

**Were
Native
Americans
the Victims of
Genocide?**

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IMPORTANT EVENTS



1492

Christopher Columbus reaches the New World and establishes a colony on the Caribbean island of Hispaniola (now Haiti and the Dominican Republic).

1532

Francisco Pizarro sets out to conquer the Incan Empire in Peru, a feat he will accomplish with guns, cannons, and horses.

1784

A year after the end of the American Revolution, the Treaty of Fort Stanwix forces the Iroquois to give up their land in the Ohio River valley, allowing for more westward expansion into Pennsylvania.

1779

George Washington orders General John Sullivan and four brigades of colonial regulars to march into Iroquois territory to destroy their ability to wage war.

1607

England's Virginia Company founds Jamestown in modern-day Virginia. It is the first permanent English settlement in the New World.

1400

1500

1600

1700

1800



1519

Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés begins his conquest of the Aztec Empire in Mexico.

1620

Puritan separatists from England establish Plymouth Colony in Massachusetts. The Puritans initially have peaceful relations with the nearby tribes, but expansion of the colony leads to conflict and war.

1776

The thirteen colonies in America declare their independence from Great Britain. Many Native tribes join the British to fight the colonists, who are still pushing westward.



Like the Roanoke settlers, the Jamestown colonists did not thrive in their new homes. Many did not know how to raise crops or live off the land, and some were focused solely on finding gold. Over time, 80 percent of them died from disease, malnutrition, and other scourges. Those who remained alive did so with the help of the thirty or more Powhatan Indian tribes that were largely hospitable toward the English. Kirkpatrick Sale argues, “That the colony survived at all in its first three years is remarkable due in part to the tenacity of [its leaders], the determination of the investors in London, and most of all—ironically—the supplies of corn provided regularly (given, bartered, or stolen) from the Pow-

“That the [Jamestown] colony survived at all in its first three years is remarkable due in part to the tenacity of [its leaders], the determination of the investors in London, and most of all—ironically—the supplies of corn provided regularly (given, bartered, or stolen) from the Powhatans’ fields.”²⁵

—Author Kirkpatrick Sale

hatans’ fields.”²⁵ Chief Wahunsonacock, who became known to the English simply as Powhatan, was suspicious of the English because he had some experience with Spanish explorers who had passed through the region from Florida. When the colonists began stealing the tribe’s corn, Powhatan turned against the foreigners, and warfare ensued for many years.

The colonists’ treatment of the Native Americans was similar to that of the Spanish, but the English turned the Powhatans into enemies only when the chiefs failed to acknowledge King James I as their ruler, the Christian God as their deity, and their responsibility to provide food, animal skins, and willing workers as tribute to the settlers. To force the chiefs to give in to these demands, the

English seized what crops they wanted and captured chiefs and their families in order to indoctrinate them in European customs. The colonists hoped that by teaching the Native leaders English ways and manners, the rest of the tribe would learn to become—in their view—more civilized as well as pacified. Because Sale maintains that it was logical for the Indians to resist such demands, he believes the colonists’ actions were “nothing short of a declaration of war.”²⁶

Native American Cultural Regions



This map shows the major Native American cultural regions in North America as they were when the Europeans first arrived. It also names some of the tribes living in each region.

Justifications for War

Certainly both sides understood that war was inevitable. Powhatan could not peaceably stop the colonists' attempts to expand their colonies into tribal lands. He was also greatly angered by the continuing efforts on the part of the English to convert

The Expansion West

By the time America asserted its independence from England in 1776, most Native American tribes in the thirteen colonies had been evicted from their ancestral lands. Several tribes had been devastated by disease and conflict with settlers, and their remnants were pushed west of colonial borders. The tribes that stayed in the colonies typically were given land as well as hunting and fishing rights through treaties with England. Often these pieces of land were not part of a tribe's original homelands. Known as manors or reservations, the Native Americans were expected to remain on them, not only to guarantee the safety of the surrounding settlers but also to protect the Indians from harassment from the colonists. Even as the colonies united to proclaim that their territories were their own and not subject to distant rule, they were still hungry to move their borders westward in hopes of enlarging the new nation.

