

Source:
An Indigenous Peoples' History
of the United States (2019)

MYTH OF THE PRISTINE WILDERNESS

What do you imagine North America looked like when colonizers first came from Europe? Do you picture it as an untouched, green wilderness with a small scattered population of primitive people, or with no people at all? Your mental image has probably been influenced by paintings and movies about that time. That mental image most likely includes depictions of Pilgrims or Puritans in a prayerful pose. Their Christian Bible has a line in it that seemed to shape how they went into that wilderness: "For all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed for ever." (Genesis 13:15, King James Version)

Those images do not reflect the presence of roads, cities, towns, villages, and trading networks you read about in chapter 2. Native peoples had created town sites, farms, monumental earthworks, and networks of roads, and they had devised a wide variety of governments, some as complex as any in the modern world. They had developed sophisticated philosophies of government, traditions of diplomacy, and policies of international relations. They conducted trade along roads that crisscrossed

the land masses and waterways of the American continents. Before the arrival of Europeans, North America was indeed a "continent of villages,"¹ as some historians have called it, but it was also a continent of nations and alliances among nations.

But the Doctrine of Discovery, which was ingrained in the mind-set of European colonizers, assured Christians that whatever land they saw was theirs to occupy and use. Their god, they believed, had given them dominion over the land and all its resources. In their eyes the land was an unoccupied, pristine wilderness. This idea is the basis of the origin story of the United States, a story that, like a myth, has been retold for hundreds of years.

If North America had actually been an undeveloped wilderness, the European settlers could not have survived. They lacked the financial means, the technology, and the social organization to maintain colonies so far from Europe. The colonizers' survival depended both on what they could learn from Indigenous peoples and on what they could take from them. They learned to grow plants Indigenous peoples had domesticated, such as corn, squash, and tobacco. They relied on local Indigenous people to help them find necessities such as water and medicinal herbs. The colonizers also stole farmland that was already cultivated. They took control of the deer parks that had been cleared and maintained by Indigenous communities. They traveled on overland and water routes the Indigenous peoples made, and ultimately, they used those routes to move their armies in wars against Indigenous nations and other European nations.

The European colonizers lacked the skills they needed to survive in this "pristine wilderness," but they had the

skills, the technology, and the motivation for conquering other people, which is what they set about to do. As historian Francis Jennings writes,

They did not settle a virgin land. They invaded and displaced a resident population.

This is so simple a fact that it seems self-evident.²

This invasion and displacement were not random occurrences. Some significant ideas about religion and culture provided justification and incentive for what happened.

CONSIDER THIS

Notice that the man on the official seal of the Massachusetts Bay Colony is shown wearing only a bunch of leaves. From their first contact with Indigenous peoples to the present, non-Indigenous image makers have created images of Indigenous people that show them with very little clothing. At times, these depictions defy logic: showing people nearly naked in the dead of winter, as if they didn't know better, were impervious to cold, or were more animallike than human. In contrast, Europeans in North America are generally shown as being fully clothed, even in the sweltering heat of summer.

If you examine a selection of the countless images available of Native people and their material culture, you would see that most focus on clothing, tools, weapons, and homes. These are visible aspects of any culture, but there are not-visible aspects that are more important. Indigenous peoples of what came to be called the Americas were citizens of self-governing nations. What are some ways the images like the one on the seal, made by non-Indigenous people, might affect your ability to see, know, and understand Indigenous peoples?

- Obeying lawful authority, even when one disagrees with it, is a sign of being one of the elect.
- Bad luck, poverty, and a rebellious attitude are all evidence of damnation.

As Calvinists, the Pilgrims and the Puritans thought, although they could never be certain, that they were among the elected few their god had chosen for salvation. They believed that they were called by their god to create a new place where they could practice their own religion without having to live among those who did not believe as they did. Both groups viewed the "New World" as a place where they could do that.

When the *Mayflower* landed at Cape Cod in 1620, forty-one of the men on board wrote an agreement for how their colony would operate. This Mayflower Compact invoked their god's name and declared that they and their fellow passengers on the *Mayflower* were

- loyal subjects of the king of England
- the "First Colony" in North America
- in a covenant that would be governed by "just and equal laws" that they promised to obey

Ten years later in 1630, Massachusetts Bay Colony was founded by the Puritans. This colony had two purposes. One goal was to establish trade in goods produced in the colonies. But it was also meant to be a godly community, a religious home for the Puritans, who did not tolerate dissenting views on spiritual matters. The Puritans saw the Indigenous people as incapable of salvation but still in need of aid, as the colony's official seal suggests. It depicts