

## **Spirit of a Nation** Myths and Misconceptions

*Below are some common misunderstandings about Native American history, as well as some stereotypes that persist today. Each of the bolded statements is **incorrect**.*

### **1. MYTH: Columbus “discovered” America.**

The idea that Columbus “discovered” America is just one way to understand the history of Europeans in North America. Because Columbus and others on his voyage recorded what they found when they made it to “the New World,” their writings shaped Europeans’ impressions of the land and the people who lived there.

However, there are other important perspectives about American history. Millions of Indigenous people lived in the areas that we now call North and South America – they were not waiting to be found by Europeans and some people’s lives did not immediately change after Europeans arrived. These people might have described the arrival of Columbus and other Europeans in lots of different ways: for some, it was a violent invasion. Others encountered strangers who needed food and information in order to survive in a new place. And for some Indigenous Americans, the Europeans brought goods and could help them gain advantages over their enemies.

Rather than a single moment of discovery, it is more useful to think about a long period of contact between Europeans and Native Americans. Some Europeans were motivated by exploration: Columbus sought new routes to make it faster for Spanish traders to sail to Asia. When he landed on Ay-ti, an island he named Hispaniola (now home to Haiti and the Dominican Republic), he believed he was in India and called the people living there “Indians.” After Columbus, other voyages set out from Europe to the Americas, looking for places to establish new colonies or to find precious metals and natural resources that could enrich their governments or benefit the wealthy who financed the voyages. Christian missionaries also came trying to spread their religions. These colonies and interactions slowly transformed the Americas and the lives of Native peoples.

### **2. MYTH: All Native Americans used to live in tipis and rode horses.**

A common view of American Indians in the past comes from television and movies that show “Indians” who attacked cowboys and settlers in what’s now the western U.S. This stereotype does not fit the Apalachees, who are the focus of *Spirit of a Nation*, and it ignores many differences among the millions of Indigenous people who have lived in what’s now the United States, who had different languages, governments, worldviews, and territories, and who differed in how they responded to European settlers.

In the 1500s when Spanish soldiers arrived in what’s now called Florida, the region was divided into territories controlled by many Native nations, including the Apalachee, Timucua, Yustaga, and Potano. They were not “savages” hiding out in the woods or shooting arrows from horseback, although they did fight to keep invaders out of their territory. The Apalachees lived on farms and in towns, each with its own political leader. Apalachee diplomats and warriors traveled widely to set up political alliances and to trade food and other items with Native Americans hundreds of miles away. And it’s unlikely that there were many horses in the region until after Spanish soldiers came.

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### **3. MYTH: British colonies at Plymouth and Jamestown were the first, and most important, settlements in America.**

Many histories of the United States start with the arrival of English colonists on the east coast. However, the settlements in Jamestown in 1607, and Plymouth in 1620, were not the oldest, largest, or longest lasting towns. This Mission takes place in La Florida – what we now call the state of Florida – where Spain set up military forts, religious missions, and organized economic trade and labor systems decades before these English colonies. Starting in 1565, St. Augustine, about 200 miles from Apalachee territory, became a base for Spanish military and missionary operations.

And there were even older cities, towns, and villages throughout the continent occupied by Native Americans. Hundreds of years before the Spanish and British arrived, the Apalachees built a major city near Lake Jackson (now in Florida) where there were hundreds of homes, a large public plaza, and at least seven large ceremonial mounds. By the early 1500s, Apalachees lived in more than forty towns, including Anhaica and Bacuqua. But whether we're talking about Jamestown or St. Augustine, calling the European colonies the oldest or most important settlements ignores this long history of Indigenous peoples in North America.

### **4. MYTH: Europeans always quickly conquered Native Americans.**

The process of European settlement in North America took a long time and never led to total control of Native Americans. The Spanish soldiers and explorers who landed in La Florida in the early 1500s did not control the land, politics, spiritual life, or economy. For more than 100 years after Europeans arrived, it remained an Indigenous-centered world: different groups of Native people interacted with each other through their trade networks, political alliances, and warfare. After the Spanish began to build missions and settlements, the Apalachees were still politically powerful and continued to negotiate alliances and relationships with Spanish and with other southeast Native groups. But the presence of Europeans brought unrest and illness – it is estimated that 75% of the Timucuan population died of diseases brought by the Spanish. Some Apalachees believed the Spanish could provide military support or protection or help their political leaders grow more powerful. Others fought off Europeans' attempts to change Native religions or control Native land and labor. And some Indigenous groups aligned with English and French settlers, trying to gain an advantage over other tribes.

But even though many Native peoples in Florida died during these conflicts with Europeans, many others survived. They were never “conquered.” Their descendants still live in Florida and neighboring states.

### **5. MYTH: “Native American” is the only correct term for American Indians.**

When we talk about big groups of people, like different races or ethnicities, there usually isn't just one label we can use to describe the entire group. Instead, we have many words, like “white” or “Caucasian” for some people, and “Black” or “African American” for others. But it's important to remember that individual members of those groups might prefer one word over another.

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Most Native Americans first identify by their tribe or nation. This Mission focuses on the people who lived in Apalachee territory. Apalachees today, descendants of these earlier communities, proudly use the name of their nation. Nowadays, it's also common for both Native Americans and people who aren't Native to use words like "American Indian," "Native American," or "Indigenous." Canadian people often use the term "First Nations" as well.