

“America Before Columbus”

By Lewis Lord and Sarah Burke

Pay attention to the following ideas as you read this article from U.S. News and World Report:

- ***Had you heard of Cahokia before? What surprised you, if anything?***
- ***What misconceptions did Europeans have about the North American Continent? How were these misconceptions inaccurate?***
- ***What details help to show that Native American tribes were part of a civilized culture? In what ways was that civilization misunderstood by the Europeans?***
- ***How has the land and wildlife changed since the time of Columbus?***
- ***What was the Columbian Exchange? How did it affect the societies involved?***

They lived in temples as well as teepees, dined on succotash and 9-inch oysters, and developed customs, including daily baths, that Europeans abhorred. They were ***America's*** first settlers, and the world they inhabited was anything but new.

Most vacationers on Interstate 70 speed right by ancient Cahokia and its 15-acre ceremonial mound, the one that's 2 acres bigger than the Great Pyramid of Egypt. Only a curious few pull off to learn how a feather-crowned dictator known as the Great Sun used to kneel atop the earthen temple every morning and howl when the real sun came up. At its peak, the town across the Mississippi from present-day St. Louis boasted a trade network that stretched from the Gulf of Mexico to the Dakotas and probably had as many residents as did London at that time. But modern textbooks barely take notice. Cahokia's problem is that American history, in the minds of many, started just 500 years ago, back when Columbus discovered the New World. By 1492, Cahokia was an Illinois Babylon, a city that had thrived and vanished.

Like many 20th-century metropolises, 13th-century Cahokia could not handle growth, even though its developers were sharp enough to grasp geometry and astronomy. Besides building more than 100 neatly proportioned mounds, they constructed a circle of tall poles -- archaeologists call it "Woodhenge" -- that aligned with the sun at equinox and solstice. Despite this evidence of advanced thinking, however, no Cahokian appears to have anticipated the consequences of ecological change and environmental degradation. Cornfields that fed 20,000 to 40,000 urbanites gradually lost their fertility. Forests were stripped of trees not only to fuel thousands of daily household fires but also to form a 2 1/2-mile stockade wall. As hard times set in, Cahokians moved or perished. Centuries later, the French arrived and found only grown-over mounds.

The Europeans who peopled America in Columbus's wake believed the land had never been settled, much less civilized. "North America was inhabited only by wandering tribes who had no thought of profiting by the natural riches of the soil," wrote Alexis de Tocqueville in 1835. It was, the French observer concluded, "an empty continent, a desert land awaiting its inhabitants." Tocqueville's "empty continent" phrase endures today in Fourth of July speeches that hail the building of the nation, but in fact the New World was

anything but empty in Columbus's day. Give or take several million, the Western Hemisphere in 1492 had as many people as Europe. It was the teeming and majestic civilizations of Mexico's Aztecs and Peru's Incas that awed the Spanish conquistadors initially -- some gawked like country bumpkins at Montezuma's capital, with its several hundred thousand people -- but ancient societies had also been rising and falling for centuries above the Rio Grande. More than 1,000 tribes -- with upward of 2 million people -- still inhabited the northern forests, prairies and mesas when whites arrived.

Newcomers from Europe, though accustomed to people being burned or beheaded, were shocked at what went on in America. Columbus claimed he had to take hundreds of Carib Indians to Spain for their own good and that of their Arawak neighbors, whom they were eating. (He had a harder time explaining why he also enslaved the gentle Arawaks.) While cannibalism and human sacrifice were rare among Indians north of Mexico, people in some tribes killed unwanted infants, had multiple wives and, in the case of the Hurons, wiped their hands on dogs that ambled by. Other traits seemed alien as well: an awed reverence of nature, a desire to share and, for many, societies free of oppression and class stratification. In addition, most took a daily bath, a practice the Europeans abhorred. America was not new, but it was different.

As whites moved westward across what is now the United States, they encountered a familiar question among tribesmen in their path: "Why do you call us Indians?" The answer, of course, was that Columbus was mistaken. He thought he was in the distant Indies, somewhere between Japan and India, and labeled his hosts los Indios. The Indians had no word for their race. They called their own tribes "people" or "real people," and other tribes names like "friend," "enemy" or "poisonous snake."

