

Native American Interactions with Europeans

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

When European and Native Americans met for the first time, it set the stage for a variety of interactions. Both groups recognized the significance of European arrival in the Americas. Both groups also hoped to benefit from cross-cultural exchanges. Each European empire had different expectations when it came to interacting with New World's landscapes and its peoples. However, irrespective of their expectations, exchanges between Europeans and Native Americans occurred at an unprecedented level and sometimes produced unexpected results.

This tutorial covers the nature of European–Native American exchanges during the colonial period, paying particular attention to environmental factors and the Spanish in New Mexico.

Our discussion will break down like this:

1. European Goods and Native American Life

While the Americas remained firmly under the control of native peoples in the first decades of European settlement, conflict increased as colonization spread and Europeans placed greater demands upon the native populations, including expecting them to convert to Christianity (particularly Catholicism). Throughout the 17th century, the still-powerful native peoples and confederacies that retained control of the land waged war against the invading Europeans, achieving a degree of success in their effort to drive the newcomers from the continent.

At the same time, European goods had begun to change Native American life radically. In the 1500s, some of the earliest objects Europeans introduced to Native Americans were glass beads, copper kettles, and metal utensils. Native people often adapted these items for their own use.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Some native peoples would cut up copper kettles and refashion the metal for other uses, including jewelry that conferred status on the wearer, who was seen as connected to the new European source of raw materials.

As European settlements grew throughout the 1600s, European goods flooded native communities. Soon native people were using these items for the same purposes as the Europeans. For example, many native inhabitants abandoned their animal-skin clothing in favor of European textiles. Similarly, clay cookware gave way to metal cooking implements, and Native Americans found that European flint and steel made starting

fires much easier.



In this 1681 portrait, the Niantic-Narragansett chief Ninigret wears a combination of European and Native American goods. Which elements of each culture are evident in this portrait?

The abundance of European goods gave rise to new artistic objects. For example, iron awls made it easier for tribes in eastern North America to create shell beads, and the result was an astonishing increase in the production of wampum, or shell beads used in ceremonies and as jewelry and currency.

Native weapons changed dramatically as well, creating an arms race among the peoples living in European colonization zones. Native Americans refashioned European brassware into arrow points and turned axes used for chopping wood into weapons. The most prized piece of European weaponry to obtain was a musket,

or light, long-barreled European gun. To trade with Europeans for these, native peoples intensified their harvesting of beaver, commercializing their traditional practice.

The influx of European materials made warfare more lethal and changed traditional patterns of authority among tribes. Formerly weaker groups, if they had access to European metal and weapons, suddenly gained the upper hand against the once-dominant groups. The Algonquian, for instance, traded with the French for muskets and gained power against their enemies, the Iroquois. Eventually, native peoples also used their new weapons against the European colonizers who had provided them.

2. Environmental Changes

European arrival in the Americas also spurred countless changes in the environment that historians often associate with the Columbian Exchange. Europeans deliberately introduced new plant and animal species, including domestic livestock animals such as cows, pigs, and horses. Europeans accidentally introduced a number of weed and pest species as well. Deliberate and accidental introductions had profound effects on native plants, animals, and human beings.

Old World plants and animals exploited the disturbed conditions that Europeans and their livestock created during the colonization process. For instance, common plantain (*Plantago major*), which is now a common weed found in many American backyards, was accidentally introduced to North America by Europeans. By the 16th and 17th centuries, plantain came to be known as “Englishman’s foot” by many native tribes because it seemed to precede or follow every footstep the English made in North America.

The spread of Old World plants and animals in the New World was facilitated by an important geologic fact. Once the last Ice Age ended and the connection between Asia and North America was severed by the Bering Strait, the Americas became isolated from the Old World, and the region developed its own plant and animal species. New World plants and animals would be at a disadvantage during the Columbian Exchange, as they came up against European plows or against grazing livestock, such as cows, pigs, and horses.

New World plants were not used to domestic livestock or European methods of land use, such as plowing and fire suppression. In contrast, Old World plants had evolved under such land-use methods for thousands of years, and they spread quickly in the New World during the colonization process.

