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Colonial America

Backwards Planning Curriculum Units

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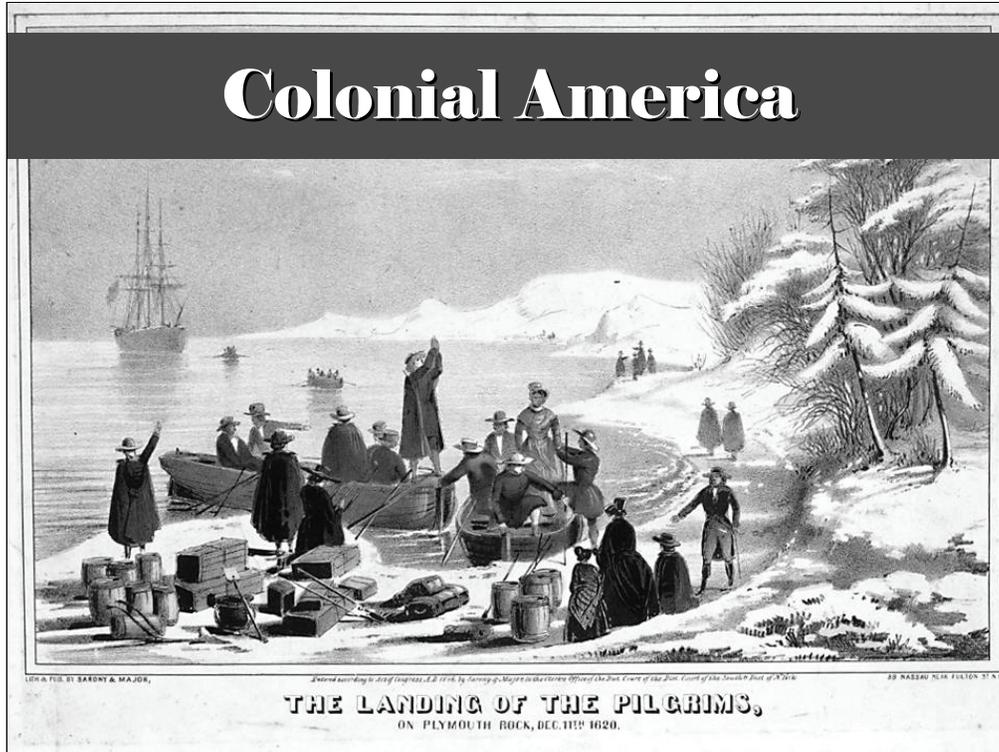
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Table of Contents

Introduction	iv
Lecture Notes	S1
Student Handouts	H1
Backwards Planning Curriculum:	
Project 1: A Young Colonist’s Blog of the Journey to the New World	3
Young Colonist’s Blog: Biography Information Sheet	6
Project 2: John Peter Zenger Mock Trial	8
John Peter Zenger Mock Trial:Information Sheet	12
Activity 3: Colonial Ad Campaign Web Page	15
Colonial Ad Campaign:Information Chart.....	19
Colonial America: Quiz	21
Colonial America:Answer Key	25

Colonial America



Traditionally, people think of Italian explorer Christopher Columbus as the “discoverer” of America. However, some historians believe that Viking explorers may have landed in the “New World” nearly 500 years before Columbus. Europeans came to America for several reasons: lots of land for farming, to profit from America’s natural resources (such as timber, tobacco, and gold), or the opportunity to worship their religions freely, which they had not been able to do in their mother countries.

Several European nations (including Great Britain, Spain, France, and the Netherlands) established settlements in America, but the British eventually developed the most colonies. These colonies had different economies depending on the region: the “Middle Colonies” mostly grew food, the southern ones grew tobacco and sugar, and the northern ones took many of these crops and traded them with other countries for money and manufactured items.

Colonists first cooperated peacefully with Native Americans, but later came into conflict with them and fought wars against them. British colonies also came into conflict with French colonies over land. The two countries fought what became known as the Seven Years’ War in Europe, and the French and Indian War in America. The British won the war, but it cost them a lot of money. They tried to pay off their war debt by taxing the colonists more, but many felt this was unfair and protested. Soon the American Revolution would begin.

Essential Questions

- What factors led Europeans to become interested in exploring and colonizing the New World?
- Why did certain colonies thrive while others failed?
- How did the colonies differ in terms of economy, culture, politics, and types of people who lived there?
- In what ways did colonists and Native Americans interact?
- How did issues in the North American colonies lead to conflicts among European superpowers?
- How did British policies for governing the North America colonies shape how colonists viewed themselves and their relationship with the mother country?

Explorers

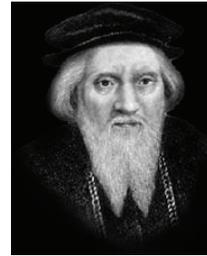
- Leif Ericson
- Christopher Columbus
- John Cabot



Columbus's landing in the "New World"



Ericson



Cabot

For years, many claimed that Christopher Columbus was the “discoverer” of America. However, Viking explorer Leif Ericson is thought to have landed on North American shores approximately 1000 CE, nearly 500 years before Columbus.

While other explorers may have gone before Christopher Columbus, he was generally credited with “discovering” the New World. His four voyages, beginning in 1492, made Spain a major colonial force. Upon landing in the Caribbean Sea, on an island he named San Salvador, he thought he'd landed somewhere close to Japan or China. However, the Earth was much larger than he had believed, and he had not come anywhere near Asia. He made three more voyages to the area, never realizing that instead of finding a faster route to the Indies he'd discovered a “New World.”