The diversity that Americans relish today actually existed long before Columbus arrived. Most of the hundreds of languages the Indians spoke were as different from one another as Farsi is from French. Some Indians loved war. Others hated it. After every reluctant fight, Arizona's Pimas subjected their warriors to a 16-day cure for insanity. Some tribes banned women from their councils. Others were ruled by female chiefs, like Georgia's "Lady of Cofitachequi," who greeted Hernando DeSoto with pearls from the Savannah River. (He ungraciously kidnapped her.) Puppies were a gourmet's delight in some huts. Elsewhere, Indians would rather die than eat dog meat. Premarital sex was unthinkable among the Cheyenne. But Mississippi's Natchez tribe encouraged teenagers to have flings while they could. Once a Natchez girl wed, an extramarital affair could cost her her hair or even an ear.

Every American Indian, from the Abenakis of Maine to the Zunis of New Mexico, descended from immigrant stock. Asian-Americans were the first Americans, and they came over 12,000 to 20,000 years ago, probably crossing a glacial land bridge between Siberia and Alaska. For some time, they hunted the mastodon and the long-horned bison, perhaps speeding their extinction. As long ago as 5,000 years, people in Mexico may have cultivated maize, better known as corn, and early residents of Arizona were growing it in A.D. 1. Many people in what is now the United States existed the next 10 or 15 centuries as nomads, moving about in search of game, fish and wild plants for food, but some accomplished much more.

Pioneers who found thousands of abandoned mounds in the Ohio and Mississippi valleys refused to believe they had been built by Indians. "The natural indolence of the Indian and

his averseness to any kind of manual labor are well known," wrote author William Pidgeon in 1858. Other 19th-century writers speculated that the mound builders were stray Vikings, Phoenicians or a lost tribe of Israel -- obviously an intelligent people who were annihilated by Indian savages. Settlers liked that theory, because it seemed to justify the treatment they inflicted on the Indians on the frontier. Not until the 1890s did educated people agree that the mounds in fact were built by the Indians' ancestors.

The genius of the mound builders has become even more evident in recent years. Just west of the Mississippi in northeast Louisiana lies Poverty Point, a 3,500-year-old collection of concentric semicircles of earth, the biggest nearly three quarters of a mile long. Visitors can stand atop a mound just west of Poverty Point's rings during the spring and fall equinox and see the sun rise over what was the town's central plaza -- a view like that at England's Stonehenge during similar conjunctions of earth and sun. On Moundbuilders Golf Course in Newark, Ohio, stands an earthen ring that is 15 centuries old. Its diameter is the same, 1,050 feet, as those of two more circles within 50 miles of Newark. Other precisely measured mounds in central Ohio include three 1,200-foot circles and five 27-acre squares. "Such nice equivalences of shapes and sizes are not the work of savages," says Roger Kennedy, director of the Smithsonian's Museum of American History, who is writing a book entitled "Medieval America." "I doubt that the Harvard freshman class would be capable of similar intellectual achievement."

Every explorer and early settler seemed to notice the aroma of America. Robert Beverley was awed by "the pleasantest Smell" of Virginia's giant magnolias. DeSoto's men admired Georgia's "very savoury, palatable and fragrant" strawberries. Henry Hudson paused in New York's harbor to enjoy the "very sweet smells" of grass and flowers on the New Jersey shore. But the visitors also smelled smoke. Many soon concluded that Indian women did all the work, while the men idled away their time hunting, fishing and setting the woods on fire.

The native men, it turned out, were practicing a form of forest management that put food in their wigwams and longhouses. With torches and stone hatchets, the Nootkas and Haidas of the Pacific Northwest toppled giant redwoods and turned them into whaling canoes. In the eastern forests, Indians slashed and burned to clear the way for cornfields fertilized by the ashes and to create meadows for grazing deer and elk. Every autumn, Indians burned huge chunks of woodland to clear away underbrush. The sprouts that poked each spring through the charred ground boosted populations of game animals, which the Indians could easily spot in the open forests. The trees that survived flourished, too. Sycamores in Ohio grew seven feet in diameter, and the white pines of New England towered 200 to 250 feet. Governor's Island, now in the shadow of Manhattan's skyscrapers, had so many big hickory and walnut trees that the Dutch settlers called it Nut Island.

Colonists enjoyed describing the country they settled as a "howling wilderness" -- a phrase from the Book of Jeremiah -- and in many places it was. Bamboo canebrakes, 20 to 30 feet high and impenetrable, stretched in parts of the Southeast for 100 miles or more, and tangles of brier and grapevines crowded the cottonwoods of the river bottoms. The forests were so boundless, the settlers liked to say, that a squirrel could travel from Maine to the Mississippi and never touch the ground. But wherever Indians hunted, the forest floor was usually clear, reminding one observer of "our parks in England."

