

A World Apart

Lesson Overview

Learning Objectives

1. Describe how and why historians study the past.
2. Describe the geographical and human origins of North American history.
3. Explain the development and characteristics of major indigenous cultures found in six distinct regions of the area that would become the United States of America.
4. Describe the Mexican culture of Meso-America prior to contact with Europeans.
5. Assess the legacy of Native American cultures and their status as of 1492.

Video: History Matters

This first video provides you with some perspectives on why history matters and introduces the themes that recur throughout the course: freedom, equality, and identity. Featured historians also share their thoughts on how to approach the study of history. Why does history matter to you?

Video script:

Music introduction

James McPherson, Princeton University: I like to compare the importance of knowing history to an individual who wakes up one morning with amnesia, cannot remember who he is, where he came from, who his friends are. He would be helpless.

Richard White, Stanford University: I give a lecture that ends up with Vietnam Veterans' monument in Washington, D.C. What I do is I start going through the names and start going through the ages of the people when they died. And most of them are the ages of the people in my class, they're 18, 19, 20. And the point that I make is that before they ever got to learn why history mattered, history caught up with them.

Mike Wallace, Co-author of Gotham, John Jay College: Most Americans are, in fact, pretty

firmly convinced that history does not matter. Most Americans, I think, tend to think history is dead, done with, you know the “ash bin of history.” Worst thing you can say about somebody, really, if you want to be really cutting is, “he’s history.”

Carol Berkin, City University of New York: Too often, history is taught as if everybody who lived in the past had read the textbook and knew what was going to happen.

Annette Gordon-Reed, New York Law School: I think that you should approach the study of history with a spirit of curiosity. Be open-minded about the possibility that the story is much bigger than has been presented.

Theda Perdue, University of North Carolina: What we need to remember is that there’s not just one story of American history. There are many stories.

Dorothy Redford, Somerset Place Plantation Historic Site: And history was integrated. People occupied the same space in time, the same piece of land.

Edward Countryman, Southern Methodist University: But it’s often a bitter connection through slavery, through Indian disposition. Still, we’re connected. We’re not Europeans and we’re not Africans and we’re not what the natives would have been if the Europeans and Africans hadn’t shown up.

Dayton Duncan, Writer: Modern Americans, at least, are held together by an idea – that and geography. We inhabit an awful big diverse space and we’re a diverse people. And it’s that intermingling, I think, of a vast diverse geography and a lot of different people that makes our history what it is.

End of video.

Video: Defining America

Looking at American history as a whole, *Defining America* examines America both as a place and an idea, and describes how these two elements helped shape the American identity.

American identity comprises ideas that developed and eventually became associated with the nation. Foremost among these ideas are freedom and equality, concepts that are contested from beginning to end. As a third part of American identity, consider an old and persistent

question: Who is an American? How do race and ethnicity fit into being an American? How and why has this changed over time?

Video script:

Narrator: The history of the United States begins with the story of a rich and varied landscape.

Gerald Danzer, University of Illinois at Chicago: Each region has its own ecosystem. Each one of the areas has a different mix, a different timing. Different people were there at the beginning. Different cultures who were there at the point of contact, and also, different connections in a geographic sense. But there's the other historical geography. That is the geography that people thought was there, the attitudes they had toward the land and toward the world and toward the landscape.

Narrator: America is a place, but it's also an idea.

Linda Kerber, University of Iowa: I think that American history is about equality and about freedom. If we keep asking the equality question, then we won't go wrong.

Eric Foner, Columbia University: America is unique perhaps in that it established itself on the basis of a set of political principles, principles of equality and justice and liberty. We haven't always lived up to those ideals. And some of the great struggles in our history have been based upon people who were denied those rights claiming them for themselves.

James Oliver Horton, George Washington University: African American history raises the blatant contradiction in American society, "all men are created equal", our notions of Americans as people committed to equality and so on. Well, how can we be a people committed to those things, believing in those documents when at the same time, the people who wrote those documents, who articulated those beliefs, were themselves the holders of human beings and human bondage?

Narrator: America, the place. America, the idea. Together they forge the American identity.

Eric Foner: Who is an "American"? What kinds of people have been included in the notion of "American"? What kinds of people have been excluded at various times in our history from the notion of "American"?

Dave Edmunds, University of Texas at Dallas: I think for many years, we saw the American culture and American society as sort of a boullion, a soup in which everyone would blend and

melt into it. And now, certainly, at the beginning of the 21st century, we understand that American society is more like a stew. There is this stock of sort of western European flavor; but there are also phenomenal segments of American society that have been flavored by that stock, but still retain their own ethnicity.

Linda Kerber: So in an odd way, “American” came to mean for a long time people who were not American, people who came from across the ocean. And the odd thing about European culture in the Americas is how little attention Europeans wanted to give to the people who were here to begin with.

David Edmunds: For generations and generations Native American people lived in this continent before the coming of the Europeans. And there was the rise and the fall of different cultures and very sophisticated societies, which all have a very rich culture and history of their own.

James Oliver Horton: American society has always been a multi-racial, multi-cultural society. When Columbus came, he came bringing yet another cultural group and another racial group to take their place beside an already multi-cultural, multi-racial society. And in fact, that is central to what America is.

End of video.

Lesson Focus Points

Look for answers to these questions as you study the lesson:

- What sources other than written records tell us about history?
- How do we learn about ancient Americans? What limits our learning?
- How do historians differ from archaeologists in their study of the past?
- What affects how people interpret events? What does their interpretation tell us about the world they live in?
- How have experts reconstructed what life was like for prehistoric peoples?
- Why were human beings relatively late in arriving in the Western Hemisphere? What made it possible for them to get there? Who were the First Americans?
- Why did Paleo-Indians spread relatively rapidly across the Americas? What characterized this culture?

- Why did Paleo-Indians face a crisis about 11,000 years ago? How did they adapt? What resulted from these adaptations?
- What does the term "archaic" connote about cultures indigenous to America?
- How did environmental factors help define the cultural boundaries and characteristics of the First Americans?
- What characterized the Mexica culture of Meso-America before European contact?