Clash of Cultures: Interpreting Murder in Early Maryland

New World conquest sparked unexpected, often embarrassing contests over the alleged superiority of European culture. Not surprisingly, the colonizers insisted they brought the benefits of civilization to the primitive and savage peoples of North America. Native Americans never shared that perspective, voicing a strong preference for their own values and institutions. In early seventeenth-century Maryland the struggle over cultural superiority turned dramatically on how best to punish the crime of murder, an issue about which both Native Americans and Europeans had firm opinions.

The actual events that occurred at Captain William Claiborne’s trading post in 1635 may never be known. Surviving records indicate that several young Native American males identified as Wicomess Indians apparently traveled to Claiborne’s on business, but to their great annoyance, they found the proprietor entertaining Susquehannock Indians, their most hated enemies. The situation deteriorated rapidly after the Susquehannock men ridiculed the Wicomess youths. Unwilling to endure public humiliation, the Wicomess group later ambushed the Susquehannock men, killing five, and then returned to the trading post where they murdered three Englishmen.

Wicomess leaders realized immediately that something had to be done. They dispatched a trusted messenger to inform the governor of Maryland that they intended “to offer satisfaction for the harm . . . done to the English.” The murder of the Susquehannock Indians was another matter, best addressed by the Native Americans themselves. The governor praised the Wicomess for coming forward, announcing that “I expect that those men, who have done this outrage, should be delivered unto me, to do with them as I shall think fit.” The Wicomess spokesman was dumbfounded. The governor surely did not understand basic Native American legal procedure. “It is the matter amongst us Indians, that if any such like accident happens,” he explained, “we do redeem the life of a man that is so slain with 100 Arms length of Roanoke (which is a sort of Beads that they make, and use for money.)” The governor’s demand for prisoners seemed doubly impertinent, “since you [English settlers] are here strangers, and coming into our Country, you should rather conform your selves to the Customs of our Country, than impose yours upon us.” At this point the governor hastily ended the conversation, perhaps uncomfortably aware that if the legal tables had been turned and the murders had been committed in England, he would be the one loudly defending “the Customs of our Country.”

Europeans sailing in the wake of Admiral Christopher Columbus constructed a narrative of superiority that survived long after the Wicomess had been dispersed—a fate that befell them in the late seventeenth century. The story recounted first in Europe and then in the United
States depicted heroic adventurers, missionaries, and soldiers sharing Western civilization with the peoples of the New World and opening a vast virgin land to economic development. The familiar tale celebrated material progress, the inevitable spread of European values, and the taming of frontiers.

That narrative of events no longer provides an adequate explanation for European conquest and settlement. It is not so much wrong as partisan, incomplete, and even offensive. History recounted from the perspective of the victors inevitably silences the voices of the victims, the peoples who, in the victors’ view, foolishly resisted economic and technological progress. Heroic tales of the advance of Western values only serve to deflect modern attention away from the rich cultural and racial diversity that characterized North American societies. More disturbing, traditional tales of European conquest also obscure the sufferings of the millions of Native Americans, as well as huge numbers of Africans sold as slaves in the New World.

By placing these complex, often unsettling, experiences within an interpretive framework of creative adaptations—rather than of exploration or settlement—progress is made in recapturing the full human dimensions of conquest and resistance. While the New World often witnessed tragic violence and systematic betrayal, it allowed ordinary people of three different races and many different ethnic identities opportunities to shape their own lives as best they could within diverse, often hostile environments. It should be remembered that neither Native Americans nor Africans were passive victims of European exploitation. Within their own families and communities they made choices, sometimes rebelling, sometimes accommodating, but always trying to make sense in terms of their own cultures of what they were experiencing. Of course, that was precisely what the Wicomess messenger tried to tell the governor of Maryland.

Native American Histories Before Conquest

The peopling of North America did not begin with Columbus’s arrival in 1492. Although Spanish invaders proclaimed the discovery of a “New World,” they really brought into contact three worlds—Europe, Africa, and America—that in the fifteenth century were already old. Indeed, the first migrants reached the North American continent some fifteen to twenty thousand years ago.

Environmental conditions played a major role in this story. Twenty thousand years ago, the earth’s climate was considerably colder than it is today. Huge glaciers, often more than a mile thick, extended as far south as the present states of Illinois and Ohio and covered broad sections of western Canada. Much of the world’s moisture was transformed into ice, and the oceans dropped hundreds of feet below their current levels. The receding waters created a land bridge connecting Asia and North America, a region now submerged beneath the Bering Sea that modern archaeologists have named Beringia.

Even at the height of the last ice age, much of the far North remained free of glaciers. Small bands of spear-throwing Paleo-Indians pursued giant mammals—woolly mammoths and mastodons, for example—across Beringia. Because these migrations took place over a long period of time and involved small, independent bands of highly nomadic people, the Paleo-Indians never developed a common identity. Each group focused on its own immediate survival, adjusting to the opportunities presented by various microenvironments.

The Environmental Challenge: Food, Climate, and Culture

Some twelve thousand years ago global warming substantially reduced the glaciers, allowing nomadic hunters to pour into the heart of North America. Within just a few thousand years, Native Americans had reached the southern tip of South America. Blessed with a seemingly inexhaustible supply of meat, the early migrants experienced rapid population growth. Archaeologists have discovered that this sudden expansion of human population coincided with the loss of scores of large mammals. Some archaeologists have suggested that the Paleo-Indian hunters bear responsibility for the mass extinction of so many animals. It is more probable that climatic warming put the large animals under severe stress, and the early humans simply contributed to an ecological process over which they had little control.