Early English settlers, accustomed to woods with only a few doves, were startled by the spectacle in America's skies. The colonists especially admired the green-and-gold Carolina parakeet, "a fowle most swift of wing [and] very beautiful." Passenger pigeons passed in flocks "for three or foure houres ... so thicke they have shaddowed the skie from us." Out west, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark would see huge flocks of pelicans and sandhill cranes along the Missouri and dense clouds of geese over the Columbia River.

Animals were bigger then. Pennsylvania trout, nearly 2 feet long, were easy targets for Algonquian arrows. Virginia sturgeon stretched 6 to 9 feet, and Mississippi catfish topped 120 pounds. Off Cape Cod, a few Indians could catch 30 lobsters in a half hour, some weighing 20 pounds, and many Massachusetts oysters had to be sliced into thirds to be swallowed.

Bison roamed not only the Great Plains but also the meadows and open forests of Ohio, Pennsylvania and Virginia. The western bison were infinitely more numerous, thundering along in herds 25 miles long, but the woods buffalo was bigger and blacker with shorter hair and no hump. A few still remained in George Washington's time; he considered crossing them with domestic cattle.

The white man's Bible taught that it is better to give than to receive, and the Indians couldn't agree more. Long after the Arawaks showered Columbus with birds, cloth and "trifles too tedious to describe," natives were offering Europeans virtually anything they had, from fish and turkeys to persimmon bread and the companionship of a chief's daughter. Colonists interpreted the Indians' generosity as evidence they were childlike. That they had no desire to accumulate wealth was seen as a symptom of laziness. The Indians, concluded one New Englander, must develop a love of property. "Wherever this can be established, Indians may be civilized; wherever it cannot, they will still remain Indians."

The Indians felt quite civilized with what they did own, often things a Puritan wouldn't appreciate. Colorado's Pueblos kept parrots that came from Mexico. The Cayuse of Eastern Oregon swapped buffalo robes for the shells of coastal Indians. The Ottawas, whose name meant "to trade," traveled the Great Lakes exchanging cornmeal, herbs, furs and tobacco. The Chinooks of the Northwest even developed their own trade jargon. Their word hootchenoo, for homemade liquor, eventually became the slang word "hootch."

Above all else, Indians were religious. They saw order in nature and obeyed elaborate sets of rules for fear of disturbing it. Land was to be shared, not owned, because it was sacred and belonged to everyone, like the air and sea. Animals also were precious. A hunter risked stirring the spirits if he killed two deer when one was all his tribe needed. Europe's view of nature, though rooted in religion, was much different. Man should subdue the Earth, Genesis dictated, "and have dominion ... over every living thing."

Rituals surrounded each important Indian event. To prove their courage, the Arikara of North Dakota danced barefoot on hot coals and, with bare hands, retrieved and devoured hunks of meat from pots of boiling water. Timucuan leaders started council meetings in Florida with a round of emetics brewed from holly leaves. The Hurons of the Great Lakes carried smoldering coals in their mouths to invoke a spirit to cure the sick. But often the rituals were painless. From New York to New Mexico, tradition allowed a woman to end

her marriage by putting her husband's belongings outside their door -- a sign for him to live with his mother.

Three centuries before the U.S. Constitution took shape, the Iroquois League ran a Congress-like council, exercised the veto, protected freedom of speech and let women choose officeholders. The New Yorkers ran a classless society, as did many tribes across America. But ancient caste systems also endured. The Great Sun of the Natchez, a mound dweller like Cahokia's Great Sun, used his feet to push his leftovers to his noble subordinates. The nobles were not about to complain; below them was a class known as "Stinkards." Besides, the chief's feet were clean. He was carried everywhere, a French guest reported, and his toes never touched ground.

Columbus's second voyage -- the one in which Europeans came to stay -- began the process that changed nearly everything. Instead of 90 sailors on the Nina, the Pinta and the Santa Maria as in 1492, Columbus set out in '93 with 1,200 men in 17 ships. In addition to starting the world's most significant movement of people, he delivered a Noah's Ark of animals unknown to the New World -- sheep, pigs, chickens, horses and cows -- plus a host of Old World diseases. What the Admiral of the Ocean Sea created was the Columbian Exchange, a global swap of animals, plants, people, ailments and ideas that historian Alfred Crosby calls "the most important event in human history since the end of the Ice Age." (See pullout.)