Similar to European plants and animals, European ideas about land use and ownership clashed with the land use practices of various Native American groups in the New World. In contrast to Europeans, native peoples neither saw land as a commodity nor considered it private property. Rather, individual or family land ownership was implied through use.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Native American families possessed the right to use a particular agricultural plot, but they could not claim ownership of the land itself. Once the family abandoned the use of that particular agricultural plot (perhaps by clearing another agricultural plot nearby), another family could move in. Similar concepts applied to popular hunting or fishing sites.

Native land use customs stood in stark contrast to European notions of private property ownership, where an individual could claim ownership of a piece of land and any resources derived therefrom. In addition, European colonizers established fields, fences, and other means of demarcating private property within their communities. Native peoples who moved seasonally to take advantage of natural resources now found areas off-limits, claimed by colonizers because of their insistence on private-property rights.

3. The Introduction of Disease

The introduction of new diseases to North America was perhaps the single greatest impact of European colonization and the Columbian Exchange. Indeed, Old World diseases displayed many of the same characteristics of European plants and animals. They could reproduce quickly and were capable of exploiting disturbances associated with colonization, such as war, migrations, and everyday commerce. We have already seen the effects that smallpox had on the destruction of the Aztec and Inca empires. Similar epidemics affected native peoples in North America as well.

For instance, diseases wreaked havoc upon the Native American cultures that Hernando de Soto encountered in southern North America between 1539 and 1542. When de Soto wandered through the region, he saw large agricultural plots cleared for corn cultivation and witnessed large villages. However, a century later, when the French entered the region, they saw a very different landscape that featured agricultural plots and villages abandoned because of disease outbreaks that originated from the de Soto expedition.

Disease epidemics had similar effects on native populations in northern North America. Along the New England coast between 1616 and 1618, epidemics claimed the lives of 75% of the native people. By the 1630s, at least half the Huron and Iroquois population around the Great Lakes died of smallpox.

In addition to smallpox, a number of other diseases that originated from Europe wreaked havoc upon the native peoples of North America. These diseases included measles, scarlet fever, chicken pox, whooping cough, bubonic plague, malaria, dysentery, cholera, yellow fever, and influenza. In most cases, these diseases worked more efficiently than European gunpowder in killing indigenous peoples in North America.

In contrast, syphilis was perhaps the only significant New World disease that was exported to Europe and the Old World. But, despite its notoriety as a venereal disease, syphilis never stopped population growth in the Old World to the extent that smallpox and other diseases did in the New World.

With every epidemic in North America, the very young and the very old were the most vulnerable and experienced the highest mortality rates. The loss of the older generation meant the loss of knowledge and tradition, while the death of children only compounded the trauma. Both trends had devastating implications for future generations of native peoples.

4. Native and European Relations in Spanish New Mexico

Physical power—to work the fields, build villages, and process raw materials—was a necessity for building colonial societies in the Americas. However, during the 16th and 17th centuries, humans could derive power only from the wind, water, animals, or other humans. Thus, everywhere in the Americas, a crushing demand for labor bedeviled Europeans because there were not enough colonists to perform the work necessary to keep the colonies going.

Spain responded to this problem by granting **encomiendas**—legal rights to native labor—to conquistadors who proved their service to the Crown. This system reflected the Spanish view of colonization: the king rewarded successful conquistadors who expanded the empire. Some native peoples, such as the Tlaxcalan, who had sided with the conquistadors, also gained encomiendas. For example, Malintzin, the Nahuatl woman

who helped Cortés defeat the Mexica, received one.



TERM TO KNOW

Encomienda

Legal rights to native labor as granted by the Spanish Crown.

The Spanish believed native peoples would work for them by right of conquest, and, in return, the Spanish would bring them Catholicism. In theory, the relationship consisted of reciprocal obligations, but in practice, the Spaniards ruthlessly exploited it, seeing native people as little more than beasts of burden for work in mines or plantations. Convinced of their right to the land and its peoples, they sought both to control native labor and to impose what they viewed as correct religious beliefs upon the land's inhabitants. Native peoples everywhere resisted both the labor obligations and the effort to change their ancient belief systems. Indeed, many retained their religion or incorporated only the parts of Catholicism that made sense to them.