The Indian peoples adjusted to the changing environmental conditions. Dispersing across the North American continent, they found new food sources, such as smaller mammals, fish, nuts, and berries. About five thousand years ago, they discovered how to cultivate certain plants. The peoples living in the Southwest acquired cultivation skills long before the bands living along the Atlantic coast as knowledge of maize (corn), squash, and beans spread north from central Mexico. The shift to basic crops—a transformation that is sometimes termed the Agricultural Revolution—profoundly altered Native American societies. Freed from the insecurity of an existence based solely on hunting and gathering, Native Americans began settling in permanent villages. They also began to produce ceramics, a valuable technology for the storage of grain. As the food supply increased, the Native American population greatly expanded, especially in the Southwest and in the Mississippi Valley.

Mysterious Disappearances

Several magnificent sites in North America provide powerful testimony to the cultural and social achievements of native peoples before European conquest. One of the more impressive is Chaco Canyon on the San Juan River in present-day New Mexico. The massive pueblo was the
center of Anasazi culture, serving both political and religious functions, and it is estimated that its complex structures may have housed as many as fifteen thousand people. The Anasazi sustained their agriculture through a huge, technologically sophisticated network of irrigation canals that carried water long distances. They also constructed a transportation system connecting Chaco Canyon by road to more than seventy outlying villages.

Equally impressive urban centers developed throughout the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys. In present-day Ohio, the Adena and Hopewell peoples—names assigned by archaeologists to distinguish differences in material culture—built large ceremonial mounds, where they buried the families of local elites. Around A.D. 1000, the groups gave way to the Mississippian culture, a loose collection of communities along the Mississippi River from Louisiana to Illinois that shared similar technologies and beliefs. Cahokia, a huge fortification and ceremonial site in Illinois that originally rose high above the river and supported a population of almost twenty thousand, represented the greatest achievement of the Mississippian peoples.

Recent research reveals that Native American peoples did not isolate themselves in their own communities. Over the millennia they developed different cultural and social practices, and more than three hundred separate languages had evolved in North America before European conquest. Members of different groups traded goods over extremely long distances. Burial mounds in the Ohio Valley, for example, have yielded obsidian from western Wyoming, shells from Florida, mica quarried in North Carolina and Tennessee, and copper from near Lake Superior.

Yet however advanced the Native American cultures of the southwest and Mississippi Valley may have been, both cultures disappeared rather mysteriously just before the arrival of the Europeans. No one knows what caused the disappearances. Some scholars have suggested that climatic changes and continuing population growth affected food supplies; others insist that chronic warfare destabilized the social order. Still others argue that diseases carried to the New World by the first European adventurers ravaged the cultures. No matter what the explanation, modern commentators agree that the breakdown of Mississippian culture caused smaller bands to disperse, construct new identities, and establish different political structures. These were the peoples who encountered the first European arrivals along the Atlantic Coast.

Aztec Dominance
The stability resulting from the Agricultural Revolution allowed the Indians of Mexico and Central America to structure their societies in more complex ways. Like the Incas who lived in what is now Peru, the Mayan and Toltec peoples of Central Mexico built vast cities, formed government bureaucracies that dominated large tributary populations, and developed hieroglyphic writing as well as an accurate solar calendar.

Not long before Columbus began his voyage across the Atlantic, the Aztec, an aggressive, warlike people, swept through the Valley of Mexico, conquering the great cities of their enemies. Aztec warriors ruled by force, reducing defeated rivals to tributary status. In 1519, the Aztec’s main ceremonial center, Tenochtitlán, contained as many as two hundred fifty thousand people as compared with only fifty thousand in Seville, the port from which the early Spaniards had sailed. Elaborate human sacrifice associated with Huitzilopochtli, the Aztec sun god, horrified Europeans, who apparently did not find the savagery of their own civilization so objectionable. The Aztec ritual killings were connected to the agricultural cycle, and the Indians believed the blood of their victims possessed extraordinary fertility powers.

Eastern Woodland Cultures
Indians living in the northeast region along the Atlantic coast, who numbered less than a million at the time of conquest, generally supplemented farming with seasonal hunting and gathering. Most belonged to what ethnographers term the Eastern Woodland cultures. Small bands formed
villages during the warm summer months. The women cultivated maize and other crops while the men hunted and fished. During the winter, difficulties associated with feeding so many people forced the communities to disperse. Each family lived off the land as best it could.

Seventeenth-century English settlers were most likely to have encountered the Algonquian-speaking peoples who occupied much of the territory along the Atlantic Coast from North Carolina to Maine. Included in this large linguistic group were the Powhatan of Tidewater Virginia, the Narragansett of Rhode Island, and the Abenaki of northern New England.

Despite common linguistic roots, the scattered Algonquian communities would have found communication extremely difficult because they had developed very different dialects. Furthermore, linguistic ties had little effect on Indian politics. Algonquian groups who lived in different regions, exploited different resources, and spoke different dialects did not develop strong ties of mutual identity. When their own interests were involved, they were more than willing to ally themselves with Europeans against other Algonquian speakers. Divisions among Indian groups would in time facilitate European conquest.

However divided the Indians of eastern North America may have been, they shared many cultural values and assumptions. Most Native Americans, for example, defined their place in society through kinship. Such personal bonds determined the character of economic and political relations. The farming bands living in areas eventually claimed by England were often matrilineal, which meant in effect that women owned the planting fields and houses, maintained tribal customs, and had a role in tribal government. The native communities of Canada and the northern Great Lakes were more likely to be patrilineal. In these groups, men owned the hunting grounds that the family needed to survive.

Eastern Woodland communities organized diplomacy, trade, and war around reciprocal relationships that impressed Europeans as being remarkably democratic. Chains of native authority were loosely structured. Native leaders were accomplished public speakers because persuasive rhetoric was often their only effective source of power. It required considerable oratorical skill for an Indian leader to persuade independent-minded warriors to support a certain policy.