For the Old World as well as the New, the event was both salubrious and calamitous. Twenty years after Columbus colonized Hispaniola -- the island now shared by Haiti and the Dominican Republic -- diseases and taskmasters reduced its Arawaks from a quarter million down to 14,000. Within two centuries, Old World diseases killed probably two thirds of the New World's natives, and America did indeed seem empty. Africans also were dying by the thousands. They were brought to the New World to grow sugar, another import from the Old World.

Yet, thanks to Columbus, Africa's population boomed. Corn, an American staple for thousands of years, augmented African diets, boosting the continent's birth rates and life spans. The same thing happened in Europe with the potato, also from America. The Columbian Exchange thickened Italy's sauces with tomatoes, seeded Kentucky with European bluegrass and covered the gullies of Georgia with Chinese kudzu. China, in return, became the globe's No.1 consumer of the American-born sweet potato. "The Columbus story is not an Old World, New World story," explains Smithsonian historian Herman Viola, who heads the Museum of Natural History's Columbus Quincentenary programs. "It is two old worlds that linked up, making one new world."

It is also a story of winning and losing, with many of the losers gone before the winners ever showed up. When whites first penetrated the fertile Ohio Valley, they found many mounds but few Indians. The Southeast also seemed vacant when the French came to stay around 1700. As they moved into lands that abounded in natural food resources, the settlers kept wondering where the Indians had gone. Some scholars believe they were wiped out or chased away by epidemics of European diseases that moved north along Indian trade routes in the century after Columbus. Two years before DeSoto visited Cofitachequi's female chief in the 1540s, pestilence swept her province, decimating her town and emptying others nearby. In one village, the Spaniards found nothing but large houses full of bodies. It was the same medical disaster the conquistadors at that time

were discovering in Mexico and Peru and the Pilgrims would notice much later in Massachusetts. Four years before the Mayflower landed, disease killed tens of thousands of Indians on the New England coast, including the inhabitants of a village where Plymouth would stand. John Winthrop, admiring the abandoned cornfields, saw the epidemic as divine providence. "God," he said, "hath hereby cleared our title to this place."

Indians in the forests shuddered every time they found honeybees in a hollow tree. The "English flies" moved 100 miles ahead of the frontier -- a sign that the white man was on his way. The smart tribes moved west, pushing whatever band was in their way. The Chippewas pushed the Sioux out of the woods of Minnesota into the Dakotas. The Sioux pushed the Cheyenne into Nebraska. The Cheyenne pushed the Kiowas into Oklahoma. Yet not every Indian fled. The Comanches, with horses descended from Columbus's stock, thwarted Spain's colonial designs on Texas with frequent raids on Spanish outposts. Apaches did the same thing in Arizona and New Mexico. Parts of Pennsylvania and New York today might be part of Quebec had the Iroquois rolled over for the French.

Many who didn't move perished. A generation after their gifts of corn saved England's toehold settlement at Jamestown, the Powhatan Indians were systematically wiped out, their crops and villages torched by settlers who wanted more land to grow tobacco. Florida's Timucuas -- of whom it was said "it would be good if among Christians there was as little greed to torment men's minds and hearts" -- vanished in the early 19th century, victims of epidemics and conflicts with the Spanish, English and Creeks. Natchez's Great Sun wound up with his feet on the ground, enslaved in the West Indies by the French, who eradicated his tribe. California's Chumash shrank from 70,000 to 15,000 toiling for the friars. Soon after the Gold Rush, the tribe, like most in California, ceased to exist. The four-century clash of cultures made 2 of every 3 tribes as extinct as the Carolina parakeet.

The land they left is different now. The white pines that towered over New England became masts for the Royal Navy's sailing ships. The redwoods that stretched from the Rockies to the Pacific, like the cypresses that crowded the Mississippi Valley, exist in pockets smaller than the Indians' shrunken reservations. The hours-long thunder of bison hooves no longer shakes Kansas or Nebraska, where only a few stretches of grassland remain like the prairie John Muir described a century ago -- "one sheet of plant gold, hazy and vanishing in the distance." The prairie now feeds the nation with Old World food like wheat and pork.

Yet at least one ancient American community endures. Shunning electricity, 3,000 Pueblo Indians live today in Acoma atop a mesa in the high New Mexico desert. The town's adobe apartments have been inhabited since the 12th century, through droughts, Apache raids and a brutal occupation in which the enslaving Spaniards chopped off one foot of each adult male. Acomans are reluctant to promote the fact that their settlement is nearly twice as old as St. Augustine, Fla., the Spanish-settled city that is generally considered the nation's oldest community. The people of Acoma figure they have had enough visitors.

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