Only five years after Columbus's first voyage, an Italian explorer named Giovanni Caboto (known in English as John Cabot) made the first British claim in the New World, in Canada. While the exact location of Cabot's landing is not known, many believe he ended up in what is now Newfoundland. He wanted to find a Northwest Passage—a route through the Arctic Ocean (north of Canada) that would allow ships to reach Asia more quickly. He failed to find one, though, and believed he'd landed in northeastern Asia.

Explorers (continued)

- Vasco Núñez de Balboa
- Ferdinand Magellan



Balboa



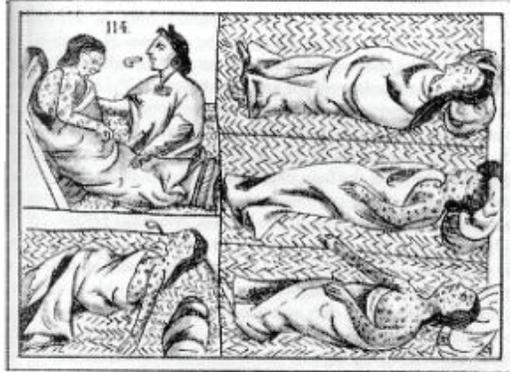
Magellan

Vasco Núñez de Balboa, a Spanish conquistador, first heard of the “other sea” (the Pacific Ocean) while serving as governor of Veragua, an area on the Caribbean coast of South America. Natives there told him of a kingdom in which the inhabitants had a large amount of gold; however, they also warned that it would take “a thousand men” to defeat the tribes living on the coast. In 1513, Balboa began an expedition across the Isthmus of Panama in an attempt to find gold. During the expedition, natives attacked Balboa’s men. The Spaniards won the battle, but lost a lot of troops. Most of Balboa’s men chose to stay behind, but Balboa and a few soldiers finished crossing the isthmus and were the first Europeans to find what Balboa called the South Sea.

Since Balboa had already crossed the Isthmus of Panama on foot and discovered the Pacific Ocean, Ferdinand Magellan believed it would be possible to sail from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean and reach the Indies that way. He began his journey from Spain in 1519. However, many of his crew died during sudden storms, and Magellan himself was killed in a battle against natives in the Philippines. Only enough of Magellan’s men were left to sail the three remaining ships. Only one, the *Victoria*, made it back to Spain. Though he and many of his men died, Magellan proved that it was possible—although difficult and dangerous—to sail around the globe.

The Columbian Exchange

- Describes the “exchange” of animals, plants, and diseases between the “Old” and “New” Worlds
- Both worlds changed greatly because of it



An illustration showing how smallpox was transmitted from Europeans to Native Americans

The Columbian Exchange describes the transfer of animals, plants, and diseases between the Old World and New World as exploration of North and South America continued in the 15th and 16th centuries.

The introduction of new crops, animals, and plants transformed both the New World and the Old. Horses, unknown in the New World, became an important part of Native Americans’ everyday life. New food crops such as corn and potatoes became common in European diets as well.

However, illnesses such as typhoid, influenza, cholera, and smallpox—none of which had existed in the New World before the Europeans came—ended up killing thousands upon thousands of Native Americans, who, unlike the Europeans, had no resistance to the disease.

Conquistadors

- Spanish “conquerors”
- Included Cortes, Pizarro, Coronado
- Had better weapons
- Introduced horses to the New World
- Spread diseases as well



Conquistadors meeting Native Americans

As Spain began to further move into North America, thousands of soldiers and adventurers known as *conquistadors* (“conquerors”) came to the New World to subjugate native populations as well as claim land and wealth for Spain—and for themselves. Some of the more famous Spanish *conquistadors* included Cortes, Pizarro, and Coronado.

The Spanish had better weapons than the natives, including guns and metal armor. The native peoples, unused to firearms, were awed by the flash, noise, and smoke of gunpowder. There had been no horses in the Americas before Europeans arrived, so native peoples were also surprised by the Europeans’ use of horses during battles. Owing to these reasons, the *conquistadors* won most of their battles with the natives.

Perhaps the most effective weapons the Spanish brought with them—though not on purpose—were diseases. These nearly wiped out the native population, especially smallpox. In some cases, the Spanish even tried to spread smallpox by giving natives blankets and gifts infected with the disease. Europeans had dealt with smallpox for centuries and had some resistance to it, but the natives had none. As a result, several thousand natives died.

Discussion Questions

1. What was the goal of Columbus's first voyage in 1492? Explain why he never realized he had landed in a "new world."
2. What was the Columbian Exchange? In your opinion, did it help or hurt Native Americans more? Explain your answer.
3. Why was finding a Northwest Passage so important to many early explorers?

1. While Columbus was by no means the first or only European to believe the world was round, he thought the Earth was smaller than it was, and he assumed it would be simple matter to reach the Indies by sailing west, instead of going around the Cape of Good Hope at the southern tip of Africa. Columbus probably wasn't aware of specific landmarks that would have been unique to China or the Indies. Without that information, he didn't have anything to help him realize that he hadn't landed in Asia.
2. The Columbian Exchange describes the movement of animals, plants, and diseases between the Old World and New World as exploration of North and South America continued in the 15th and 16th centuries. Most students will probably believe that this exchange hurt Native Americans, since thousands of them died from diseases that they had never been exposed to. However, some students may note that the introduction of animals such as horses provided long-term benefits for the Native Americans.
3. The Northwest Passage would have been a simpler way to cross the Atlantic to the Pacific, and cut down the time ships needed to reach China and the Indies. Many explorers searched for the fabled passage but could not find it. It wasn't until the early 20th century that ships finally had an easier way of getting from the Atlantic to the Pacific: the Panama Canal.