

Encounter, Colonization, and Devastation

Elementary US History

Early European explorers found tribal people fascinating, because they were different. But, because these tribal people did not live, look, or act like they did, most explorers before and during the Colonial period thought of tribal people as savages who lived like animals instead of humans.

¹Although the tribal people looked human in form, to early Europeans, they were barely human in their customs. One word often used to describe them was 'beasts.' The Virginia Charter of 1606 was a way to bring God to the savages since going the 'Christian' way was considered civilized. In the charter, King James the First declared British colonization from present day Canada to South Carolina. The charter had only one purpose: to Christianize tribal people:

"in propagating of Christian Religion to such People, as yet live in Darkness and miserable Ignorance of the true Knowledge and Worship God, and may in time bring the Infidels and Savages, living in those parts, to human Civility, and to a settled and quiet Government..."



As settlers purchased land from the tribes, they thought they could live in harmony with the tribal people as soon as they were 'Christianized.' Later, the Catholic and Anglican churches sent missionaries to the colonies to convert the tribal children to Christianity, because they thought it would be easier to teach the youngsters than the adults.

Colonists at first thought they were successful, since no tribal people complained. Tribal people remained silent, even while colonists verbally abused and insulted them. One chief, Powhatan, hoped the colonists and churches would fail, but the English kept going forward with their 'civilizing' tactics.

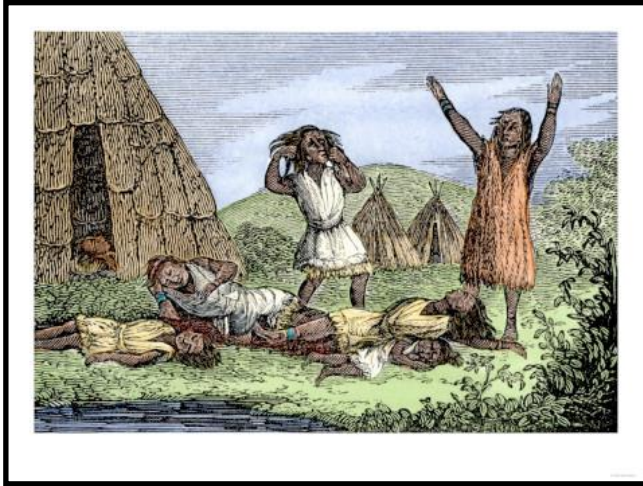
Then in 1622, it became clear to nearly every tribal leader that the colonists would demand more land from them, demand them to convert to Christianity, and demand that they give up their tribal lifeways. Opechancanough—leader of the Powhatan Nation—waged an attack against Jamestown. Over 300 colonists died.

During the next 50 years, tribal nations and colonies alike waged war against each other. Colonists felt justified in destroying these 'savages' and did not try to understand the tribal people. Tribal people were angered by how the colonists treated them.

Each colony was different because of the settlers' various backgrounds, goals, and interactions with tribal people. The Anglicans and Catholics, for example, protected

¹ Cartoon reprinted with the permission of Mike Keefe <http://www.intoon.com/?keywords=mayflower#16149>

smaller tribal nations against the more powerful tribes living nearby. Land was always purchased and the tribal people were treated well. Just the same, they tried to 'Christianize' them without much success. Even the nonviolent Quakers of Pennsylvania could not convince tribes to convert to Christianity. But conversion and war were just two of the ways the colonists—and later the United States—used to solve what they would call "The Indian Problem."



European diseases such as smallpox killed many Northeast Indians, including the Wampanoag pictured here. (North Wind Picture Archives)

Because of a lack of immunity to European diseases, entire tribes were wiped out by 'wonderful plagues,' such as smallpox, measles, mumps, and typhus. Before contact with European explorers and colonists, it is estimated that more than 90 million indigenous people called North and South America home. Sadly, 95% of them succumbed to disease before mass colonization of the Americas even began. In fact, when colonists arrived at areas already cleared for farming, they mistakenly interpreted this as proof that God had

prepared this land for their use, and their use alone. When in reality, tribal people had been farming the land for thousands and thousands of years—only to be wiped out by disease just before the colonists' arrival.

Truth is, Europeans tried a number of ways to clear the continent of tribal people: war, disease, enslavement, and conversion. All of them worked to some degree, but none as successful as the spread of European diseases. Later, the newly formed United States would continue the colonial policy of war and Indian removal as solutions to the "Indian Problem." And what exactly was the problem? That Indians existed at all.

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Name: _____ Date: _____

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Study Questions

Directions: After reading the article "Encounter, Colonization, and Devastation," answer the questions below.

1. List the three ways that Indian people and their lifeways were threatened and in many cases destroyed:
 - a. _____
 - b. _____
 - c. _____
2. The single purpose of the Virginia Charter of 1606 was to _____

3. One of the major reasons why Pilgrims left England was to be able to practice their own religion. Explain why this conflicts with their desire to force tribal people to convert to Christianity. _____

4. Why do you think tribal people resisted conversion to Christianity?

5. How did European diseases destroy entire tribal nations? _____

6. Most historians agree that Europeans often spread disease to tribal people on purpose. Do you agree? Use at least one detail from the article to support your opinion. _____

7. Define "The Indian Problem." _____

8. How did colonists often justify the taking of tribal homelands? _____

9. What could tribal people, missionaries, and/or colonists have done to live peacefully?