Before the arrival of the Europeans, Indian wars were seldom very lethal. Fatalities, when they did occur, sparked cycles of revenge. Young warriors attacked neighboring bands largely to exact revenge for a previous insult or the death of a relative, or to secure captives. Some captives were tortured to death; others were adopted into the community as replacements for fallen relatives.
A World Transformed

The arrival of Europeans on the North American continent profoundly altered Native American cultures. Indian villages located on the Atlantic Coast came under severe pressure almost immediately; inland groups had more time to adjust. Wherever they lived, however, Indians discovered that conquest strained traditional ways of life, and as daily patterns of experience changed almost beyond recognition, native peoples had to devise new ways to survive in physical and social environments that eroded tradition.

Cultural change was not the only effect of Native Americans’ contact with Europeans. The ecological transformation, known as the Columbian Exchange, profoundly affected both groups of people. Some aspects of the exchange were beneficial. Europeans introduced into the Americas new plants—bananas, oranges, and sugar, for example—and animals—pigs, sheep, cattle, and especially horses—that altered the diet, economy, and way of life for the native peoples. Native American plants and foods, such as maize, squash, tomatoes, and potatoes, proved equally transforming in Europe.

Other aspects of the Columbian Exchange were far more destructive, especially for Native Americans. The most immediate biological consequence of contact between Europeans and Indians was the transfer of disease. Native Americans lacked natural immunity to many common European diseases and when exposed to influenza, typhus, measles, and especially smallpox, they died by the millions.

Cultural Negotiations

Native Americans were not passive victims of forces beyond their control. So long as they remained healthy, they held their own in the early exchanges, and although they eagerly accepted certain trade goods, they generally resisted other aspects of European cultures. The earliest recorded contacts between Indians and explorers suggest curiosity and surprise rather than hostility. A Southeastern Indian who encountered Hernando de Soto in 1540 expressed awe (at least that is what a Spanish witness recorded): “The things that seldom happen bring astonishment. Think, then, what must be the effect on me and mine, the sight of you and your people, whom we have at no time seen . . . things so altogether new, as to strike awe and terror to our hearts.”

What Indians desired most was peaceful trade. The earliest French explorers reported that natives waved from shore, urging the Europeans to exchange metal items for beaver skins. In fact, the Indians did not perceive themselves at a disadvantage in these dealings. They could readily see the technological advantage of guns over bows and arrows. Metal knives made daily tasks much easier. To acquire such goods they traded pelts, which to them seemed in abundant supply. “The English have no sense,” one Indian informed a French priest. “They give us twenty knives like this for one Beaver skin.”

Trading sessions along the eastern frontier were actually cultural seminars. The Europeans tried to make sense out of Indian cultures, and although they may have called the natives “savages,” they quickly discovered that the Indians drove hard bargains. They demanded gifts; they set the time and place of trade. Indians used the occasions to study the newcomers. They formed opinions about the Europeans, some flattering, some less so, but they never concluded from their observations that Indian culture was inferior to that of the colonizers.

For Europeans, communicating with the Indians was always an ordeal. The invaders reported having gained deep insight into Native American cultures through sign languages. How much accurate information explorers and traders took from these crude improvised exchanges is a matter of conjecture. In the absence of meaningful conversation, Europeans often concluded that the Indians held them in high regard, perhaps seeing the newcomers as gods. Sometimes the adventurers did not even try to communicate, assuming from superficial observation—as did the sixteenth-century explorer Giovanni da Verrazzano—“that they have no religion, and that they live in absolute freedom, and that everything they do proceeds from Ignorance.”

Ethnocentric Europeans tried repeatedly to “civilize” the Indians. In practice that meant persuading natives to dress like the colonists, attend white schools, live in permanent
structures, and, most important, accept Christianity. The Indians listened more or less patiently, but in the end they usually rejected European values. Although some Indians accepted Christianity, most paid it lip service or found it irrelevant to their needs. As one Huron told a French priest, “It would be useless for me to repent having sinned, seeing that I never have sinned.”

Among some Indian groups, gender figured prominently in a person’s willingness to convert to Christianity. Native men who traded furs for European goods had more frequent contact with Europeans, and they proved more receptive to the arguments of missionaries. But native women jealously guarded traditional culture, a system that often sanctioned polygamy—a husband having several wives—and gave women substantial authority over the distribution of food within the village. French Jesuit missionaries insisted on monogamous marriages, an institution based on Christian values but that made little sense in Indian societies where constant warfare against the Europeans killed off large numbers of young males and increasingly left native women without sufficient marriage partners.

Even matrimony seldom eroded the Indians’ attachment to their own customs. When Native Americans and Europeans married, the European partner usually chose to live among the Indians. Impatient settlers who regarded the Indians simply as an obstruction to progress sometimes developed more coercive methods, such as enslavement, to achieve cultural conversion. Again, from the European perspective, the results were disappointing. Indian slaves ran away or died. In either case, they did not become European.

**Threats to Survival: Trade and Disease**

Over time, cooperative encounters between Native Americans and Europeans became less frequent. The Europeans found it almost impossible to understand the Indians’ relation to the land and other natural resources. English planters cleared the forests and fenced the fields and, in the process, radically altered the ecological systems on which the Indians depended. The European system of land use inevitably reduced the supply of deer and other animals essential to traditional native cultures.

Trade, too, came to threaten Native Americans’ survival. The Indians welcomed European commerce, but like so many consumers throughout recorded history, they discovered that the objects they most desired led them into debt. To pay for the goods, the Indians hunted more aggressively and so further reduced the population of fur-bearing animals.

Commerce affected Indian survival in other ways. After several disastrous wars—the Yamasee War in South Carolina in 1715, for example—the natives learned that demonstrations of force usually resulted in the suspension of normal trade, on which the Indians had grown quite dependent for guns and ammunition, among other things.

It was disease, however, that ultimately brought disaster to many North American tribes. European adventurers exposed Indians to bacteria and viruses to which they had no natural immunity. Smallpox, measles, and influenza decimated the Native American population. Other diseases such as alcoholism took a terrible toll.

