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## 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.

## 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 from Enlightenment ideas—that people are basically good and can use reason to create a better society.



## What was the New World's natural environment?

About one century before the colonists arrived in North America, many people thought that crossing the Atlantic Ocean meant sailing off the edge of the earth. Instead, the first European colonists found a continent more magnificent, strange, and dangerous than any of them had ever imagined.

**Place of Wonder** The colonists discovered long shores and sandy beaches backed by vast forests. They found ranges of mountains and fertile valleys and an astounding variety of plants, fish, birds, and animals. Nature in America was built on an immense scale. The wilderness looked endless. Nevertheless, for all its intimidating size and wild variety, this new place had one overwhelmingly satisfying quality: It was not Europe.

**At One with the Place** From the beginning, then, America was a place apart—but it was not so in the eyes of the Native Americans. In fact, for most Native American cultures, the people belonged to the land. The deep forests and wide plains were simply to be used and cared for by the human beings who lived in them temporarily. The lands and waters were life-giving environments, and the animals were part of the community. The facts of nature could be harsh, but they were also to be celebrated in myths, rituals, and songs. Nature was not to be feared as an enemy or overcome as an obstacle, but honored as the source of life.



## What were the colonists' attitudes toward the New World environment?

For the colonists, the people did not belong to the land. Quite the opposite: Land belonged to people, and this land was to be claimed by Britain, France, and Spain. It was measured, divided, bought, sold, and governed as the property of European kings and trading companies. The Puritans, filled with religious zeal, may have wanted to build a "city upon a hill," but the hill would still belong to the King of England.

**Dream vs. Reality** During the seventeenth century, the colonists' attitude toward the American environment was a blend of dream and reality. The dream was to create a theocracy, an earthly community governed by religious principles. The reality was to avoid starving to death or falling prey to cold, disease, or animals. The colonists saw the continent's raw beauty, rich resources, and awe-inspiring possibilities. They also felt every day the hard facts of staying alive.



**Independent Place and People** By the eighteenth century, Europeans had gained a more secure foothold in America. Tree by tree, they had tamed a portion of the wilderness and built towns, roads, schools, and churches. They began to worry less about survival and more about self-government. They began to ask, “We live in an independent place, so why aren’t we an independent people?” The effects of the Enlightenment began to set in, and people realized that they could belong to themselves rather than to a monarch. The spirit of self-reliance that had faced down the wilderness was the same spirit that would face down European kings. The place itself had taught Americans how to be Americans.

## How did attitudes toward nature show up in literature?

The close relationship between Native Americans and nature showed up in myths and legends. In these stories, people communicate with mountains and rivers. People and animals talk with each other and sometimes even change into each other. Human beings and nature live in harmony.

When the earliest explorers searched the continent, their responses to the land appeared in their journals and in the reports and letters they sent back home. Cabeza de Vaca recorded the natural wonders of the New World. William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation*, the finest written work of the first European Americans, is filled with detailed descriptions of creating a colony in a place so delightful and so dangerous.

## What were early American themes?

Three themes dominate early American writing:

**Wilderness** Writers revealed insights into the nature and meaning of the wilderness by the details they used to describe it and by the stories they told of their physical, political, and spiritual struggles with it.

## Our Native American Heritage

by Richard Lederer

If you had been a settler in North America, you would have found many things in your new environment unknown to you. The handiest way of filling voids in your vocabulary would have been to ask local Native Americans what words they used. Colonists began borrowing words from Native Americans almost from the moment of their first contact, and many of those shared words have remained in our everyday language. They are part of what makes American literature American.

**Anglicizing** Pronouncing many of the Native American words was difficult for the colonists, so they often shortened or simplified the words. For example, *askútasquash* became "squash," *otchock* became "woodchuck," *rahaugcum* turned into "raccoon," and the smelly *segankw* transformed into "skunk." The North American menagerie brought more new words into the English language, including *caribou* (Micmac), *chipmunk* (Ojibwa), *moose* (Algonquian), and *muskrat* (Abenaki).

