
TEACHER BACKGROUND MATERIALS

I. UNIT OVERVIEW

Columbus's momentous arrival in 1492 in the Caribbean ended the mutual isolation of two regions of the globe. From this moment on, the future of the Americas has been inextricably linked to those of Europe, Asia, and Africa. The watershed encounter between Columbus and Native Americans signalled the beginning of an ever-increasing global interdependence that has had monumental effects—both positive and negative—for world history. These effects continue into the present. Accordingly, historical portrayals of Columbus have varied tremendously. At one extreme he appears a mythical hero, a bold adventurer and intrepid navigator, the honoree of a national holiday, and the worthy namesake for dozens of U. S. cities and a South American country. At the opposite extreme, many see him as responsible for an environmental holocaust and five hundred years of genocide. Only by studying the historical context in which Columbus sailed can we hope to arrive at an accurate and balanced understanding of this pivotal event.

The lessons included in this unit present the Columbian encounter from a variety of perspectives. For centuries, educators have taught the story of the Columbian encounter from a European point of view, as the discovery of a "New World" and the subsequent expansion of Europeans into it. It is important to remember that after 1492 both Native Americans and even those Europeans who stayed at home also lived in a "New World." With the arrival of Europeans the Americas acquired a host of diseases, flora, fauna, and unfamiliar cultures. For Europeans, the knowledge of two previously unknown continents challenged conventional wisdom and their traditional world view. At the same time, it would be inaccurate to portray Native Americans and Africans as merely reacting to European exploits. Indeed, as this unit demonstrates, Native Americans and Africans significantly shaped the subsequent development of both the Americas and

Teacher Background Materials

Europe. This unit begins by comparing and contrasting American and European cultures before 1492. It then examines the changes in European society leading to the wave of maritime exploration at the end of the fifteenth century, which resulted in the famed contact between Europeans and Native Americans. Finally, it explores the dramatic changes wrought by the interaction between two previously isolated regions.

Students should learn from this unit that the actions of historically prominent figures such as Columbus often reflect the general trends and values of their time. This knowledge, however, should not lead them to see history as a string of inevitable events; rather individual choices and contingency shape history. Regardless of whether those involved in the Columbian encounter made good or bad decisions, studying those decisions will help students to understand the world today.

II. UNIT CONTEXT

This unit would complement any studies of the Crusades, the Renaissance, European maritime exploration, or Ancient American history. As the scope of this lesson is broad, it could also serve as an introduction to several topics, especially European colonization of the Americas, slavery and the slave trade, Native American history after 1492, or the history of Mexico. Finally, this unit can help students understand the controversy surrounding Columbus and his first voyage to the Americas by placing it in its proper historical context.

III. CORRELATION TO NATIONAL HISTORY STANDARDS

"Three Worlds Meet: The Columbian Encounter and Its Legacy" provides teaching materials that address *National Standards for History, Basic Edition* (National Center for History in the Schools, 1996), in both United States and World History. Lessons specifically address United States History, **Era 1, Standard 2**, "How early European exploration and colonization resulted

in cultural and ecological interactions among previously unconnected peoples" and World History, **Era 6, Standard 1**, "How the transoceanic interlinking of all major regions of the world from 1450 to 1600 led to global transformations," and **Standard 6**, "Major global trends from 1450 to 1770."

This unit likewise integrates a number of specific Historical Thinking Standards including: reconstruct patterns of historical succession and duration in which historical developments have unfolded; draw upon data in historical maps; analyze cause-and-effect relationships; draw comparisons across eras and regions in order to define enduring issues; interrogate historical data by uncovering the social, political, and economic context in which it was created; and, evaluate alternative courses of action.

IV. UNIT OBJECTIVES

1. To understand how the European world view had developed in the years preceding Columbus's voyage and how Christo-Eurocentrism pervaded this view.
2. To understand that before 1492 diverse societies existed in the Americas.
3. To examine how historians draw on archaeological sources to study native Americans.
4. To compare European societies with Native American societies.
5. To investigate the various motives prompting Columbus' voyage.
6. To understand how the motives and beliefs of both Europeans and Americans helped to shape the first encounters between the two peoples by examining accounts of these encounters from both Spanish and Aztec points of view.

Teacher Background Materials

7. To explain how ethnocentrism and the drive for profit led some Spaniards to exploit the labor of Native Americans and Africans and to understand the brutality embodied in this labor system.
8. To explain how the exchange of culture, flora, fauna, and disease took place after 1492.

V. LESSON PLANS

1. The Changing European World View (2 days)
2. The Many Peoples of the Americas (2 days)
3. The First Voyage: Motives and Shipboard Conditions (1 day)
4. First Encounters (2-3 days)
5. Relations Among the Races (2 days)
6. Seeds of Change (1-2 days)

VI. INTRODUCTION TO THE COLUMBIAN ENCOUNTER

On October 12, 1492, Columbus first landed on the island that he named Hispaniola (today shared by Haiti and the Dominican Republic). Columbus mistakenly believed he had accomplished his primary goal of finding a short, trans-Atlantic route to Asia. For years European sailors had longed to find a shortcut to replace the overland trading routes to East Asia. Many sailors at the time, including Columbus, may have heard the Icelandic sagas describing Leif Eriksson's voyages to Newfoundland five hundred years earlier. Portuguese sailors had already begun to expand Europe's knowledge of the Eastern Atlantic, and Columbus, like many Europeans, speculated that India and Asia lay across the Atlantic; thus it is important to note that while Columbus had pioneered an unprecedented route across the Atlantic, his voyage constituted just a single chapter in a long saga of European maritime exploration. In the late fifteenth century, trends in economics, demographics, technology, cartography, and religion converged, leading to a competition primarily between Spain and Portugal to expand trade and Christianity. Within this context, Columbus deserves the credit for linking Europe and the Americas and also deserves to be held accountable for his individual actions and decisions. Yet it is worth noting that had he not attempted his voyage or had it failed, another mariner would have eventually awakened Europe to the existence of the Americas.

