

Historical Background

Early America (Beginnings to 1800)

The First Americans

No one knows when or how the first Americans arrived in what is now the United States. It was probably between 12,000 and 70,000 years ago. The rich cultural presence of Native American tribes spanned the continent, and Native American oral literature—myths, legends, songs—begins our American literary heritage.

Colonists from Europe did not reach the north American continent until the late 1500s. The Europeans who settled at St. Augustine, Florida, in 1565 and at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607 learned agriculture and woodcraft from the Native Americans. They learned about maize and squash and bark canoes. These men and women were tough and hardy, but without the help of those who knew the wilderness intimately, they would probably not have survived.

Puritans, Pilgrims, Planters

After a terrifying ocean voyage, the *Mayflower* sailed into harbor at Plymouth, Massachusetts, in 1620. Its passengers were religious reformers who had tried to “purify” the Church of England but thought they had a better chance in the New World. These Puritans, now called Pilgrims, gave every ounce of energy—and often their lives—to build a “city upon a hill,” a model community based on the Bible.

Puritanism gradually declined, but around 1720 a revival called the Great Awakening brought some new converts. Genuine old-fashioned Puritanism never reawakened, although the “Puritan ethic” of hard work and self-discipline remained a basic American value.

The Southern Colonies differed from New England in climate, crops, social organization, and religion. Large plantations, not small farms, were the core of the economy, and slaves, who had been first brought to Virginia in 1619, were the core of the plantations. Planters thought of themselves as hardworking but aristocratic, and their way of life was more sociable and elegant than that of the Puritans.

TIMELINE

1490

1492: Christopher Columbus lands in the Bahamas. ▶



▲ 1499: England 20,000 die in London Plague.

The Age of Reason

The Enlightenment shocked Puritan beliefs. Inspired by brilliant scientists such as Galileo and Newton, and philosophers such as Voltaire and Rousseau, the thinkers of this time valued science, logic, and reason over faith. They believed that people are good by nature and capable of building a better society. They spoke of a “social contract” that forms the basis of government, an idea that laid the groundwork for the American Revolution.

The Birth of the Nation

Taxes, taxes, and more taxes imposed by Britain kept beating down American colonists. The Stamp Act, the Townshend Acts, the Tea Act, the Coercive Acts—by 1774 the colonists had had enough. They met in Philadelphia for the First Continental Congress, and in 1775 minutemen at Lexington and Concord fired “the shot heard ‘round the world.”

Six long years of bloodshed followed. At Bunker Hill, Saratoga, and many other sites, colonists fought alongside French and African American soldiers, until the British finally surrendered at Yorktown in 1781. Even then, the “united” states disagreed fiercely among themselves until the Constitution and Bill of Rights were ratified.

Heroes of the Revolution—Washington and Adams—became the first two presidents. Thomas Jefferson, a hero of the Enlightenment, became the third. By 1800, the United States of America had firmly established its political identity. It would soon establish its cultural identity as well.

Key Historical Theme: Creating a Nation

- Europeans came to America to create a “city upon a hill,” an ideal community founded on moral and religious values.
- Colonists, with the help of Native Americans, learned to make the wilderness productive, on both small farms and large plantations.
- The United States arose out of Enlightenment ideas—that people are basically good and can use reason to create a better society.



1508: Italy

Michelangelo begins painting ceiling of Sistine Chapel. ▼



1513: Juan Ponce de León lands on the Florida peninsula.

1513: Vasco Nuñez de Balboa reaches the Pacific Ocean.

▲ 1519: Magellan begins voyage around the world.

1519: Spain
Chocolate introduced to Europe.

1521: Mexico
Cortés conquers the Aztecs.

1555