

LESSON 1

Exploration of America (1492–1600)

The lands and human societies that European explorers called a New World were in fact very old. About 10,000 years ago ancestors of the Native Americans filled nearly all of the habitable parts of North and South America. They lived in isolation from the history – and particularly from the diseases – of what became known as the Old World. Native Americans were diverse peoples. They spoke between 300 and 350 distinct languages, and their societies and ways of living varied tremendously. The Aztecs of Mexico and the Incas of Peru built great empires. In what is now the United States, the Mississippians built cities surrounded by farmland between present-day St. Louis, Missouri, (where their city of Cahokia was larger than medieval London) and Natchez, Mississippi. The Mississippians’ ‘Great Sun’ king ruled authoritatively and was carried from place to place by servants, preceded by flute-players. The Pueblo peoples of the Southwest lived in large towns, irrigated their dry land with river water, and traded with peoples as far away as Mexico and California.

The peoples were varied, but they lived in similar ways. All of them grew much of their food. Women farmed and gathered food in the woods. Men hunted, fished, and made war. None of these peoples kept domestic animals. All lived in family groups, but owed their principal loyalties to a wider network of kin and to their clans. Some – the Iroquois in upstate New York and the Powhatan confederacy in Virginia – formed alliances called confederacies for the purposes of keeping peace among neighbours and making war on outsiders. Even within these confederacies, however, everyday political organization seldom extended beyond

villages, and village chiefs ruled their independent-minded people by consent.

The first attempt by Europeans to colonize the New World occurred around AD 1000, when the Vikings sailed from the British Isles to Greenland, established a colony, and then moved on to Labrador, the Baffin Islands, and finally Newfoundland. There they established a colony named Vineland (meaning fertile region) and from that base sailed along the coast of North America, observing the flora, fauna, and native peoples. Inexplicably, after a few years Vineland was abandoned.

Between 1000 and 1650 a series of interconnected developments occurred in Europe that provided the impetus for the exploration and subsequent colonization of America. These developments included the Protestant Reformation and the subsequent Catholic Counter-Reformation, the Renaissance, the unification of small states into larger ones with centralized political power, the emergence of new technology in navigation and shipbuilding, and the establishment of overland trade with the East and the accompanying transformation of the medieval economy. Portugal, Spain, France, and England were transformed from small territories into nation-states with centralized authority in the hands of monarchs who were able to direct and finance overseas exploration.

But the most powerful inducement to exploration was trade. The newly unified states of the Atlantic – France, Spain, England, and Portugal – and their ambitious monarchs were envious of the merchants and princes who dominated the land routes to the East. Moreover, in the latter half of the 15th century, war between European states and the Ottoman Empire greatly hampered Europe's trade with the Orient. The desire to supplant the trade moguls, especially the Italians, and fear of the Ottoman Empire forced the Atlantic nations to search for a new route to the East.

Christopher Columbus sailed for the monarchs of Spain in 1492. He used the familiar prevailing winds to the Canary Islands, off the northwest coast of Africa, and then sailed on. In about two months he landed in the Caribbean on an island in

the Bahamas, thinking he had reached the East Indies. Columbus made three more voyages. He died in 1506, still believing that he had discovered a water route to Asia. In 1499 an Italian navigator Amerigo Vespucci sailed to the northern coast of South America and pronounced the land a new continent.

The first European recorded voyage to the northern coast of America was made by John Cabot, an Italian navigator in the service of England, who sailed from England to Newfoundland in 1497. Giovanni da Verrazzano, in 1524, and Jacques Cartier, in 1534, explored nearly the whole Atlantic coast of the present United States for France. By that time, Europeans had scouted the American coast from Newfoundland to Brazil. While they continued to look for shortcuts to Asia, Europeans began to think of America for its own sake. **Spain** again led the way: Hernán Cortés invaded Mexico in 1519, and Francisco Pizarro did the same in Peru in 1532. A few years later (1539–1542) Francisco Vásquez de Coronado discovered the Grand Canyon and journeyed through much of the Southwest looking for gold and the legendary Seven Cities of Cibola. About the same time Hernando de Soto explored southeastern North America from Florida to the Mississippi River. By 1650 Spain's empire was complete and fleets of ships were carrying the plunder back to Spain.

By the 1530s **French** explorers had scouted the coast of America from Newfoundland to the Carolinas. Samuel de Champlain built the foundations of what would become French Canada (New France). From 1604 to 1606 he established a settlement at Acadia in Nova Scotia, and in 1608 he travelled up the St. Lawrence River, made contact with the Huron and Algonquin peoples, and established a French settlement at Québec.

