The Native Americans

When Europeans arrived in the Western Hemisphere in the 1490s, it was already home to hundreds of Native American peoples with different languages, cultures, and social values. The ancestors of these Native Americans had come to the Western Hemisphere from Asia thousands of years before.

The descendants of these early travelers developed different types of social organization, often based on the local environment. Some peoples, such as the Aztecs of Mexico and Central America, created complex societies with great cities, large-scale farming, and elaborate record keeping based on systems of writing. Others, such as the Plains Indians, who hunted buffalo, lived in portable dwellings and passed on their knowledge through oral tradition.

European Contact

Beginning about 1400, a number of forces prompted Europeans to start exploring the rest of the world. These forces included the growth of trade between Europe and Asia and advances in navigation and shipbuilding. European explorers brought many parts of the world into meaningful contact with one another for the first time in history. One of these explorers was Christopher Columbus, an Italian who commanded a Spanish fleet. In 1492 he made the first of four voyages from Spain to the Americas, opening the era of cultural contact between Europe and the Western Hemisphere.

The European exploration, conquest, and settlement of the Americas led to the founding of many new nations, including the United States. For the Native Americans, however, it was the beginning of an immense tragedy during which many of their societies were destroyed by war and disease.

Religious Belief

Religion was a major factor in American colonial culture. Groups of Protestants from England, such as the Pilgrims and Puritans, began founding settlements in New England in 1620. Other groups seeking religious freedom followed, including the Quakers, who settled in Pennsylvania in 1670. In the 1730s and 1740s, a religious revival called the Great Awakening spread throughout the American colonies. Two results of this movement were increased feelings of responsibility for Native Americans and enslaved Africans and a more tolerant spirit toward other faiths.

The Slave Trade

From their beginnings, the American colonies suffered from a severe labor shortage. This was particularly true in the South, where large tobacco and rice plantations required hundreds of
Despite protests from some groups, many colonists participated in the slave trade. By 1750 there were more than 200,000 enslaved Africans in Britain's North American possessions, most of them in the Southern colonies. These colonies developed slave codes—sets of laws that formally regulated slavery and defined the relationship between enslaved Africans and free people.

The American Revolution

In the mid-1760s, unrest began to develop in the American colonies. A long war with France had left Britain in debt. To raise money, the British government passed a series of unpopular laws, including those that levied taxes on a variety of everyday items. By the mid-1770s, resentment over these taxes was leading to political violence and calls for colonial self-rule.

In April 1775, the British colonial government in Massachusetts ordered troops to the towns of Lexington and Concord to control unrest. The first battles of the Revolutionary War were fought there between the American militiamen and British soldiers. On July 4, 1776, the Second Continental Congress adopted the Declaration of Independence, asserting the colonists' right to self-government and establishing the United States of America. To defend their independence, the Americans fought a long war with the British, who finally accepted American independence in 1783.

CENTRAL IDEAS OF EARLY AMERICAN LITERATURE

CENTRAL IDEA 1: The Sacred Earth and the Power of Storytelling — Native American life was organized around the cycles of nature, and many myths and folktales told of the origins of various aspects of the universe and of human relationships with the natural world.

CENTRAL IDEA 2: Life in the New World — European explorers and settlers left accounts of endurance and religious faith as they struggled to adapt to life in an unfamiliar world. Victims of the slave trade, Africans recorded their fight to survive.

CENTRAL IDEA 3: The Road to Independence — British taxes, regulations, and soldiers on American soil aroused annoyance, irritations, and finally revolt. American writers provided ideas and inspiration to the cause of American freedom.

CENTRAL IDEA 1: THE SACRED EARTH AND THE POWER OF STORYTELLING

"I Have Killed the Deer"
Taos Pueblo Song

I have killed the deer.
I have crushed the grasshopper
And the plants he feeds upon.
I have cut through the heart
Of trees growing old and straight.
I have taken fish from water
And birds from the sky.
In my life I have needed death
So that my life can be.
When I die I must give life
To what has nourished me.
The earth receives my body
And gives it to the plants
And to the caterpillars
To the birds
And to the coyotes
Each in its own turn so that
The circle of life is never broken.

We often have a strong feeling for the land where we live--its shapes and colors, its sounds and smells. In many Native American cultures, the entire earth and all of the living things that inhabited it were sacred. This reverence for the earth and its creatures was passed down orally from generation to generation. Speakers and storytellers were valued members of Native American communities.

The Cycle of Life

Native Americans saw animals, plants, and the forces of nature as part of a great sacred cycle of life that humans must treat with deep respect. Religious ceremonies were organized around the events of this natural cycle. Through dreams and visions, Native Americans sought contact with the spirits they believed to inhabit all living things. Through their tales and songs, Native Americans expressed their view of the sacredness of the natural world.

Owing the Land

Native Americans' belief that the natural world is sacred affected their attitude toward land ownership. In their view, no one person could own land, which instead belonged in common to all people--and other living things--that inhabited it.

This concept of common ownership contrasted sharply with that of the Europeans, who began settling North America in the early 1600s. These settlers had a fierce desire to own their own land. Violent conflicts often resulted when Native American leaders signed treaties--which they usually did not understand--that opened lands to white settlement.

A Legacy of Stories

The Native American oral tradition began when humans crossed from Asia to Alaska via a land bridge now covered by the Bering Strait. As populations migrated south, unique cultures and languages developed in response to different environments. When European explorers first arrived in the New World, thousands of languages, some as unlike each other as English and Chinese, were spoken in the Americas. Each of these cultures developed its own stories and mythology.

