

EARLY AMERICAN LITERATURE

People have been living in the Americas for at least tens of thousands of years, adapting to its diverse environments. Millions of Native Americans lived on the land, in small villages and in large cities, such as the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán, the site of present-day Mexico City. When Europeans arrived in 1492, there were many Native American cultures in North America with strongly differing customs and about 300 different languages.

Christopher Columbus's voyage to the Caribbean in 1492 marked the beginning of contact between Europeans and Native Americans. Spain, Portugal, England, France, and the Netherlands all staked claims in the Americas. At first, Native Americans were helpful to the Europeans, but it soon became clear that the newcomers intended to take control of the land. However, firearms were not the most dangerous weapons the Europeans brought with them; they also brought new diseases that killed millions.

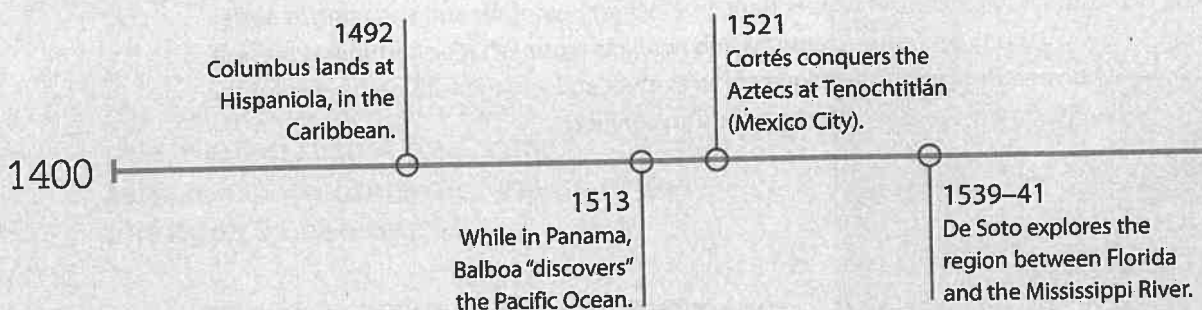
In the early 1500s Spain conquered the great Aztec and Inca Empires and claimed Mexico, most of South America, and large portions of what is now the United States. The first French settlements in New France were founded in the early 1600s by fur traders along the St. Lawrence River. Eventually, French holdings included the Great Lakes region and most of the land along the Mississippi River, which was named Louisiana.

English Settlers The English were eager to have a colony in the New World and to prevent the northward expansion of the Spanish colony in Florida. A private trading company, the Virginia Company of London, established the first permanent English settlement at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607. In 1619 the first Africans were brought to Virginia as enslaved persons to work for white slaveholders.

The original settlers of New England were Pilgrims, Protestant reformers who wanted to separate from the Church of England. Among them was William Bradford, who helped organize the voyage of the *Mayflower*, bringing nearly a hundred people to Massachusetts in 1620. Another group who settled in New England were the Puritans, who wanted to "purify" the Church of England. The Puritans' religious beliefs influenced all aspects of their lives, and the values of hard work, thrift, and responsibility led to thriving settlements and financial success.

COLLABORATIVE DISCUSSION

In a small group, review the timeline and discuss which literary or historical events had the most impact and why.





Native American Oral Traditions Few of the Native American cultures had a written language, but all possessed strong oral cultures and a rich tradition of storytelling. Creation stories—ways to explain how the universe and humans came into being—can be found in every Native American culture. Other forms include legendary histories tracing the migration of peoples or the deeds of cultural heroes, trickster tales, lyrics, chants, songs, healing ceremonies, and dream visions.

Tragically, much of this literature did not survive after so many Native Americans died from European diseases. The surviving works, however, show that diverse Native American groups explored common themes in their spoken literature, including a reverence for nature and the worship of many gods. Contemporary Native American writers, such as Joy Harjo, often incorporate elements of these traditional tales in their writing.

Pre-Colonial Literature While Native American literature offers us a glimpse into the ways and values of America's indigenous peoples, much of our understanding of pre-colonial America comes from the first-person accounts of its early explorers, settlers, and colonists. One of the founders of Jamestown, John Smith, wrote about conflicts with Native Americans, but he also described the "New World" as a paradise with great economic

RESEARCH

What about this historical period interests you? Choose a topic, event, or person to learn more about. Then, add your own entry to the timeline.

1607

First permanent English settlement is founded in Jamestown, Virginia.

1620

Mayflower Pilgrims found Plymouth colony in Massachusetts.

1676

English settlers defeat Native Americans in King Philip's War.

1682

France claims the Mississippi River valley and names it *Louisiana*.

1700

potential. William Bradford, governor of Plymouth Plantation, described North America as "a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men." Bradford and other colonial writers were motivated by their beliefs about their role in God's plan. Their writings included historical narratives, sermons, and poems written in a generally plain style.

Anne Bradstreet was one of the first poets in the American colonies. A volume of her poetry was published in England in 1650 as *The Tenth Muse*. Some of her best work is on personal themes, such as childbirth and the death of a grandchild.

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Choose the best answer to each question.

- 1 What was North America like before the arrival of Europeans?
 - A It was an empty continent with abundant resources.
 - B It was a diverse land with more than 300 well-developed cultures with strongly differing customs.
 - C North America was a land recently settled by Native American groups that shared a single culture.
 - D North America was a continent ravaged by disease and warfare.

- 2 Which statement is an accurate description of Native American literature?
 - F It was a rich oral tradition focusing on creation stories and a reverence for nature.
 - G It was written in pictographs similar to Egyptian hieroglyphics.
 - H It contained many of the same myths and folktales that appear in European cultures.
 - J It had no literature because Native Americans did not have a written language.

- 3 We get most of our information about pre-colonial America from —
 - A modern-day scholars of the historical period
 - B elaborate written records from ancient civilizations
 - C first-person accounts of early explorers, settlers, and colonists
 - D Native American creation myths