Unlike Spain's empire, 'New France' produced no caches of gold and silver. Instead, the French traded with inland tribes for furs and fished off the coast of Newfoundland. New France was sparsely populated by missionaries and dotted with military forts and trading posts. Although the French sought to colonize the

area, the growth of settlements was stifled by inconsistent policies. Initially, France encouraged colonization by granting charters to fur-trading companies. Then control of the empire was put in the hands of the government-sponsored Company of New France. The company, however, was not successful, and in 1663 the king took direct control of New France. Although more prosperous under this administration, the French empire failed to match the wealth of New Spain or the growth of neighboring British colonies.

Another contender for influence in North America was the **Dutch**, inhabitants of the leading commercial nation in the early 17th century. Sailing for the Dutch in 1609, Henry Hudson explored the river that now has his name. The Dutch established a string of agricultural settlements between New Amsterdam (New York City) and Fort Orange (Albany, New York) after 1614. They became the chief European traders with the Iroquois, supplying them with firearms, blankets, metal tools, and other European trade goods in exchange for furs. The Iroquois used those goods to nearly destroy the Huron and to push the Algonquins into Illinois and Michigan. As a result, the Iroquois gained control of the Native American side of the fur trade.

The Dutch settlements, known as New Netherland, grew slowly at first and became more urban as trade with the indigenous peoples outdistanced agriculture as a source of income. The colony was prosperous and tolerated different religions. As a result, it attracted a steady and diverse stream of European immigrants. In the 1640s the 450 inhabitants of New Amsterdam spoke 18 different languages. The colony had grown to a European population of 6,000 (double that of New France) on the eve of its takeover by England in 1664.

Until Queen Elizabeth's reign, the **English** showed little interest in exploration, being preoccupied with their European trade and establishing control over the British Isles. By the mid-16th century, however, England had recognized the advantages of trade with the East, and in 1560 English merchants enlisted Martin Frobisher to

search for a northwest passage to India. Between 1576 and 1578 Frobisher as well as John Davis explored along the Atlantic coast.

Thereafter, Queen Elizabeth granted charters to Sir Humphrey Gilbert and Sir Walter Raleigh to colonize America. Gilbert headed two trips to the New World. He landed on Newfoundland but was unable to carry out his intention of establishing military posts. A year later, Raleigh sent a company to explore territory he named Virginia after Elizabeth, the ‘Virgin Queen’, and in 1585, he sponsored a second voyage, this time to explore the Chesapeake Bay region. By the 17th century, the English had taken the lead in colonizing North America, establishing settlements all along the Atlantic coast and in the West Indies.

For **Native Americans** and Africans, American history began in disaster. Native Americans suffered heavily because of their isolation from the rest of the world. Europe, Africa, and Asia had been trading knowledge and technologies for centuries. Societies on all three continents had learned to use iron and kept herds of domestic animals. Europeans had acquired gunpowder, paper, and navigational equipment from the Chinese. Native Americans, on the other hand, had none of these. They were often helpless against European conquerors with horses, firearms, and – especially – armour and weapons.

The most disastrous consequence of the long-term isolation of the Americas was biological. Asians, Africans, and Europeans had been exposed to one another’s diseases for millennia; by 1500 they had developed an Old World immune system that partially protected them from most diseases. On average, Native Americans were bigger and healthier than the Europeans who first encountered them. But they were helpless against European and African diseases. Smallpox was the biggest killer, but illnesses such as measles and influenza also killed millions of people. Scholars estimate that on average the population of a Native American people dropped 90 percent in the first century of contact. The worst wave of epidemics in human history cleared the way for European conquest.

Europeans used the new lands as sources of precious metals and plantation agriculture. Both were complex operations that required labour in large, closely supervised groups. Attempts to enslave indigenous peoples failed, and attempts to force them into other forms of bound labour were slightly more successful but also failed because workers died of disease. Europeans turned to the African slave trade as a source of labour for the Americas. During the colonial periods of North and South America and the Caribbean, far more Africans than Europeans came to the New World. The slave trade brought wealth to some Europeans and some Africans, but the growth of the slave trade disrupted African political systems, turned slave raiding into full-scale war, and robbed many African societies of their young men. The European success story in the Americas was achieved at horrendous expense for the millions of Native Americans who died and for the millions of Africans who were enslaved.