Standing in their way, though, were various Native American tribes that had long resisted the settlers' push westward. Some sided with the British in the American Revolution to keep colonists from moving them farther off their tribal lands in upstate New York. This included four of the six tribes of the Iroquois Confederacy. The British used their new allies to conduct raids on colonial farms and settlements. In November 1778 a group of colonial militia loyal to Britain and a party of Iroquois warriors attacked the settlers of Cherry Valley, New York. They burned homes, killed forty-six people, crushed the faces of corpses with tomahawks and rifle butts, and scalped several of the dead, including women and children. Captain Benjamin Warren, who came on the scene when Continental forces arrived, wrote, "A shocking sight my eyes never beheld before of savage and brutal barbarity."³⁸ Such eyewitness accounts spread quickly through border settlements

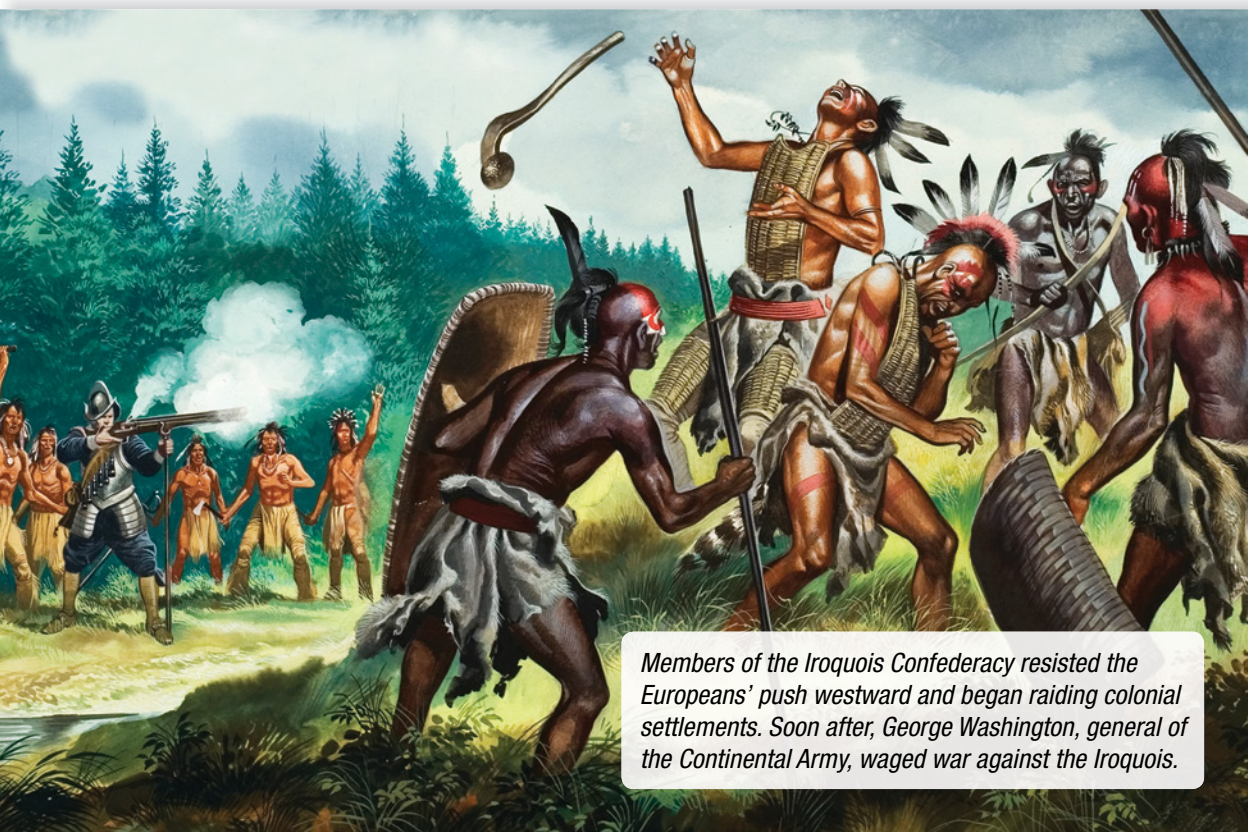
and even to the cities along the coast. News of massacres, scalplings, torture, and capture were common, even if there was not always evidence to support these accounts. As Guenter Lewy writes, “Stories of real, exaggerated, and imaginary atrocities spread by word of mouth, in narratives of imprisonment, and by means of provincial newspapers.”³⁹ It was enough, he claims, to have convinced many military leaders to give no quarter to Indians who were suspected of such foul deeds.