At the close of the fifteenth century, Europe's geographic knowledge improved dramatically. Contrary to popular myth, Columbus as well as most Europeans understood the world to be round. In 1487, the Portuguese sailor Bartholomew Diaz had rounded the southern tip of Africa in search of a sea route to Asia. Ten years later, and five years after Columbus's voyage across the Atlantic, Vasco da Gama of Portugal rounded the Cape of Africa and travelled as far as India. Despite the scope of these voyages, however, Europeans remained uncertain about the earth's circumference until 1522, when Magellan, a Portuguese navigator who sailed for Spain,

Teacher Background Materials

circumnavigated the globe. In 1492, Columbus had underestimated the earth's circumference by two-thirds. Ironically, had Columbus known the actual size of the world he probably would not have attempted to cross the Atlantic. Ignorance gave him the impetus to sail.

Columbus's voyages depended upon many other factors. At the end of the fifteenth century, Europe had largely recovered the huge population loss incurred during the plague of the 1340s. Accordingly, many felt the need to expand the European economy into foreign markets, especially Asia. This expansion would not have been possible without the rise of strong unified monarchies in Europe that could finance maritime voyages. In Spain, Isabella and Ferdinand married, uniting the kingdoms of Castille and Aragon under one monarchy. This monarchy came to power at the end of a long war between Christians and Muslims in Europe. Having just expelled the Jews and Muslims from their country, Ferdinand and Isabella sought to expand their economic power as well as their religion. Fortunately for Columbus, his request of support from the Spanish government for his trans-Atlantic voyage coincided with these developments.

On the eve of Columbus's first voyage, according to recent estimates, as many as seventy five million people lived in the Americas. These people, inaccurately named "Indians" by Columbus who mistakenly believed he had landed in Asia, descended from the first true discoverers of the continent. When Columbus arrived in the Caribbean five hundred years ago, he met a people whose ancestors had arrived at least twelve thousand years before him. As nomadic bands chasing big game, they came from Asia via a land bridge that at one time connected Alaska to Siberia. Over time these first pioneers had spread out and settled throughout North and South America.

It is impossible to characterize the typical native American of 1492, because of the continent's tremendous cultural diversity. The lack of written evidence makes this task even more difficult, and it especially complicates

efforts to understand American history before 1492. Nevertheless, archaeological evidence provides a glimpse at the long history of these peoples. The stereotype of the warrior on horseback roaming the great plains and living in perfect harmony with the environment can be readily dismissed. Native Americans had no horses until after the arrival of Europeans. Instead, living throughout the Americas many different peoples had adapted to a multiplicity of environments and climates. Their histories are full of innovations and inventions produced in complete isolation from Europeans. Some used complex calendars and lived in cities larger than any in Europe at the time. Many lived in small villages and survived by growing corn and hunting game. A variety of political, social, and cultural systems existed throughout the Americas. Native Americans spoke over two thousand languages at the time of Columbus' arrival, and their political and social structures were diverse.

With the arrival of white men in 1492, radical changes shook native American communities. For many, disease marked their first encounter with the European world. Before 1492 Native Americans had not acquired, nor had they needed, immunities to the diseases that Europeans carried. Among them, small pox proved the deadliest. Coastal societies acquired diseases that spread to inland societies through routine contact. In some areas 90 percent of the population had been decimated before they had even seen a white man.

As time passed, however, it became apparent that racism and greed posed an equally great enemy to native peoples. Columbus' first voyage was a relatively small undertaking, and after only ten weeks in the Caribbean he returned to Spain with only a handful of trade goods and six kidnapped natives. His apparent success, however, brought him financial support for three subsequent and much larger voyages. His second voyage consisted of seventeen ships carrying over 1,200 Spaniards and allowed for extended contact between Native Americans and Europeans. Not finding the abundant and readily accessible deposits of gold he had expected, yet deter-

Teacher Background Materials

mined to make his discovery profitable for Europeans, Columbus, against the Queen of Spain's desires, enslaved 1,600 natives and brought a third of them back to Spain. Herein lay the ominous beginning of the Atlantic slave trade. Subsequent settlers in the "New World" would reverse the dominant flow of the trade by bringing Africans to the Americas rather than taking Native Americans back to the "Old World." In the end, Europeans enslaved approximately eleven million Africans over a period of four centuries for use in the Americas.

During his lifetime, Columbus's discoveries seemed relatively insignificant compared to those of the Portuguese sailors along the coast of Africa. Columbus died in poverty in 1506, disgraced by the Spanish government for insubordination. To the day of his death he believed that he had discovered a trans-Atlantic route to Asia. In retrospect, however, his encounter takes on far greater importance. True, he did not pioneer the much heralded water route to Asia. Instead, he brought to an end the isolation of two hemispheres and ushered in the era of global interdependence in which we live today. After 1492, disease, flora, fauna, and masses of people with diverse cultures flowed between the previously separate regions of the globe.