Within a generation of initial contact with Europeans, the Carib, who gave the Caribbean its name, were virtually extinct. The Algonquian communities of New England experienced appalling rates of death. Historical demographers now estimate that some tribes suffered a 90 to 95 percent population loss within the first century of European contact. The population of the Arawak of Santo Domingo, for example, dropped from about 3,770,000 in 1496 to only 125 in 1570. The death of so many Indians decreased the supply of indigenous laborers, whom the Europeans needed to work the mines and cultivate staple crops such as sugar and tobacco. The decimation of native populations may have persuaded colonists throughout the New World to seek a substitute labor force in Africa. Indeed, the enslavement of blacks has been described as an effort by Europeans to “repopulate” the New World.

Some native peoples, such as the Iroquois, who lived a long way from the coast and thus had more time to adjust to the challenge, withstood the crisis better than those who immediately confronted the Europeans. Refugee Indians from the hardest hit eastern communities were absorbed into healthier western groups. However horrific the crisis may have been, it demonstrated how much the environment—a source of opportunity as well as devastation—shaped human encounters throughout the New World.

**West Africa: Ancient and Complex Societies**

During the era of the European slave trade, a number of myths about sub-Saharan Africa were propagated. Europeans maintained that the sub-Saharan Africans lived simple, isolated lives. Indeed, some scholars still depict the vast region stretching from the Senegal River south to modern Angola as a single cultural unit, as if at one time all the men and women living there had shared a common set of political, religious, and social values.

Such was not the case. Sub-Saharan West Africa was rich in political, religious, and cultural diversity. Centuries earlier, the Muslim religion had slowly spread into black Africa, and although many West Africans resisted the Islamic faith, it was widely accepted in the Senegal Valley. The Muslim traders from North Africa and the Middle East who introduced their religion to West Africans also established sophisticated trade networks that linked the villagers of Senegambia with the urban centers of northwestern Africa—Tangier, Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli. Great camel caravans regularly crossed the Sahara carrying trade goods, which were exchanged for gold and slaves.

West Africans spoke many languages and organized themselves into diverse political systems. As in Europe,
Artists in West Africa depicted the European traders who arrived in search of gold and slaves. This sixteenth-century Benin bronze relief sculpture portrays two Portuguese men.

Local African rulers allowed European traders to build compounds along the West African coast. Constructed to expedite the slave trade, each of these so-called slave factories served a different European interest. Cape Coast Castle, which changed hands several times as rival nations fought for its control, became one of the largest slave-trading posts in the world after the British captured and reinforced it in 1665.

Europe on the Eve of Conquest

In ancient times, points west had an almost mythical appeal among people living along the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Classical writers speculated about the fate of the legendary Atlantis, a great civilization that had mysteriously sunk beneath the ocean waves. In the fifth century A.D., an intrepid Irish monk, Saint Brendan, reported finding enchanted islands far out in the Atlantic where he also met a talking whale. Such stories aroused curiosity but proved difficult to verify.
About A.D. 1000, Scandinavian seafarers known as Norsemen or Vikings actually established settlements in the New World. In the year 984, a band of Vikings led by Eric the Red sailed west from Iceland to a large island in the North Atlantic, which Eric inappropriately named Greenland in an effort to attract colonists to the icebound region. A few years later, Eric’s son, Leif, pushed even farther west to northern Newfoundland. Poor communications, hostile natives, and political upheavals at home, however, made maintenance of these distant outposts impossible. The Vikings’ adventures were not widely known; when Columbus set out on his great voyage in 1492, he was most likely unaware of these earlier exploits.

**Building New Nation-States**

The Viking achievement went unnoticed partly because other Europeans were not prepared to sponsor transatlantic exploration and settlement. Medieval kingdoms were loosely organized, and for several centuries, fierce provincial loyalties, widespread ignorance of classical learning, and dreadful plagues such as the Black Death discouraged people from thinking about the world beyond their villages.

In the fifteenth century, these conditions began to change. The expansion of commerce, a more imaginative outlook fostered by the European cultural awakening and humanistic movement known as the Renaissance, and population growth after 1450 contributed to the exploration impulse. Land became more expensive, and landowners prospered. Demands from wealthy landlords for such luxury goods as spices and jewels, obtainable only in distant ports, introduced powerful new incentives for exploration and trade.

This period also witnessed the victory of the “new monarchs” over feudal nobles; political authority was centralized. The changes came slowly—and in numerous areas, violently—but wherever they occurred, the results altered traditional political relationships between the nobility and the crown, between the citizen and the state. The new rulers recruited national armies and paid for them with national taxes. These rulers could be despotic, but they usually restored a measure of peace to communities tired of chronic feudal war.

The story was the same throughout most of western Europe. Henry VII in England, Louis XI in France, and Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile in Spain forged strong nations from weak kingdoms. If these political changes had not occurred, the major European countries could not possibly have generated the financial and military resources necessary for worldwide exploration. Indeed, the formation of aggressive nation-states prepared the way for the later wars of empire.

During this period, naval innovators revolutionized ship design and technology. Before the fifteenth century, the ships that plied the Mediterranean were clumsy and slow. But by the time Columbus sailed from Spain, they were faster, more maneuverable, and less expensive to operate. Most important of all was a new type of rigging developed by the Arabs, the lateen sail, which allowed large ships to sail into the wind, permitting transatlantic travel and difficult maneuvers along the rocky, uncharted coasts of North America. By the end of the fifteenth century, seafarers set sail with a new sense of confidence.

The final prerequisite to exploration was knowledge. The rediscovery of classical texts and maps in the humanistic Renaissance of the fifteenth century helped stimulate fresh investigation of the globe. And because of the invention of the printing press in the 1430s, this new knowledge could spread across Europe. The printing press opened the European mind to exciting possibilities that had only been dimly perceived when the Vikings sailed the North Atlantic.