“Stories of real, exaggerated, and imaginary atrocities spread by word of mouth, in narratives of imprisonment, and by means of provincial newspapers.”³⁹

—Political science professor
Guenter Lewy

Eradicating the Iroquois

In 1779 George Washington, who was then general of the Continental army, ordered General John Sullivan to wage war against the Iroquois. He told Sullivan that his objective was “the total destruction and devastation of their settlements, and the capture of as many prisoners of every age and sex as possible.” He said he expected Sullivan to carry out his mission “in the most



Members of the Iroquois Confederacy resisted the Europeans' push westward and began raiding colonial settlements. Soon after, George Washington, general of the Continental Army, waged war against the Iroquois.

effectual manner, that the country may not be merely overrun, but destroyed.”⁴⁰ It is difficult to know what motivated Washington’s tone. Washington believed victory over Britain would come in a decisive battle in the eastern region, so expending men and resources to battle Indians on the western frontier was frustrating.

“There is nothing to be obtained by an Indian War but the Soil they live on and this can be had by purchase at less expence [sic], and without that bloodshed, and those distresses which helpless Women and Children are made partakers of in all kinds of disputes with them.”⁴²

—General George Washington

His call to eradicate the Iroquois enemy could have much to do with his desire to solve the crisis in the western frontier as quickly as possible so that the Continentals could get on with the war against the British regulars.

However, David E. Stannard believes Washington’s word choice reveals a deep-seated and pervasive attitude that the Native Americans were subhuman. Stannard quotes a 1783 letter to James Duane, a Revolutionary War leader in New York, in which Washington compared the Native warriors who fought against the colonials to wolves, “both being beasts of prey tho’ they differ in shape.”⁴¹ Yet in the rest of the letter, Washington speaks of the importance of making peace with the Indians so that the settlement of the

frontier could continue. He stated, “There is nothing to be obtained by an Indian War but the Soil they live on and this can be had by purchase at less expence [sic], and without that bloodshed, and those distresses which helpless Women and Children are made partakers of in all kinds of disputes with them.”⁴²

Sullivan’s mission was so successful that the Iroquois who survived referred to Washington by the nickname “Town Destroyer.” Stannard claims that numerous villages of the Mohawk, Onondaga, Seneca, and Cayuga were eradicated to make way for American settlement. There are accounts, too, of colonial soldiers and militia skinning dead Iroquois and committing acts of torture and desecration in retaliation for reports of Native American savagery. In 1784, a year after closing hostilities with the British, the new government of the United States concluded the Treaty of Fort Stanwix with the Iroquois. For siding with the

British, the Iroquois were required to give up their land in the Ohio River valley, a concession that allowed the Pennsylvania territory to grow westward and pushed the Iroquois into Wisconsin and Canada.

The Goal of Expansion

When Thomas Jefferson became the third president of the United States in 1801, one of his chief desires was to see the fledgling nation expand. He organized the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 and sent Meriwether Lewis and William Clark on their famed journey to explore that area and parts westward the following year. One of the goals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition was to befriend Native tribes and secure peaceful trade. Jefferson believed it would be in America's best interest to convince the Indians to cooperate

Meriwether Lewis, William Clark, and their guide Sacagawea explore the lower Columbia River. President Jefferson hoped the expedition would help improve relations with Native tribes and expand trade.



in nation building. However, his motives have fallen under criticism in more recent times. For instance, Jefferson hoped America would remain a land of farmers with a moral center that reflected ties to the soil and small government. In a confidential letter to Congress in 1803, Jefferson spoke of a desire to convert Indians into farmers and raisers of livestock so that they would give up their forests and extensive claims to land and allow more settlement from the eastern states. He argued, “The extensive forests necessary in the hunting life, will then become useless, and they [the Native Americans] will see advantage in exchanging them for the means of improving their farms, and of increasing their



Thomas Jefferson's Views on Native Americans

The Enlightenment, an eighteenth-century philosophical movement based on reason, influenced Thomas Jefferson's opinion of Native Americans. Leonard Sadosky of the Manhattan Institute and Gaye Wilson of the Thomas Jefferson Foundation at Monticello explain that Jefferson's desire to “civilize” the Native Americans was rooted in the Enlightenment theory of environmentalism, which held that people's relationship to the land and climate helped shape their culture, their politics, and even their appearance.

European naturalists used the theory of “environmentalism” to argue that plants, animals, and the native peoples of America were inferior to that of Europe due to climate and geography. Jefferson refuted these notions in his only book, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, and defended American Indian culture. . . . “I believe the Indian then to be in body and mind equal to the whiteman,” Jefferson wrote. Only their environment needed to be changed to make them fully American in Jefferson's mind. Even though many American Indians lived in villages and many engaged in agriculture, hunting was often still necessary for subsistence. It was this semi-nomadic way of life that led Jefferson and others to consider Indians as “savages.” Jefferson believed that if American Indians were made to adopt European-style agriculture and live in European-style towns and villages, then they would quickly “progress” from “savagery” to “civilization” and eventually be equal, in his mind, to white men.

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