

The Columbian Exchange



When European explorer Christopher Columbus landed on the island he named San Salvador in 1492, he began a process known as the Columbian Exchange. Columbus was followed by explorers, soldiers, and colonists from Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, France, and England. The Europeans brought with them a great number of plants, animals, and diseases that the New World had never seen. And soon, countries in the Old World smoked American tobacco and tasted corn, tomatoes, peanuts, chili peppers, and potatoes for the first time.

The first European settlement in what is now the United States began on May 14, 1608, when an English ship landed on Jamestown Island in the present-day state of Virginia. The Jamestown Colony was founded in the middle of an Indian empire called Tsenacomoco, an area of about 8,000 square miles with more than 14,000 people. The principal Indian chief was Powhatan, father of the legendary Pocahontas, and the settlers called the native people Powhatan Indians.

Before the arrival of the English, the Powhatan Indians used to grow corn, hunt wild animals such as deer, and gather wild plants for food. When a cornfield started to produce less corn, the Indians would plant in another area. The Jamestown colonists saw these empty fields as a perfect place to grow tobacco, a New World plant that the Spanish discovered in the Caribbean. Tobacco from Virginia could be shipped to Europe and sold, and the colony's investors in England were eager to make a profit.

The Jamestown colonists also introduced several kinds of domestic animals to the New World, including pigs, cattle, horses, and chickens. The Indians had no large domestic animals, and so they had no fences around their cornfields. They were soon competing with the colonists' animals for both crops and wild food. The corn that the Indians stored for the winter months, meanwhile, became a favorite food for an animal the English brought accidentally in their ships—black rats.

In addition to the rats, colonists carried diseases from the Old World that Native Americans had never been exposed to. Diseases such as malaria, smallpox, measles, and cholera were not always deadly to Europeans, but killed a large percentage of native people in the Americas. The Columbian Exchange, therefore, came at a very high cost, but without a doubt, it was one of the most significant events in modern human history.

