

North America: Its History and People

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INTRODUCTION

In the course of American history study at the senior high school or freshman college level, a survey overview textbook is used to provide a general detailed coverage of the subject as an edited secondary source, occasionally including some primary source documents. Often it is written without unnecessary perspective but offers most of the salient facts of the political, military, economic and social histories.

These tomes are often published in glossy large format, heavy, hard cover, 800-900 page volumes and are used over two semesters. I have read several of these for my comparative purposes and for the value they afforded me.

My purpose with this essay is to provide a brief thumbnail sketch of a summary of those massive summaries. It is a good place to start.

EARLY HISTORY

Most historians agree that the first peoples to inhabit North America were from Siberia and had crossed the temporary ice bridge across the Bering Strait about 13,000 years ago. They were of Mongolian DNA and traveled as family groups south toward warmer climate to settle near what is now Clovis, New Mexico. They are called the Clovis people. Eventually they spread south through Central America and into northwest South America. They were the early native people who were hunters, gatherers and eventually farmers.

A few historians believe the very earliest immigrants crossed broad oceans by boat to settle the continent during those very early times. Other historians, without broad consensus, believe there is evidence that Scandinavian people from northern Europe traveled by boat and came to the northeast coast of North America some centuries later. Some believe they may have moved south and west into inland America.

How pristine that land must have looked to those first people. Whether they had any concept of gods, heavens or the cosmos, the sheer primal raw beauty of the forests, the mountains, the lakes, the deserts must have filled their eyes with wonder even while they struggled to survive and settle this new world.

They developed great civilizations – the Aztecs and the Maya from Mexico and Central America and the Incas from Peru – with growing knowledge of astronomy, mathematics and architecture that must have come from inspiration of this world and their love of life upon it.

The centuries passed and we learn from the study of western civilization that the ancient Egyptian, Greek, Roman and Arabic peoples passed a civilizing development onto Europe. The continents of Asia and Africa influenced and informed the mighty Monarchies and nation states that grew there during the Renaissance following the regressive times of the dark ages. The ancient knowledge and wisdom pre-dating those black sorry centuries was partially preserved for newly rekindled advancement. Christianity moved through the dark age – early medieval ages - but added little benefit to the woeful existence of the European people of that time.

The old world developed in a more structured way as tribalism yielded to feudalism. Eventually the ages of nobility and monarchy led to a scientific revolution and ultimately to an age of enlightenment. Enlightenment was a secular view looking ahead from the crude, dark-age that preceded it. It rejected religion, and Christianity in particular, as the way forward for mans' advancement and instead looked to the power of the human mind for wisdom and guidance. But Christianity survived, became less corrupted in its human leadership, and was reformed.

EXPLORATION

The great age of exploration across the oceans began first with the Portuguese and the Spaniards. These men launched fearful voyages to seek more knowledge of the world and most importantly, riches. The study of western civilization begins to include the Americas at this point.

In the late 15th century, the Spanish came to the Caribbean and explored Florida, Mexico and Central America. The Portuguese came to northwest South America. They scorned the indigenous peoples they found there and forced Christianity upon them even while subjugating their culture and stealing their riches.

By the early 16th century, the French, Dutch and English began to come to North America, arriving on the north Atlantic coast.

The French established footholds in North America beginning in 1524. Early settlements were established in Canada and the frontier far west of the Atlantic coast by French hunters and fur traders. They established good working relationships with the Indians out there in the wilderness.

The Dutch began arriving at the beginning of the 1600's. They explored the Hudson River into northern areas up to the confluence with the Mohawk River near Albany. They established a territory they named New Netherlands. Later, on the tip of Manhattan Island, they established a settlement they named New Amsterdam in 1625. They were a small presence on the continent.

BRITISH COLONIZATION

The English came also in the early 1600's, in two small groups. The first were Royal Cavalier adventurers arriving in Jamestown, Virginia in 1607-1612. The second were Puritan religious refugees arriving in Plymouth, Massachusetts in 1620. Each established a small tenuous foothold.

These became permanent and grew to become more successful. They were the seeds from which would grow the rivalry and contention between the American North and the American South.

The American colonies developed with its British citizens throughout the Colonial period. The British Americans became embroiled in the French and Indian War in 1763 on their western frontier along the Allegheny mountain spine while England and France were simultaneously at war in Europe - the Seven Years' War. The young George Washington fought as a British officer in that conflict on this continent. The resolution of that conflict diminished France's foothold and established British dominance on the North American continent.

