

Name _____ Date _____

Discovering America

"Who Discovered America?"

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. b"

We could look at America as a landmass: a vast continent of mountains, rivers and plains stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific. The people who discovered this place were Native Americans.

\n

About 120,000 years ago, the Earth fell into an ice age. Temperatures dropped, the polar ice caps grew and ocean levels fell. These lower ocean levels revealed a land bridge between Siberia and Alaska. Roughly 30,000 years ago, nomadic hunting groups followed giant herds of woolly mammoth across that bridge to America. These were America's first human inhabitants. They inhabited this land for 25,000 years before Europeans came over on giant ships.

\n

These first Americans were nomadic: they didn't form permanent settlements or towns but instead moved whenever food ran out. Around 7,000 years ago, some tribes began to farm and settled down in permanent villages.

\n"

2. Over time, the first Americans spread out across the land. In the Southwest, the Anasazi built elaborate caves into the face of cliffs. These caves are still visible today. Around 3,300 years ago, tens of thousands of Anasazi mysteriously deserted their cliff dwellings. Their descendants (Hopi, Zuni and others) are now known as the Pueblo tribes. In the Mississippi area, the Mississippi people became known as mound builders because of the large platform mounds they constructed for their temples.

Notes

Notes

3. b'

Notes

In the Great Plains, the Cheyenne, Sioux and other tribes hunted and searched for food. For a long time, they were mostly unable to hunt the mighty buffalo. This changed when the Spanish arrived and brought horses. With this development, the tribes produced excellent horsemen and formed large, powerful hunting groups.

\n'

4. The Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Seminole, and Creek tribes lived in America's eastern woodlands. Europeans would eventually call them the "five civilized tribes" because they had government systems that Europeans easily comprehended and because they assimilated into European culture more easily than other tribes. In the 1700s, for example, some members of these tribes owned plantations with slaves. Because the term "civilized" implies that other tribes were not, historians have abandoned this term. These tribes are now mostly known as the Five Tribes, not to be confused with the Five Nations of the Iroquois.

Notes

5. While most tribes in North America formed relatively modest-sized towns and nomadic groups, Native Americans in Mesoamerica developed into three huge empires: the Aztecs, the Mayans and the Incas.

Notes

The Aztec empire was centered in Tenochtitlán, an enormous city in the middle of a lake with 100,000 inhabitants. Aztec society consisted of distinct social classes: nobles, peasants and slaves. The Aztecs also had a powerful standing army with a corps of professional warriors whose rank depended on how many prisoners of war they had captured.

The Aztecs also engaged in human sacrifice. At times, Aztecs sacrificed 1,000 people per day. One Aztec account, which is likely exaggerated, notes that during the construction of the great stone temple in Tenochtitlán, 84,000 people were sacrificed in four days.

6. Montezuma (sometimes spelled Moctezuma) was the Aztec ruler at the time the conquistadors arrived in Mexico in 1519. The conquistadors led Spain's conquest of Mexico and Peru; "conquistador" means "conqueror" in Spanish. Hernando Cortés led the conquistadors on a rampage through Mexico, destroying villages and weakening the empire. Eventually, Cortes formed an alliance with the city of Tlaxcala, and with the help of its residents, he conquered Tenochtitlán. Montezuma greeted Cortes, and according to some reports, Cortés played a ceremonial Aztec board game with Montezuma before taking him hostage. The Aztecs were known for playing board games that had ceremonial and religious meanings.

Notes

7. b'

Notes

Mayan civilization flourished from 300-1000 CE. The Mayans were based on the Yucatán Peninsula. They built giant temples, pyramids, palaces and ball courts. The Mayans had a written language, studied math and astronomy and used their astronomical measurements to create the most accurate calendar in the world at that time.

\n'

8. Incan civilization began in today's Peru and eventually spread north to Ecuador and south to Chile. The empire flourished in the 15th and 16th centuries, expanding rapidly through military conquest and peaceful assimilation. By the time the Spanish conquistadors arrived, however, the Incan empire was sprawling and difficult to control. The Spanish used this to their advantage. They set one city against another until the empire was destroyed.

Notes

9. Christopher Columbus wanted to find a western route from Europe to Asia. He was looking for gold, spices and trade routes. Spain agreed to finance his trip, and on August 3, 1492, Columbus set out on an expedition that changed the world. Two months after Columbus left Spain, just as his crew was planning to mutiny and turn the ships back to Spain, a lookout spotted land. It was October 12 at 2:00 AM, and the lookout saw the moonlight reflected on white, sandy beaches. Columbus and his crew had arrived at what they considered "the New World" and what would come to be known as the Americas. This New World was not Asia (as Columbus believed), nor was it empty. Columbus had sailed to the islands of the Bahamas, and the locals swam out to greet him. The Arawak men and women welcomed Columbus's crew with gifts and hospitality. However, Columbus soon took some of the Arawak as slaves. He thought they could lead him to gold.

Notes

10. Columbus was an expert sailor who led an expedition across the ocean, but he wasn't sailing for science. He wanted gold, and his goal was to reach Asia. He believed the land that he "discovered" was in fact part of Asia. He did not know that he had sailed to another continent. Columbus returned to Spain after exploring Cuba and Hispaniola. He reported to the royal court about the amount of gold, exaggerating his findings. The Spanish monarchs gave Columbus the title "Admiral of the Ocean Sea" and promised him 10% of the gold and spices he found for them. Columbus and a 1,500-man crew returned to the Americas and demanded that the Taino Indians on Hispaniola bring them gold. They established a system of quotas, in which the Native Americans had to bring the Spanish certain amounts of gold. If they failed to meet the quota, the Spanish would cut off their hands or, in many cases, crucify them on hilltops.

Notes

11. b"

Notes

Historians' estimates of the size of the Native American population when Columbus arrived vary. Most estimate the total population of the Americas before Columbus to be around 50 million people. Some estimate that just 200 years later, the Native American population across the Americas dropped to 6 million.

\n

Explorers' greed and the new arrivals' misplaced religious conviction led to millions of Native American deaths. Even more deadly were the diseases that Europeans brought to the Americas. Smallpox and other diseases would eventually claim tens of millions of Native Americans' lives.

\n

The word genocide, the planned extermination of an ethnic group, is rarely used, probably because the killings were not methodical. The effect of the killings, however, was as devastating as a genocide.

\n"