

7 Facts About the Colonization of America Nobody Wants To Talk About

Story by Ed Foster | December 2024



The colonization of America is a subject layered with triumphs, tragedies, and little-known complexities. While many celebrate it for fostering new freedoms and opportunities, others critique the destruction of indigenous civilizations and ecological transformations. Here are seven overlooked facts that paint a broader, more nuanced picture of this pivotal historical era.



1. The Plymouth Colonists Benefited from a Tragic Epidemic

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The Pilgrims of Plymouth Colony stumbled upon land that seemed uninhabited and ideal for their settlement. What they didn't realize was that this land had been home to a thriving Native American population until a mysterious epidemic decimated the local tribes. Likely introduced by earlier European explorers or their animals, the disease wiped out a significant portion of the coastal population, creating a vacancy for colonists. This tragic loss left the region vulnerable and shaped early settler-Native relations, which were often marked by mistrust and tension.



2. Manifest Destiny Helped Create the Dust Bowl

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The westward expansion of European settlers wasn't just a story of pioneering spirit – it had severe environmental consequences. The Great Plains, once stabilized by deep-rooted prairie grasses and home to bison, were turned into farmland. Settlers uprooted native vegetation to plant shallow-rooted crops like wheat, which left the soil exposed. Combined with cattle grazing and droughts, these practices led to the infamous Dust Bowl of the 1930s. Massive dust storms wreaked havoc across the plains, causing widespread ecological and human suffering.



3. Sweden Briefly Colonized Delaware

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When thinking of colonial powers in America, Sweden doesn't typically come to mind. However, in 1638, the Swedish Empire established the colony of New Sweden along the Delaware River, encompassing parts of modern-day Delaware, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. Though the colony was short-lived and absorbed by the Dutch in 1655, Swedish settlers remained in the area for decades, and traces of their influence persisted, including reports of the Swedish language being spoken into the 18th century.



4. Columbus Never Set Foot in What Is Now the United States

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Christopher Columbus is often celebrated for “discovering” America, but he never actually set foot in what is now the United States. Instead, he landed in the Caribbean and never ventured further north. The naming of America itself honors Italian explorer Amerigo Vespucci, who first recognized the landmass as a new continent. Meanwhile, early exploration of North America’s coast was led by figures like Giovanni da Verrazzano, who charted areas such as New York Harbor and Narragansett Bay long before Jamestown was founded.



5. The First English Settlement Wasn't Jamestown

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Jamestown is often hailed as the first English colony in America, but it wasn't the first English settlement. Fishing camps along Canada's coast, established decades earlier, were semi-permanent hubs for European activity. Other attempts, such as Martin Frobisher's ill-fated colony on Baffin Island and the enigmatic Roanoke settlement, predated Jamestown but either failed or disappeared under mysterious circumstances.



6. Colonization Contributed to a Global Climate Shift

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A surprising consequence of the colonization of the Americas was its impact on global climate. The decimation of indigenous populations, primarily through disease and conflict, led to widespread abandonment of agricultural land. Fast-growing vegetation reclaimed these areas, sucking significant amounts of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. This phenomenon likely contributed to the “Little Ice Age” in Europe, characterized by colder winters and frozen rivers like the Thames.



7. Native and European Relationships Were Far from Simple

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The interactions between Native Americans and European settlers were diverse and deeply complicated. While some tribes formed alliances with colonial powers, others engaged in trade or resisted expansion. Intertribal conflicts, such as the Beaver Wars, were often exacerbated by European influence, including the introduction of firearms. These alliances and rivalries shifted constantly, leaving Native tribes divided and unable to present a unified front against colonial expansion.