**The Poetry of Place Names** Some of our loveliest place names—*Susquehanna*, *Shenandoah*, *Rappahannock*—began life as Native American words. Such names are the stuff of poetry. Colonists freely used words of Indian origin to name states (half of all of them), cities, towns, mountains, lakes, rivers, and ponds.



## What is uniquely American about those themes?

**The Place** Americans recognized that they were in a unique place, a New World, only a small part of which they had even seen. Nothing in their European experience had prepared them for the splendors and the terrors of the American wilderness. Sometimes, America seemed to be the Garden of Eden, a newly created place of natural wealth. Sometimes, it seemed to be an enemy, a punishment, or a source of fear and death. These themes entered into the American literary imagination.

**The Past** When Americans wrote, they were aware of the many traditional European subjects and themes that were now of no importance to them. After all, there had been no Middle Ages or Renaissance in America. Europeans had medieval romances that told tales of knights and chivalry; Americans did not. Europeans had Shakespeare's tragedies of kings and princes; Americans did not. Europeans had a heritage of elegant and witty writing; Americans had a plain, straightforward way of writing. Americans did have histories and journals, prayers and sermons, speeches and essays. They even had some poems, but all of these imitated European styles. With the turn of the nineteenth century, American writers would begin to forge unique ways of expressing their unique experience.

**The Vision** The themes of independence and self-reliance are at the heart of Americans' vision of themselves as a new and unique people. They knew they were creating not only a new nation but a new kind of nation. That sense of newness marked Americans as a people of youth, innocence, optimism, risk-taking, and boundless originality.

## What social and political forces affected early American literature?

**Puritanism** From the first, Puritanism influenced just about every aspect of colonial life. The impulse to escape to a New World and build a reformed and uncorrupted society shaped Puritan lawmaking, social relations, and daily life. Belief in predestination—John Calvin’s doctrine that God has already decided who will be saved—made Puritans search every thought, action, and word for signs of grace. In hymns, sermons, histories, journals, and autobiographies, they aimed only for self-examination and spiritual insight.

**The Enlightenment** By the eighteenth century, the power of reason asserted itself in America. In speeches, pamphlets, essays, and newspaper articles, the spirit of the times called for debate, clear thinking, and reorganization of the political situation. The Declaration of Independence, for example, is not an outcry or an anarchic demand. It is a reasoned document, a controlled statement of the rational argument for independence.

### **Native Americans and African Americans**

Relations with Native Americans and the continued enslavement of African Americans left deep marks in American literature. In histories and captivity narratives, we have some record of relationships between colonists and Native

## What were the major roles of early American writers?

Writers not only reflect the social and political forces of their societies, they also influence those forces. They are not just the mirrors of their cultures and their communities; they can also be the fires that make those communities burn with hope, anger, love, idealism, and creativity.

**Writer as Oral Poet and Historian** Native American oral poets held places of vital importance for their tribes. They told each community's story, related its history, and honored its heroes. Those European Americans who wrote journals and histories fulfilled a similar role—recording the social and political events that gave meaning to their community's experience. The narratives of de Cárdenas and Cabeza de Vaca, as well as William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation*, give us perspective on our own heritage.

**Writer as Preacher and Lawmaker** The writers of hymns and sermons believed that their role was to articulate the will of God. Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards explained for their communities the working of divine Providence in the wilderness, and they did their utmost to instill the fear of God into every member of their trembling audiences. The writers of America's laws and political documents had a different role—to articulate the will of the people. Thomas Paine's pamphlets, Patrick Henry's speeches and Thomas Jefferson's multifaceted writing survive today not only as a part of history but also as literature.

**Writer as Autobiographer** The autobiographer's role goes beyond answering the basic question, "What did I do and why did I do it?" The autobiographer also asks, "Why should you be interested in my life? What did I learn from it? What can you learn from it?" The slave narrative of Olaudah Equiano helped Americans face their own history and ultimately do something about it. Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* combined a fascinating life story with explorations of essential American values.