A New World

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“Give Me Liberty!”

The discovery of America,” the British writer Adam Smith announced in his celebrated work *TheWealth of Nations* (1776), was one of “the two greatest and most important events recorded in the history of mankind.” Historians no longer use the word “discovery” to describe the European exploration, conquest, and colonization of a hemisphere already home to millions of people. But there can be no doubt that when Christopher Columbus made landfall in the West Indian islands in 1492, he set in motion some of the most pivotal developments in human history. Immense changes soon followed in both the Old and New Worlds; the consequences of these changes are still with us today.The peoples of the American continents and Europe, previously unaware of each other’s existence, were thrown into continuous interaction. Crops new to each hemisphere crossed the Atlantic,reshaping diets and transforming the natural environment. Because of their long isolation, the inhabitants of North and South America had developed no immunity to the germs that also accompanied the colonizers. As a result, they suffered a series of devastating epidemics, the greatest population catastrophe in human history.Within a decade of Columbus’s voyage, a fourth continent—Africa—found itself drawn into the new Atlantic system of trade and population movement.

In Africa, Europeans found a supply of unfree labor that enabled them to exploit the fertile lands of theWestern Hemisphere. Indeed, of approximately 10 million men, women, and children who crossed from the Old World to the New between 1492 and 1820, the vast majority, about 7.7 million, were African slaves.From the vantage point of 1776, the year the United States declared itself an independent nation, it seemed to Adam Smith that the “discovery” of America had produced both great “benefits” and great “misfortunes.” To the nations of western Europe, the development of American colonies brought an era of “splendor and glory.” The emergence of the Atlantic as the world’s major avenue for trade and population movement, Smith noted, enabled millions of Europeans to increase the “enjoyments” of life. To the “natives” of the Americas, however, Smith went on, the years since 1492 had been ones of “dreadful misfortunes” and “every sort of injustice.” And for millions of Africans, the settlement of America meant a descent into the abyss of slavery. Long before Columbus sailed, Europeans had dreamed of a land of abundance, riches, and ease beyond the western horizon. Once the “discovery” of this NewWorld had taken place, they invented an America of the imagination, projecting onto it their hopes for a better life. Here, many believed, would arise unparalleled opportunities for riches, or at least liberation from poverty. Europeans envisioned America as a religious refuge, a society of equals, a source of power and glory. They searched the NewWorld for golden cities and fountains of eternal youth. Some sought to establish ideal communities based on the lives of the early Christian saints or other blueprints for social justice.Some of these dreams of riches and opportunity would indeed be fulfilled. To many European settlers, America offered a far greater chance to own land and worship as they pleased than existed in Europe, with its rigid, unequal social order and official churches. Yet the conditions that enabled millions of settlers to take control of their own destinies were made possible by the debasement of millions of others.

The New World became the site of many forms of unfree labor, including indentured servitude, forced labor, and one of the most brutal and unjust systems ever devised by man, plantation slavery. The conquest and settlement of The Western Hemisphere opened new chapters in the long histories of both freedom and slavery.There was a vast human diversity among the peoples thrown into contact with one another in the NewWorld. Exploration and settlement took place in an era of almost constant warfare among European nations, each racked by internal religious, political, and regional conflicts. Native Americans and Africans consisted of numerous groups with their own languages and cultures. They were as likely to fight one another as to unite against the European newcomers. All these peoples were changed by their integration into the new Atlantic economy. The complex interactions of Europeans, American Indians, and Africans would shape American history during the colonial era.

**THE FIRST AMERICANS**

**T H E S E T T L I N G O F T H E A M E R I C A S**

The residents of the Americas were no more a single group than Europeansor Africans. They spoke hundreds of different languages and lived in numerous kinds of societies.Most, however, were descended from bands of hunters and fishers who had crossed the Bering Strait via a land bridge at various times between 15,000 and 60,000 years ago—the exact dates are hotly debated by archaeologists. Others may have arrived by sea from Asia or Pacific islands. Around 14,000 years ago, when glaciers began to melt at the end of the last Ice Age, the land link became submerged under water, once again separating theWestern Hemisphere from Asia. History in North and South America did not begin with the coming of Europeans. The New World was new to Europeans but an ancient homeland to those who already lived there. The hemisphere had witnessed many changes during its human history. First, the early inhabitants and their descendants spread across the two continents, reaching the tip of South America perhaps 11,000 years ago. As the climate warmed, they faced a food crisis as the immense animals they hunted, including woolly mammoths and giant bison, became extinct. Around 9,000 years ago, at the same time that agriculture was being developed in the Near East, it also

emerged in modern-day Mexico and the Andes, and then spread to other parts of the Americas, making settled civilizations possible. Throughout the hemisphere, maize (corn), squash, and beans formed the basis of agriculture.The absence of livestock in the Western Hemisphere, however, limited farming by preventing the plowing of fields and the application of natural fertilizer.

I N D I A N S O C I E T I E S O F T H E A M E R I C A S

North and South America were hardly an empty wilderness when Europeans arrived. The hemisphere contained cities, roads, irrigation systems,extensive trade networks, and large structures such as the pyramid temples whose beauty still inspires wonder. With a population close to 250,000, Tenochtitlán, the capital of the Aztec empire in what is now Mexico,was one of the world’s largest cities. Its great temple, splendid royal palace, and a central market comparable to that of European capitals made the city seem “like an enchanted vision,” according to one of the first Europeans to encounter it. Further south lay the Inca kingdom, centered in modern-day Peru. Its population of perhaps 12 million was linked by a complex system of roads and bridges that extended 2,000 miles along the Andes mountain chain. When Europeans arrived, a wide variety of native peoples lived within the present borders of the United States. Indian civilizations in North America had not developed the scale, grandeur, or centralized organization of the Aztec and Inca societies to their south. North American Indians lacked the technologies Europeans had mastered, such as metal tools and machines, gunpowder, and the scientific knowledge necessary for long distance navigation. No society north of Mexico had achieved literacy (although some made maps on bark and animal hides). They also lacked wheeled vehicles, since they had no domestic animals like horses or oxen to pull them. Their “backwardness” became a central justification for European conquest. But, over time, Indian societies had perfected techniques of farming, hunting, and fishing, developed structures of political power and religious belief, and engaged in far-reaching networks of trade

and communication.