Even with native laborers working for the Spanish, Spain was still intent on expanding its empire and looked north to the land of the Pueblo, which Coronado had first explored in the early 1540s. Under orders from King Philip II, Juan de Oñate claimed the American Southwest for Spain in the late 1590s.

The Spanish hoped that what we now know as New Mexico would yield gold and silver, but the land produced little of value to them. In 1610, Spanish settlers established themselves at Santa Fe—originally named La Villa Real de la Santa Fe de San Francisco de Asís, or “Royal City of the Holy Faith of St. Francis of Assisi”—where many Pueblo villages were located. Santa Fe became the capital of the Kingdom of New Mexico, an outpost of the larger Spanish Viceroyalty of New Spain, which had its headquarters in Mexico City.

As they had in other Spanish colonies, Franciscan missionaries labored to bring about a spiritual conquest by converting the Pueblo to Catholicism. At first, the Pueblo adopted the parts of Catholicism that dovetailed with their own long-standing view of the world. However, Spanish priests insisted that native people discard their old ways entirely and angered the Pueblo by focusing on the young, drawing them away from their parents.

This deep insult, combined with an extended period of drought and increased attacks by local Apache and Navajo in the 1670s—troubles that the Pueblo came to believe were linked to the Spanish presence—moved the Pueblo to push the Spanish and their religion from the area. Pueblo leader Popé demanded a return to native ways so the hardships his people faced would end. He argued that the expulsion of the Spanish would bring a return to prosperity and a pure, native way of life.

In 1680, under Popé's leadership, the Pueblo succeeded in launching a coordinated rebellion against the Spanish. The Pueblo Revolt killed more than 400 Spaniards and drove the rest of the settlers, perhaps as many as 2,000, south toward Mexico. The revolt was among the most significant victories for Native Americans over Europeans. The revolt also marked the only instance where native peoples successfully repulsed European settlers for an extended period.

Such a success was short-lived, however. Droughts and attacks by rival tribes continued even after the Spanish were gone. Conflict broke out between several Pueblo communities. In addition, Popé died in 1690. By 1692, Spain sensed an opportunity to regain its foothold and launched an invasion to retake New Mexico. The fact that some Pueblo communities welcomed back the Spanish for reasons related to military protection revealed just how disruptive the processes of colonization had been in the region.



THINK ABOUT IT

What impact did Europeans have on their New World environments—native peoples and their communities, as well as land, plants, and animals? Conversely, what impact did the New World's native inhabitants, land, plants, and animals have on Europeans? How did the interaction of European and Native



SUMMARY

In this tutorial, we examined the interactions between Native Americans and Europeans in the colonial period. We discussed how European explorers did not always find the gold and riches they had looked for in the New World, but they did find a varied landscape ready to be harvested for profit, societies full of potential converts to Christianity, and arable land ready to be seeded with crops. To survive in the new environments that the colonization of North America created, Europeans and Native Americans were required to interact with each other. Such interactions contributed to a variety of consequences. Interactions between Native Americans and Europeans were rarely evenhanded; they left a permanent mark on the peoples, plants, and animals that filled the North American landscape.

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TERMS TO KNOW

Encomienda

Legal rights to native labor as granted by the Spanish crown.



DATES TO KNOW

1492–1650

Estimates suggest that the total Native American population declined by 90%.

1500

Spain establishes the encomienda system to harness Native American labor.

1590

Juan de Oñate claims the American Southwest for Spain.

1610

Spain establishes Santa Fe in present-day New Mexico.

1616–1618

Epidemics claim the lives of 75% of the native people in New England.

1630

At least 50% of the Huron and Iroquois population in the Great Lakes region dies of smallpox.

1680

Pueblo, under Popé’s leadership, launch a coordinated rebellion against the Spanish in New Mexico.

