**[AP US HISTORY NOTES: NATIVE POPULATIONS (1491-1607)](http://www.kaptest.com/blog/prep/ap-us-history/ap-u-s-history-notes-period-1-1491-1607/" \o "AP US History Notes: Native Populations (1491-1607))**

**NATIVE POPULATIONS https://www.kaptest.com/study/ap-us-history/ap-u-s-history-notes-period-1-1491-1607/**

Prior to the arrival of the first Europeans in North America, millions of Native Americans lived in scattered and diverse settlements across the continent. By 1492, at least 375 distinct languages were spoken and societies were structured in many ways. Some tribes were nomadic and could be easily moved to follow food sources or weather patterns, while others were more permanent. Prominent crops included maize (corn), squash, and beans that were supplemented by perfected techniques of farming, hunting, and fishing. There was, however, no livestock, so farming was limited because they were unable to plow fields or use natural fertilizer. Wheeled vehicles were nonexistent because of the lack of domestic animals like oxen and horses to pull them. Native Americans had no metal tools or machines or gunpowder prior to European arrival in the Americas. Unlike the Europeans who had developed systems of maritime navigation, Indians had only large canoes and rafts, which were unable to safely cross open waters like the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, therefore curtailing any expansionist goals.

Even though land was the economic basis of their primarily hunting and farming societies, native populations did not view land as an economic commodity that could be turned into a profit. Village leaders allocated plots of land to separate families for seasonal use and while these families owned the right to use the land assigned to them, they did not actually own the land itself. Many tribes would claim specific areas for hunting but anyone could use unclaimed land. Unlike their European visitors, indigenous American populations were not dedicated to accumulating riches or material possessions; however, social status with a kinship group or tribe held significance.

Political power structures and religious beliefs varied by tribe but this did not deter the existence of extensive trading routes and communication networks within the present boundaries of the United States. Despite trading and communicating, different tribes were often at war with one another to obtain goods, seize captives, or seek revenge for the deaths of family or tribe members. Conversely, they did frequently conduct diplomacy and make peace despite the lack of a centralized authority until the 15th century when five Iroquois tribes formed the Great League of Peace. The Great League of Peace annually convened as the Great Council with representatives from the five groups aiming to coordinate behavior toward outsiders. Despite this assembly, each tribe maintained its own separate political system and set of religious beliefs, chiefly because Native Americans did not think of themselves as a single, allied people; rather, this idea was invented by European explorers and colonists and only later adopted by the descendants of the native populations themselves.

**RELIGION**

Native American tribes were widespread throughout what is now the United States and the location of each tribe dictated how they responded to local resources. Because different tribes had to adapt to different locales, tribes became culturally distinguished, which led to tribe-specific rituals, social structures, and tactics for survival. Shamans, medicine men, and other religious leaders were thought to have unusual skills in summoning supernatural spirits and were highly esteemed in their respective tribes. While tenets of religion or spirituality varied among tribes, there were some commonalities. Most Native American cultures had **cosmologies**—origin parables passed on from each generation to the next through the oral tradition. Also, most indigenous Americans worshipped an omnipotent, omniscient Creator or “Master Spirit,” a presence that could not only assume different forms but also appear as both male and female. Native American religions supported the idea of afterlife and the immortality of the soul. In contrast with European religion, however, Native American spirituality did not set forth a distinction between the supernatural and the natural; rather, Indians believed the “material” and the “spiritual” to occupy the same plane. The indigenous North American peoples believed in **animism**, which dictated the spiritual realm pervaded all elements of the natural world and that every being—from rock to animal—had a unique spirit. Human beings lived inside this vast network of the material and spiritual and their interactions with all non-human beings was viewed as social. Europeans believed that the religions they encountered among America’s native populations to be heresy and that the native worshippers needed to be converted to the “true” religion of Christianity.

**GENDER ROLES**

Many Native American tribes were **matrilineal** in that tribal rights and responsibilities and social station were determined by the bloodline of the mother as opposed to the father. Both genders, however, had a voice when it came to decision-making. Because men were frequently away on the hunt, women took responsibility not only for household duties but also for farming. Europeans believed hunting and fishing to be leisure activities and therefore thought of Native American men as weak and not a strong source of support for the family. The fact that women worked in the fields also upset Europeans—they found this to be work meant for slaves and that these gender roles were barbaric and unchristian.

**EUROPEAN EXPANSION**

The European exploration of the Americas was a byproduct of the search for a sea route to the East: India, China, and the East Indies islands, from which Europeans could import tea, porcelain, silk, spices, and the other luxury goods that acted as the core of international trade during the early modern era.

