they could, then sailed or swam the rest of the way.
   (D) They walked across a land bridge from Eurasia to North America.
   (E) The first North Americans were Vikings who stayed.

4. The Incans (Peru), Mayans (Central America), and Aztecs (Mexico) owe the development of their sophisticated early civilizations to
   (A) the blessings of their many gods.
   (B) agriculture, particularly the cultivation of corn or maize.
   (C) early mathematics and mathematicians.
   (D) advanced early architecture.
   (E) political systems based on nation-states.

5. What was three-sister farming?
   (A) Small women-run farms that were common in some Native American cultures
   (B) An early farming cooperative in which three different tribal groups planted and harvested crops together
   (C) An agricultural method in which corn, beans, and squash were grown together
   (D) An effort originating in the southwest in 2000 C.E. to develop crops that would yield a more nutritious diet
   (E) The Iroquois inheritance system in which property and possessions passed from one generation to the next through the matrilineal (or mother’s) line

6. Native Americans did NOT make a major imprint on the land they used for all of the following reasons EXCEPT they
   (A) feared changing it would impact their survival.
   (B) lacked the means to dramatically manipulate the land.
   (C) were spread in small groups across the continent.
   (D) revered nature and endowed it with spiritual properties.
   (E) had no desire to alter the landscape.

7. Which of these reasons did NOT drive the Europeans’ exploration that led to “discovery” of the New World?
   (A) The desire to expand their empires and power.
   (B) The quest for a cheaper route to the East.
   (C) Spreading Christianity.
   (D) Finding an alternate trade source for spices, sugar, and other expensive Eastern goods.
   (E) Population surges and land shortages.

8. The plantation system was first developed
   (A) in the American southern colonies.
   (B) by Portuguese explorers in West Africa.
   (C) by various tribal societies in Africa.
   (D) in the Chesapeake colonies.
   (E) by Native Americans.

9. All of the following events in the fifteenth century set the stage for the dramatic and unexpected discovery of the New World EXCEPT
   (A) increasingly successful long-distance voyages by explorers.
   (B) Spain’s rising prominence, wealth, and power.
   (C) competition between European nations to colonize new land.
   (D) wars between rival European countries.
   (E) greater use of the compass.

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13. Spanish conquistadores, traveling to the New World, hoped to gain all of the following EXCEPT
   (A) noble or royal titles.
   (B) God’s favor.
   (C) gold.
   (D) a fresh start.
   (E) the chance to organize an army.

14. Which of the following men was NOT an explorer for Spain?
   (A) Francisco Pizzaro
   (B) Hernán Cortés
   (C) Giovanni Caboto
   (D) Juan Ponce de León
   (E) Francisco Coronado

15. How did the end of the Ice Age affect the peopling of the Americas?
   (A) It allowed settlers to explore new waterways.
   (B) It created new opportunities for African migration.
   (C) It allowed settlers to roam east and south, reaching all points of the continent.
   (D) It prevented future mass migration to the Western Hemisphere.
   (E) It opened the land bridge from Eurasia to the Americas.

16. The Spanish empire in America imported Old World culture and ideas by doing all of the following EXCEPT
   (A) building universities.
   (B) using the printing press to publish written work.
   (C) erecting cathedrals and Christianizing Native Americans.
   (D) fusing Spanish and native cultures through marriage.
   (E) shunning and isolating the Native Americans.