A larger wave of immigrants - the Ulster Scots – arrived in Colonial America after the first English between 1717 and 1775 with some a few decades earlier. They settled in Maine and backwoods areas of the frontier up and down the spine of the Appalachian Mountains and down into the South.

AMERICA DEFINED

After years of interference and taxation from the mother country throughout much of the 1760's, the disgruntled British American colonists declared their thirteen colonies independent of England in July of 1776, having already begun to fight for their independence in June of 1775 close by Boston, Massachusetts. They fought and barely won a Revolutionary War with their former Monarchy culminating with the surrender of Lord Cornwallis's in Yorktown, Virginia. France had come to George Washington's aid at that crucial moment in October of 1781. The Treaty of Paris in 1783 concluded the break from British control of these new United States of America.

After the War of Independence the new Americans replaced their meager Articles of Confederation with a more thoughtful and structured U.S. Constitution ratified in 1788. President George Washington took office in March 1789. The Bill of Rights concluded the matter with ratification in 1791. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787, written for the frontier territory of the Ohio River valley, established a plan with intent to prohibit slavery in future territories and states.

A representative form of government called a Republic was established in the 1787 Constitutional Convention. Representation for the states in the House of Representatives (half of the bi-cameral legislative branch) would be based on the population of each state with slaves counting as three-fifths of a person for that purpose. Voting rights were given to white, male property owners. Democracy was therefore indirect and limited to a select group of citizens. Inalienable rights were guaranteed for citizens. Citizenship was not yet defined.

The American 19th century began with the acquisition the Louisiana Purchase from France in 1803. This doubled its size to include all lands east of the Mississippi with the exception of Spanish influence remaining in Florida.

Again in 1812, the new America fought a small war with the British over contentions on the high seas and dispute over control of Canada. The new American capital city was sacked, its White House and Capital buildings burned, and it ended with a peace treaty while the British were resoundingly beaten in New Orleans after the peace agreement was signed. Not much changed. England still held Canada and abused American shipping.

The Mexican-American war of 1846-1848 was fought in the wake of U.S. annexation of Texas in 1845. Ultimately the U.S. acquired southwestern and pacific coast regions in New Mexico and California as well as the Texas Republic. New borders were established and more Spanish influence was displaced, while at the same time absorbed into American culture, under the philosophy of Manifest Destiny.

Immigrants continued to pour into the United States from many European countries including Ireland and Germany.

THE SECOND AMERICAN REVOLUTION

After decades of disagreement and conflict over the issues of slavery, states' rights, taxation and tariffs, economic and societal differences during the first half of the 19th century, the Civil War between the North and South begun in 1861 and concluded in 1865. It resolved the issue of slavery, diminished the power of the individual states and firmly and finally established the power and central authority of a strong Federal government at a cost of 620,000 American lives. Subsequent, reconstruction in the South failed to accomplish rebuilding it or secure rights for the newly freed African Americans.

Prior to that the expression "the United States are ..." referred to a confederation of individual states with individual rights. After that the expression "the United States is ..." referred to a country united as one thing, under one central authority of government. From then on, one size would fit all.

COMPLETION OF THE AMERICAN CONTINENT CONQUEST AND DEVELOPMENT

After the Civil War, the United States continued to make agreements, treaties and purchases, like the Gadsden Purchase and Seward's purchase of Alaska from Russia, until all vestiges of holdings of Spain and England were removed. England continued a relationship with Canada as part of the British Empire and Mexico was an independent country.

The United States continued to commission territories as new states until there was the "lower 48" plus Alaska and Hawaii to complete the 50 states we have today. The Spanish-American war ceded Guam and Puerto Rico and the Philippines (for a time) to the U.S. as protectorates.

EMERGENCE AS A WORLD POWER

The United States emerged as the major industrial power throughout the world and supported its allies late at the end of World War I. Again it supplied and supported its allies in World War II and fought with them to defeat the axis powers, including Germany and Japan, throughout the European continent and Pacific campaigns.

As the Soviet Union was formed and its power arose after World War II, America fought wars in Asia, in Korea and Viet Nam, to reduce the spread of communism. Ultimately the Soviet Union collapsed for economic and failed ideological reasons, leaving the U.S. as the sole military super power.