**Imagining a New World**

In the early fifteenth century, Spain was politically divided, its people were poor, and its harbors were second-rate. There was little to indicate that this land would take the lead in conquering the New World. But in the early sixteenth century, Spain came alive. The union of Ferdinand and Isabella sparked a drive for political consolidation that, owing to the monarchs’ militant Catholicism, took on the characteristics of a religious crusade. The new monarchs waged a victorious war against the Muslim states in southern Spain, which ended in 1492 when Granada, the last Muslim stronghold, fell. Out of this volatile political and social environment came the conquistadores, explorers eager for personal glory and material gain, uncompromising in matters of religion, and unswerving in their loyalty to the crown. These were the men who first carried European culture to the New World.

**Myths and Reality**

If it had not been for Christopher Columbus (Cristoforo Colombo), Spain might never have gained an American empire. Born in Genoa, Italy, in 1451 of humble parentage, Columbus devoted classical learning and became obsessed with the idea of sailing west across the Atlantic Ocean to reach Cathay, as China was then known. In 1484, he presented his plan to the king of Portugal, who was also interested in a route to Cathay. But the Portuguese were more interested in the route that went around the tip of Africa. After a polite audience, Columbus was refused support.

Undaunted by rejection, Columbus petitioned Isabella and Ferdinand for financial backing. They initially were no more interested in his grand design than the Portuguese had been. But fear of Portugal’s growing power, as well as Columbus’s confident talk of wealth and empire, led the new monarchs to reassess his scheme. Finally, the two sovereigns provided the supremely self-assured navigator with three ships, named Niña, Pinta, and Santa Maria. The
Cortés led his band of six hundred followers across difficult terrain, burning his ships to cut off his army from a possible retreat, and had he not bumped into the New World along the way, he and his crew would have run out of food and water long before they reached China.

After stopping in the Canary Islands for ship repairs and supplies, Columbus crossed the Atlantic in thirty-three days, landing on an island in the Bahamas. He searched for the fabled cities of Asia, never considering that he had come upon a landmass completely unknown in Europe. Since his mathematical calculations had been correct, it didn’t occur to him that he had come upon a new world, where he met friendly, though startled, Native Americans, whom he called Indians.

Three more times Columbus returned to the New World in search of fabled Asian riches. He died in 1506, a frustrated but wealthy entrepreneur, unaware that he had reached a previously unknown continent. The final blow came in December 1500 when an ambitious falsifier, Amerigo Vespucci, published a sensational travel account that convinced German mapmakers that he had beaten Columbus to the New World. By the time the deception was discovered, America had gained general acceptance throughout Europe as the name for the newly discovered continent.

The Conquistadores: Faith and Greed

Under the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494), Spain and Portugal divided the New World between themselves. Portugal got Brazil, and Spain laid claim to the remaining territories. Spain’s good fortune unleashed a horde of conquistadores on the Caribbean. They came not as colonists but as fortune hunters seeking instant wealth, preferably gold, and they were not squeamish about the means they used to obtain it. The primary casualties of their greed were the Native Americans. In less than two decades, the tribes that had inhabited the Caribbean islands had been exterminated, victims of exploitation and disease.

Around then, rumors of fabulous wealth in Mexico began to lure the conquistadores from the islands Columbus had found to the mainland. On November 18, 1518, Hernán Cortés, a minor government functionary in Cuba, and a small army set sail for Mexico. There Cortés soon demonstrated that he was a leader of extraordinary ability, a person of intellect and vision who managed to rise above the goals of his avaricious followers.

His adversary was the legendary Aztec emperor Montezuma. It was a duel of powerful personalities. After burning his ships to cut off his army from a possible retreat, Cortés led his band of six hundred followers across difficult mountain trails toward the Valley of Mexico. The sound of gunfire and the sight of armor-clad horses, both unknown to Native Americans, frightened them. Added to the technological advantages was a potent psychological factor. At first Montezuma thought that the Spaniards were gods, representatives of the fearful plumed serpent, Quetzalcoatl. By the time the Aztec ruler realized his error, it was too late to save his empire.

From Plunder to Settlement

Cortés’s victory in Mexico, coupled with other Spanish conquests, notably in Peru, transformed the mother country into the wealthiest nation in Europe. But the Spanish crown soon faced new difficulties. The conquistadores had to be brought under royal authority. Adventurers like Cortés were stubbornly independent, quick to take offense, and thousands of miles from the seat of government. One solution was the encomienda system. Conquistadores were rewarded with local villages and control over native labor. They also had the responsibility of protecting the Indians, who suffered terribly under this cruelly exploitative system of labor tribute. The system did make the colonizers very dependent on the king, however, for it was he who legitimized their title. As one historian noted, the system transformed “a frontier of plunder into a frontier of settlement.”

Bureaucrats dispatched directly from Spain soon replaced the aging conquistadores. Unlike the governing system that later existed in England’s mainland American colonies, Spain’s rulers maintained tight control over their American possessions through their government officials. After 1535, a viceroy, a nobleman appointed to oversee the king’s colonial interests, ruled the people of New Spain. Working independently of the viceroy, an audiencia, the supreme judicial body, brought a measure of justice to the Indians and Spaniards and made certain that the viceroys did not slight their responsibilities to the king. Finally, the Council of the Indies in Spain handled colonial business. Although cumbersome and slow, somehow the rigidly controlled system worked.

The Spanish also brought Catholicism to the New World. The Dominicans and Franciscans, the two largest religious orders, established Indian missions throughout New Spain, and some barefoot friars protected the Native Americans from the worst forms of exploitation. One courageous Dominican, Fra Bartolomé de Las Casas, even published an eloquent defense of Indian rights, Historia de las Indias, that among other things questioned the European conquest of the New World. The book led to reforms designed to bring greater “love and moderation” to Spanish-Indian relations.

