

# UNIT 1 — Period 1: 1491–1607

## Topic 1.1

### Contextualizing Period 1

**Learning Objective:** Explain the context for European encounters in the Americas from 1491 to 1607.

**T**oday, the United States is a synthesis, or combination, of people from around the world. The first people arrived in the Americas at least 10,000 years ago. A survey of how these indigenous people lived before the arrival of Christopher Columbus in the Americas in 1492 provides the context for understanding the interaction of the Europeans and Native Americans and the impact this had on both groups. Columbus's first voyage was a turning point in world history because it initiated lasting contact between people on opposite sides of the Atlantic Ocean. His voyages, followed by European exploration and settlement in the Americas, had profound results on how people on every continent lived.

Another landmark change came in 1607 with the founding of the first permanent English settlement at Jamestown, Virginia. The Jamestown settlement marked the beginning of the framework of a new nation.

**Cultural Diversity in the Americas** When Columbus reached the Americas, the existing cultures varied greatly, partially because of differences in geography and climate. Each culture developed distinctive traits in response to its environment, from tropical islands where sugar grew to forests rich in animal life to land with fertile soil for growing corn (maize). Native Americans also transformed their environments. For example, people in dry regions created irrigation systems, while those in forested regions used fire to clear land for agriculture.

**Motives for Exploration** The European explorers in the Americas—first the Spanish and Portuguese, then the French and Dutch, and later the English—competed for land in the Americas. Some were motivated by desires to spread Christianity. Others hoped to become wealthy by finding an all-water route to Asia, establishing fur-trading posts, operating gold and silver mines, or developing plantations. Europeans often relied on violence to subdue or drive away native inhabitants.

**Transatlantic Exchange** Contact between Europeans and the natives of America touched off a transatlantic trade in animals, plants, and germs known as the Columbian Exchange that altered life for people around the globe.

Crops originally from America such as corn (maize), potatoes, and tomatoes revolutionized the diet of Europeans. However, germs that had developed in Europe caused epidemics in the Americas. Typically, the native population of a region declined by 90 percent within a century after the arrival of Europeans.

**Addition of Enslaved Africans** Adding to the diversity of people in the Americas were enslaved Africans. They were brought to the Americas by Europeans who desired low-cost labor to work in mines and on plantations. Africans, like Native Americans, resisted European domination by maintaining elements of their cultures. The three groups influenced the others' ideas and ways of life.

**European Colonies** Within a century of the arrival of Columbus, Spanish and Portuguese explorers and settlers developed colonies that depended on natives and enslaved Africans for labor in agriculture and mining precious metals. In particular, mines in Mexico and South America produced vast amounts of silver that made Spain the wealthiest European empire in the 16th and 17th centuries.

## ANALYZE THE CONTEXT

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1. Describe a historical context for understanding the diverse Native American cultures that had developed in the Americas by the 1490s.
2. Explain a historical context for the European exploration in the Americas from the 1490s to early 1600s.
3. Explain a historical context for the interactions between Europeans and Native Americans in the period from 1491 to 1607.

### LANDMARK EVENTS: 1450-1650