It is likely that many early stories dramatized the struggle of the first Americans to survive.
Stone Age hunters may have related tales of the hunt to groups sitting around campfires. Sacred stories were often at the heart of religious ceremonies, and in societies where myth and reality merged, rituals were thought to link the spirits of hunters and animals. Versions of the earliest stories have evolved through hundreds of generations and are still a living part of Native American traditions.

CENTRAL IDEA 2: LIFE IN THE NEW WORLD

For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world.

--from the sermon “A Model of Christian Charity” (1630) by Puritan John Winthrop

For the Europeans who explored and settled North America, daily life was frequently a struggle to subdue a wilderness and to endure fierce conflicts with Native Americans. For Africans seized from their homes and enslaved in the Americas, life was a battle first to survive and then to hold on to their cultural identity.

A Collision of Cultures

Europeans began to explore North America in the late 1400s. Many explorers wrote grim reports of hardships encountered in the wilderness. The first arrivals were followed by other Europeans, settlers who built towns and started farms. As European settlement spread, conflict developed between the newcomers and Native Americans that often led to brutal wars. Their superior weapons enabled the Europeans to overcome their enemies. Even more destructive to the Native Americans were the diseases the newcomers brought with them. As a result of war and disease, few Native Americans survived beyond the end of the 1600s.

Puritan Style

The Puritans greatly influenced early American literature. They began to establish communities in New England in the 1620s after leaving England to escape what they saw as signs of corruption in the Church of England. These included elaborate rituals, a richly dressed clergy, and fine churches. In opposition to this, Puritans dressed plainly and held simple religious services in undecorated meetinghouses. They also believed that they had a God-given responsibility to establish an ideal way of life in America.

The Puritans' plainness and piety showed in their writing, which employed straightforward language and often focused on their faith. William Bradford was a member of the Puritan group known as the Pilgrims, who settled Plymouth Colony in 1620. Bradford viewed writing primarily as a practical tool. At the beginning of his history of the Plymouth Colony, he said that he intended to produce a record of events in a "plain style, with singular regard unto the simple truth in all things."

In 1734 Jonathan Edwards, a Congregational minister and a great spokesman for Puritanism,
began a series of religious revivals in his community of Northampton, Massachusetts. Edwards' powerful sermons helped start the "Great Awakening," a movement that spread throughout the American colonies. Edwards maintained that a person had to repent and convert in order to be "born again." This idea of having a personal emotional experience that brings one to God was a central idea of the Great Awakening.

Surviving Slavery

The first enslaved Africans were brought to Virginia in 1619. By the 1700s, slave ships arrived regularly in the American colonies. Most of these people, like Olaudah Equiano, had been taken from their homes in West Africa by slave traders. After enduring the horrors of the "Middle Passage," the long sea voyage across the Atlantic, they reached the slave markets of the Americas. Despite brutal living conditions, these Africans struggled to preserve parts of their heritage--the social values and cultural traditions of their homelands--but usually without success.

CENTRAL IDEA 3: THE ROAD TO INDEPENDENCE

These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country; but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph.

-- from the pamphlet series The American Crisis (1776-1783) by American revolutionary Thomas Paine, calling for readers to participate in the struggle for independence from Britain

Separated by a long, dangerous sea voyage from Britain, the American colonists became used to managing their own affairs. As colonial society developed, many Americans came to believe that this growth in responsibility should be matched with an increase in political and economic rights. In time, this belief would lead to revolution--resulting in a break with Britain, a long war, and full independence.

A "Natural Aristocracy"

The culture of the American colonies was shaped by the practical, self-reliant, pioneer spirit of settlers who had left their homelands to seek a better life. As the French-born American Michel Guillaume Jean de Crevecoeur observed, "He is an American who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds." The career of Benjamin Franklin reflected the American colonists' ability to rise in the world. He began life as one of seventeen children in a poor family. He ended as a businessman, an influential politician, and a famous writer and scientist.

Another important factor in the maturing of American colonial society was an emphasis on self-improvement through education. New England's Puritans, for example, established a system of public schools, believing that learning was a defense against evil. The effect of a bold,
enterprising spirit coupled with education was the emergence in the American colonies of an outstanding political leadership, which one of these leaders, Thomas Jefferson, called a "natural aristocracy" of virtue and talent.

**Political Right**

During the 1700s, America came under the influence of the European cultural movement known as the Enlightenment. Enlightenment thinkers emphasized reason and individualism over tradition and believed that natural laws applied to social, political, and economic relationships. Among these was the concept that human beings possessed certain natural, or "inalienable" rights, basic rights that could never be taken away. Thomas Jefferson believed that the colonists had a natural right to be free. He also believed that they had a right—to indeed a duty—to end what he saw as Britain's tyrannical rule of the colonies by establishing their own independent government. In the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson eloquently expressed the fundamental ideas behind the American Revolution.

**Women's Lives**

In colonial America, law and custom gave men greater authority and importance than women in politics and in the home. A married woman had few legal rights and was almost completely under her husband's control. Despite legal limitations, many colonial women worked outside the home, running farms and businesses. Women also played a vital role in the independence movement by organizing boycotts of British goods. During the Revolutionary War, women made important contributions on the home front and on the battle front. However, the political rights they helped win would be denied them for another 140 years.

*Please note that excerpts in the StudySync® library are intended as touchstones to generate interest in an author's work. StudySync® believes that such passages do not substitute for the reading of entire texts and strongly recommends that students seek out and purchase the whole literary or informational work.*

© 2016 BookheadEd Learning, LLC.