About seven hundred fifty thousand people migrated to the New World from Spain. Most of the colonists were impoverished, single males in their late twenties in search of economic opportunities. They generally came from the poorest agricultural regions of southern Spain. Since few Spanish
women migrated, especially in the sixteenth century, the men often married Indians and, later, blacks, unions that produced offspring known, respectively, as *mestizos* and *mulattoes*. The frequency of interracial marriage created a society of more fluid racial categories than there were in the English colonies, where the sex ratio of the settlers was more balanced and the racially mixed population comparatively small.

The lure of gold drew Spanish conquistadores to the unexplored lands to the north of Mexico. Between 1539 and 1541, Hernando de Soto trekked across the Southeast from Florida to the Mississippi River looking for gold and glory, and at about the same time, Francisco Vásquez de Coronado set out from New Spain in search of the fabled Seven Cities of Cíbola. Neither conquistador found what he was searching for. In the seventeenth century, when Juan de Oñate established outposts in the Southwest, the Spanish came into open conflict with Native Americans in that region. In 1680, the Indians drove the invaders completely out of the territory. Thereafter, the Spanish decided to maintain only a token presence in present-day Texas and New Mexico in order to discourage French encroachment on Spanish lands. For the same reason, the Spanish colony of St. Augustine was established in Florida in 1565. Spanish authorities showed little interest in California, a land of poor Indians and even poorer natural resources. Had it not been for the work of a handful of priests, Spain would have had little claim to California.

Even so, Spain claimed far more of the New World than it could possibly manage. After the era of the conquistadores, Spain’s rulers regarded the American colonies primarily as a source of precious metal, and between 1500 and 1650 an estimated 200 tons of gold and 16,000 tons of silver were shipped back to the Spanish treasury in Madrid. The resulting inflation hurt the common people in Spain and prevented the growth of Spanish industry. Unimaginative leadership and debilitating wars hastened the Spanish decline. As one insightful observer declared in 1603, “The New World conquered by you has conquered you in its turn.” Nonetheless, Spain’s great cultural contribution to the American people is still very much alive today.

**French Exploration and Settlement**

French interest in the New World developed more slowly. In 1534, Jacques Cartier first sailed to the New World in search of a northwest passage to China. At first he was depressed by the rocky, barren coast of Newfoundland. He grumbled, “I am rather inclined to believe that this is the land God gave to Cain.” But the discovery of a large, promising waterway raised Cartier’s spirits. He reconnoitered the Gulf of St. Lawrence, traveling up the river as far as Montreal, but he did not discover a northwest passage, nor did he find gold or other precious metals. After several voyages to Canada, Cartier became discouraged by the harsh winters and meager findings; he
This seventeenth-century woodcut depicts Samuel de Champlain’s fortified camp at Quebec on the St. Lawrence River. Champlain founded Quebec for France in 1608.
Source: North Wind Picture Archives.

returned home for good in 1542. Not until seventy-five years later did the brilliant navigator Samuel de Champlain rediscover the region for France. He founded Quebec in 1608.

In Canada, the French developed an economy based primarily on the fur trade, a commerce that required close cooperation with the Native Americans. They also explored the heart of the continent. In 1673, Père Jacques Marquette journeyed down the Mississippi River, and nine years later, Sieur de La Salle traveled all the way to the Gulf of Mexico. In the early eighteenth century, the French established small settlements in Louisiana, the most important being New Orleans. Although the French controlled the region along the Mississippi and its tributaries, their dream of a vast American empire suffered from several serious flaws. From the first, the king remained largely indifferent to colonial affairs. An even greater problem was the nature of the land and climate. Few rural peasants or urban artisans wanted to venture to the inhospitable northern country, and throughout the colonial period, New France was underpopulated. By the first quarter of the eighteenth century, the English settlements had outstripped their French neighbors in population as well as in volume of trade.

The English New World

The earliest English visit to North America remains something of a mystery. Fishermen working out of the western English ports may have landed in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland as early as the 1480s. John Cabot (Giovanni Caboto), a Venetian sea captain, completed the first recorded transatlantic voyage by an English vessel in 1497. Henry VII had rejected Columbus’s enterprise for the Indies, but the first Tudor monarch apparently experienced a change of heart after hearing of Spain’s success.

Like other explorers of that time, Cabot believed that he could find a northwest passage to Asia. He doggedly searched the northern waters for a likely opening, but a direct route to Cathay eluded him. Cabot died during a second attempt in 1498. Although Sebastian Cabot continued his father’s explorations in the Hudson Bay region in 1508–1509, English interest in the New World waned. For the next three-quarters of a century, the English people were preoccupied with more pressing domestic and religious concerns. The Cabot voyages did, however, establish an English claim to American territory.

Religious Turmoil and Reformation in Europe

The reign of Henry VII was plagued by domestic troubles. England possessed no standing army; a small, weak navy; and many strong and independent local magnates. During the sixteenth century, however, the next Tudor king, Henry VIII, and his daughter, Elizabeth I, developed a strong central government and transformed England into a Protestant nation. These changes propelled England into a central role in European affairs and were crucial to the creation of England’s North American empire.

The Protestantism that eventually stimulated colonization was definitely not of English origin. In 1517, a relatively obscure German monk, Martin Luther, publicly challenged certain tenets and practices of Roman Catholicism, and within a few years, the religious unity of Europe was forever shattered. Luther’s message was straightforward. God spoke through the Bible, Luther maintained, not through the pope or priests. Pilgrimages, fasts, alms, indulgences—none of these traditional acts could ensure salvation. Luther’s radical ideas spread rapidly across northern Germany and Scandinavia.

Other Protestant reformers soon spoke out against Catholicism. The most important of these was John Calvin, a lawyer turned theologian, who lived in the Swiss city of Geneva. Calvin emphasized God’s omnipotence over human affairs. The Lord, he maintained, chose some persons for “election,” the gift of salvation, while condemning others to eternal damnation. Human beings were powerless to alter this decision by their individual actions.