**Christopher Columbus** arrived in the Bahamas in October 1492. Shortly after, he discovered the islands of Hispaniola and Cuba. It was not until Amerigo Vespucci’s trips along the South American coast from 1499 to 1502 that Europeans realized a continent they had had no knowledge of had been encountered.

**THE COLUMBIAN EXCHANGE**

Columbus’s arrival in the Bahamas in 1492 prompted the transmission and interchange of plants, animals, diseases, culture, human populations (i.e., slaves), and technology among Europe, Africa, and the Americas; this interchange greatly benefitted Europeans while simultaneously bringing catastrophe to Native American populations and cultures.

**DESTROYED BY DISEASE**

Wherever European colonists and explorers settled, native populations succumbed to dismaying and unparalleled epidemics. Regardless of location, the preliminary exposure to European diseases such as smallpox, typhus, cholera, and measles, afflicted almost every Indian. Within one decade of initial contact, fatalities wiped out nearly 50 percent of the precontact population—even minor childhood illnesses such as chicken pox killed natives, regardless of age. In some tribes, there were so few survivors that those who remained lost their autonomous identity and joined a neighboring tribe or converted to Christianity and assimilated into the newfound European societies. Native Americans had no immunity to the pathogens Europeans brought to the New World and the exchange of such diseases was incredibly one-sided; while European infectious diseases ransacked native populations in one of the most rapid-fire population massacres in human history, Europeans were relatively untouched by the few previously unencountered pathogens found in the Americas, largely due to the fact that the Western hemisphere was home to fewer and less contagious diseases.

Despite their differing religious beliefs, both native and European invaders believed these epidemics to be indicative of some vehement mystic disturbance. Christian colonists asserted that the diseases overtaking the native populations were the work of their God, who was punishing those they encountered who defied the colonists’ attempts to convert them to Christianity. The natives, on the other hand, blamed their disease on witchcraft practiced by the colonists. Despite these rationales, colonizers never intentionally disseminated disease fostered in the Old World.

Three factors contributed to the virulence of the diseases the Europeans introduced to the New World. Trade and invasions far from the homeland were more common in Europe and Asia, allowing the trade and transformation of numerous ailments. There were also multiple urban cities scattered throughout the Old World where people lived in permanent and dense concentrations which, in addition to producing and accumulating more waste, bred microbes carried by vermin (e.g., houseflies, rats, roaches, worms) that thrive in filth. Lastly, European, Asian, and African populations lived among large quantities of domesticated animals like cattle, goats, horses, pigs, and sheep. These mammals share infinitesimal parasites with humans, prompting the incubation of new, deadly diseases as the viruses that enter a continuous interspecies exchange. Past experience of the Old World populations rendered them immune, but when these pathogens were carried over to the New World in the blood, breath, lice, and sweat of the colonists, the Indians did not have the same immunological endurance.

**ECOLOGICAL CHANGES**

The intense damage wreaked on the Native American populations not only inhibited their ability to repel European encroachment but also prevented the invaders from exploiting the Indians for labor as planned; to make up for the lost labor source, colonists turned to West Africa from where they began importing slaves as early as 1518.

Because the colonists wanted to continue farming the European way in the New World, they imported domesticated farm animals such as cattle, honeybees, horses, mules, pigs, and sheep as well as domesticated plants like barley, grapevines, grasses, oats, rye, and wheat. Along with these purposeful imports, colonizers also unintentionally brought weeds that clashed with the edible indigenous plants of the Americas. While weeds did exist in the New World prior to invasion, they were not as fast-growing or hardy as those imported from Europe.

For colonists, there was more land than there was labor to develop and harvest it, so they took to building fences around their rather small, claimed crop fields. They would then allow their livestock (i.e., pigs and cattle) free reign of the surrounding unclaimed wilderness where the animals scrounged for wild plants, damaging the natural environment that sustained native populations. The unsupervised livestock also directly trespassed Indian crop fields where they ate the natives’ crops. Indians would slaughter and eat these trespassers, which the colonists protested before demanding compensation for their killed livestock. Upon the natives’ refusal, colonizers often overreacted by invading and setting fire to Native American villages. While the natives had carefully altered their natural environment through hunting, fishing, forestburning, field-clearing, and using plants for nutritional or medicinal purposes, the Europeans dramatically reshaped American nature: they destroyed forests to obtain lumber and establish farms. The subsequent farming activities such as plowing and grazing by livestock caused the natural, enriched soil to dry up and corrode.