Reading Comprehension Check:

1. What were the main colonization routes?
2. What was the impact of colonization for Native Americans?

LESSON 2

Colonial America (1630–1763)

Among the European Atlantic states, England was notably slower than Spain, Portugal, or France to become interested in the New World. However, it sent more people to the Americas than other European nations – about 400,000 in the 17th century – and established more permanent agricultural colonies.

English migrants came to America for two main reasons. The first reason was tied to the English Reformation. King Henry VIII broke with the Catholic Church in the 1530s. The fortunes of radical Protestants, later called Puritans depended on the religious preferences of English monarchs. Queen Mary I, who ruled from 1553 to 1558, executed hundreds of Protestants and chased many more into exile. Her successor, Elizabeth I, invited the exiles back and tried to resolve differences within the English church. The Stuart kings who followed her, James I and Charles I, again persecuted Puritans. As a result, Puritans became willing to immigrate to America.

The second reason for English colonization was that land in England had become scarce. The population of England doubled from 1530 to 1680. In the same years, many of England's largest landholders evicted tenants from their lands, fenced the lands, and raised sheep for the expanding wool trade. The result was a growing number of young, poor, underemployed, and often desperate English men and women. It was from their ranks that colonizers recruited most of the English population of the mainland colonies.

Jamestown, the first permanent English settlement in America, began as a business venture that failed. The Virginia Company of

London, a joint stock company organized much like a modern corporation, sent 104 colonists to Chesapeake Bay in 1607. The company wanted to repeat the successes of the Spanish. The colonists were to look for gold and silver, for a passage to Asia, and for other discoveries that would quickly reward investors. If the work was heavy, the colonists were to force indigenous peoples to help them. The composition of the group sent to Jamestown reflected the company's expectations for life in the colony. Colonists included silversmiths, goldsmiths, even a perfumer, and far too many gentlemen who were unprepared for rugged colonial life. None of their plans worked out, and the settlers began to die of dysentery and typhoid fever. At the end of the first year, only about one-third remained alive. The Native Americans were troublesome, too. They grew tired of demands for food and started a war against the settlers that continued intermittently from 1609 to 1614.

In 1619 the Virginia Company reorganized. The colony gave up the search for quick profits and turned to growing tobacco. Under the new plan, colonists received 50 acres from the company for paying a person's passage to Virginia. The new settlers were indentured servants who agreed to work off the price of their passage. Thus, settlers, who could afford it, received land and labour at the same time. In 1624 King James I of England made Virginia the first royal colony. He revoked the Virginia Company's charter and appointed a royal governor and council, and established a House of Burgesses elected by the settlers. Although the Crown took direct control of the colony in 1624, it, however, provided no real supervision. Despite fights with the Indians (about 350 settlers died in one attack in 1622), the Virginia colony began to prosper. It had found a cash crop, a source of labour, and a stable government.

In 1634 Cecilius Calvert founded **Maryland** under a royal charter, which made the colony Baltimore's personal property. Baltimore, a Catholic nobleman, hoped to establish a refuge for English Catholics and sell large estates to individuals who would

operate as feudal lords. Neither the plans for feudalism nor for a Catholic refuge worked out, however. More Protestants than Catholics immigrated to Maryland. In 1649 Baltimore granted religious toleration to all Christians, but Protestants did not stop opposing him. They even overthrew Baltimore's government on several occasions. Baltimore's dreams of feudalism failed as well. Freed servants preferred farming on their own to staying on as tenants, and the colony quickly evolved as Virginia had. Planters (many of them former servants) imported servants from England and grew tobacco.

New England began as a refuge for religious radicals. The first English settlers were the Pilgrims. They sailed for the New World in 1620. The Puritans who founded the New England colonies openly challenged the Crown. They had come to America in order to get away from Charles I's rule, and they set up religious and political institutions in repudiation of the establishment at home. After difficult early years, they established a community of farms at Plymouth that was ultimately absorbed by the Massachusetts Bay Company.

By 1640 England had founded 6 of the 13 colonies that would become the original United States. In the 1640s, with king and Parliament absorbed in civil war at home, the English colonists in America achieved maximum independence. In New England, the four chief colonies (**Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Connecticut and Rhode Island**) formed a military confederation and conducted their own foreign policy.

Imperial Control

During the 1650s and 1660s, the English government finally began to play a more active role in American colonial development. Parliament passed a series of **Navigation Acts**, designed to exclude the Dutch from trading in English America and to channel the shipment of all Chesapeake tobacco and Caribbean sugar to the mother country. Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell (1653–1658) seized the Spanish island of Jamaica in 1655, and Charles II (1660–1685) seized the Dutch colony of New Netherland (**New York**) in 1664.