Common sense suggests that such a bleak doctrine might lead to fatalism or hedonism. After all, why not enjoy worldly pleasures if they have no effect on God’s judgment? But common sense would be wrong. Indeed, the Calvinists constantly were busy searching for signs that they had received God’s gift of grace. The uncertainty of their eternal state proved a powerful psychological spur, for as long as people did not know whether they were scheduled for
heaven or hell, they worked diligently to demonstrate that they possessed at least the seeds of grace. This doctrine of predestination became the distinguishing mark of Calvin’s followers throughout northern Europe. In the seventeenth century, they were known in France as Huguenots and in England and America as Puritans.

Popular anticlericalism was the basis for the Protestant Reformation in England. Although they observed traditional Catholic ritual, the English people had long resented paying monies to a distant pope. Early in the sixteenth century, opposition to the clergy grew increasingly vocal. Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, the most powerful prelate in England, flaunted his immense wealth and became a symbol of spiritual corruption. Parish priests were ridiculed for their ignorance and greed. Anticlericalism did not run as deep in England as in Germany, but by the late 1520s, the Roman Catholic clergy had strained the allegiance of the great mass of the population. Ordinary men and women throughout the kingdom were ready to leave the institutional church.

The catalyst for the Reformation in England was Henry VIII’s desire to end his marriage to Catherine of Aragon, daughter of the king of Spain. Their union in 1509 had produced a daughter, Mary, but no son. The need for a male heir obsessed Henry. He and his counselors assumed that a female ruler could not maintain domestic peace and that England would fall once again into civil war. Henry petitioned Pope Clement VII for a divorce. Unwilling to tolerate the public humiliation of Catherine, Spain forced the pope to procrastinate. In 1527, time ran out. Henry fell in love with Anne Boleyn, who later bore him a daughter, Elizabeth. The king divorced Catherine without papal consent.

The final break with Rome came swiftly. Between 1529 and 1536, the king, acting through Parliament, severed all ties with the pope, seized church lands, and dissolved many of the monasteries. In March 1534, the Act of Supremacy boldly named Henry VIII “supreme head of the Church of England.” Land formerly owned by the Catholic Church passed quickly into private hands, and property holders acquired a vested interest in Protestantism. In 1539, William Tyndale and Miles Coverdale issued an English edition of the Bible, which made it possible for the common people to read the Scriptures in their own language rather than Catholicism’s Latin. The separation was complete.

When Henry died in 1547, his young son Edward VI came to the throne. But Edward was a sickly child. Militant Protestants took advantage of the political uncertainty to introduce Calvinism into England. In breaking with the papacy, Henry had shown little enthusiasm for theological change; most Catholic ceremonies remained. But opponents now insisted that the Church of England remove every trace of its Catholic origins. Edward died in 1553, and these ambitious efforts came to a sudden halt. Henry’s eldest daughter, Mary I, ascended the throne. Fiercely loyal to the Catholic faith, she vowed to return England to the pope. Hundreds of Protestants were executed; others scurried off to Geneva and Frankfurt, where they absorbed the radical Calvinist doctrines. When Mary died in 1558 and was succeeded by Elizabeth I, these “Marian exiles” returned, more eager than ever to purge the Tudor church of Catholicism. Mary had inadvertently advanced the cause of Calvinism by creating so many Protestant martyrs. The Marian exiles now controlled the Elizabethan church, which remained fundamentally Calvinist until the end of the sixteenth century.

The Protestant Queen

Elizabeth was a woman of extraordinary talent. She governed England from 1558 to 1603, an intellectually exciting period during which some of her subjects took the first halting steps toward colonizing the New World.

Elizabeth’s most urgent duty was to end the religious turmoil that had divided the country for a generation. She had no desire to restore Catholicism. After all, the pope openly referred to her as a woman of illegitimate birth. Nor did she want to recreate the church exactly as it had been in the final years of her father’s reign. Rather, Elizabeth established a unique church, near-Catholic in ceremony but Protestant in doctrine. The examples of Edward and Mary had demonstrated that neither radical change nor widespread persecution gained a monarch lasting popularity.

Elizabeth still faced serious religious challenges. Catholicism and Protestantism were warring faiths; each was an ideology, a body of deeply held beliefs that influenced the way that average men and women interpreted the experiences of everyday life. The confrontation between Protestantism and Catholicism affected Elizabeth’s entire reign.

Militant Calvinists urged her to drop all Catholic rituals, and fervent Catholics wanted her to return to the Roman church. Pope Pius V excommunicated her in 1570. Spain, the most intensely Catholic state in Europe, vowed to restore England to the “true” faith, and Catholic terrorists plotted to overthrow the Tudor monarchy.

Religion, War, and Nationalism

English Protestantism and English nationalism slowly merged. A loyal English subject in the late sixteenth century loved the monarch, supported the Church of England, and hated Catholics, especially those who happened to live in Spain. Elizabeth’s subjects adored their Virgin Queen, and they applauded when her famed “Sea Dogs”—dashing naval commanders such as Sir Francis Drake and Sir John Hawkins—seized Spanish treasure ships in American waters. The English naval raids were little more than piracy, but they passed for grand victories. With each engagement, each threat, each plot, English nationalism took deeper root. By the 1570s, the English people were driven by powerful
ideological forces similar to those that had moved the subjects of Isabella and Ferdinand almost a century earlier.

In the mid-1580s, Philip II of Spain constructed a mighty fleet carrying thousands of Spain's finest infantry. The Armada was built to cross the English Channel and destroy the Protestant queen. When one of Philip's lieutenants viewed the Armada at Lisbon in May 1588, he described it as *la felicissima armada*, the invincible fleet. The king believed that with the support of England's oppressed Catholics, Spanish troops would sweep Elizabeth from power.

It was a grand scheme; it was an even grander failure. In 1588, a smaller, more maneuverable English navy dispersed the Armada and revealed Spain's vulnerability. Philip's hopes for a Catholic England lay wrecked along the rocky coasts of Scotland and Ireland. Elizabeth's subjects remained loyal throughout the crisis. Inspired by success in the Channel, bolder personalities dreamed of acquiring riches and planting colonies across the North Atlantic. Spain's American monopoly had been broken.

### An Unpromising Beginning: Mystery at Roanoke

By the 1570s, England was ready to challenge Spain and reap the profits of Asia and America. Only dimly aware of Cabot's voyages and with very limited colonization experience in Ireland, the English adventurers made almost every mistake that one could possibly imagine between 1575 and 1600. They did, however, acquire valuable information about winds and currents, supplies, and finance that laid the foundation for later, more successful ventures.

Sir Walter Ralegh's experience provided all English colonizers with a sobering example of the difficulties that awaited them in America. In 1584, he dispatched two captains to the coast of present-day North Carolina to claim land granted to him by Elizabeth. The men returned with glowing reports about the fertility of the soil. Diplomatically, Ralegh renamed this marvelous region Virginia, in honor of his patron, the Virgin Queen.

Ralegh's enterprise seemed ill-fated from the start. Though encouraged by Elizabeth, he received no financial backing from the crown, and despite careful planning, everything went wrong. In 1585, Sir Richard Grenville transported a group of men to Roanoke Island, but the colonists did not arrive in Virginia until nearly autumn. The settlement was also poorly located, and even experienced navigators found it dangerous to reach. Finally, Grenville alienated the local Indians when he senselessly destroyed an entire Indian village in retaliation for the theft of a silver cup.

Grenville hurried back to England in the autumn of 1585, leaving the colonists to fend for themselves. They performed quite well. But when an expected shipment of supplies failed to arrive on time, the colonists grew discontented. In the spring of 1586, Sir Francis Drake unexpectedly landed at Roanoke, and the colonists impulsively decided to return home with him.

In 1587, Ralegh launched a second colony. The new settlement was more representative, containing men, women, and even children. The settlers feasted on Roanoke's fish and game and bountiful harvests of corn and pumpkin. Yet within weeks after arriving, the leader of the settlement, John White, returned to England at the colonists' urging to obtain additional food and clothing and to recruit new immigrants.

Once again, Ralegh's luck turned sour. War with Spain pressed every available ship into military service. When rescuers eventually reached the island in 1590, they found the village deserted. The fate of the “lost” colonists remains a mystery. The best guess is that they were absorbed by neighboring groups of natives, some from as far as the southern shore of the James River.
Richard Hakluyt, a supremely industrious man, never saw America. Nevertheless, his vision of the New World powerfully shaped public opinion. He interviewed captains and sailors and carefully collected their travel stories in a massive book titled *The Principall Navigations, Voyages, and Discoveries of the English Nation* (1589). Although each tale appeared to be a straightforward narrative, Hakluyt edited each piece to drive home the book’s central point: England needed American colonies. English settlers, he argued, would provide the mother country with critical natural resources, and in the process they would grow rich themselves.

Hakluyt’s enthusiasm for the spread of English trade throughout the world may have blinded him to the aspirations of other peoples who actually inhabited those distant lands. He continued to collect testimony from adventurers and sailors who claimed to have visited Asia and America. In a popular new edition of his work published between 1598 and 1600 and titled *Voyages*, he catalogued in great detail the commercial opportunities awaiting ambitious English colonizers. His entrepreneurial perspective obscured other aspects of the English Conquest, which within only a short amount of time would transform the face of the New World. He paid little attention, for example, to the rich cultural diversity of the Native Americans; he said not a word about the pain of the Africans who traveled to North and South America as slaves. Instead, he and other polemicists for the English colonization led the ordinary men and women who crossed the Atlantic to expect nothing less than a paradise on Earth. By encouraging such unreal expectations, Hakluyt persuaded European settlers that the New World was theirs for the taking, a self-serving view that invited ecological disaster and human suffering.

**Conclusion: Propaganda for Empire**

**CHRONOLOGY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30,000–20,000 B.C.</td>
<td>Settlers cross the Bering Strait land bridge into North America</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000–1500 B.C.</td>
<td>Agricultural Revolution transforms Native American life</td>
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<tr>
<td>A.D. 1001</td>
<td>Norsemens establish a small settlement in Vinland (Newfoundland)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1438</td>
<td>Printing method using movable type is invented</td>
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<td>1492</td>
<td>Marriage of Isabella and Ferdinand leads to the unification of Spain</td>
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<tr>
<td>1492</td>
<td>Columbus lands at San Salvador</td>
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<td>1497</td>
<td>Cabot leads first English exploration of North America</td>
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<tr>
<td>1502</td>
<td>Montezuma becomes emperor of the Aztec</td>
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<tr>
<td>1506</td>
<td>Columbus dies in Spain after four voyages to America</td>
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<td>1517</td>
<td>Martin Luther’s protests set off the Reformation in Germany</td>
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<td>1521</td>
<td>Cortés achieves victory over the Aztec at Tenochtitlan</td>
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<tr>
<td>1529–1536</td>
<td>Henry VIII provokes the English Reformation</td>
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<td>1534</td>
<td>Cartier claims Canada for France</td>
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<tr>
<td>1536</td>
<td>Calvin’s <em>Institutes</em> is published</td>
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<tr>
<td>1540</td>
<td>Coronado explores the North American Southwest for Spain</td>
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<td>1558</td>
<td>Elizabeth becomes queen of England</td>
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<tr>
<td>1583</td>
<td>Sir Humphrey Gilbert dies</td>
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<tr>
<td>1585</td>
<td>First Roanoke settlement is established on the coast of North Carolina</td>
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<tr>
<td>1588</td>
<td>Spanish Armada is defeated by the English</td>
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<tr>
<td>1603</td>
<td>Elizabeth I dies</td>
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<td>1608</td>
<td>Champlain founds Quebec</td>
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<tr>
<td>1682</td>
<td>La Salle travels the length of the Mississippi River</td>
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