Name: _____

Date: _____

The New World

Imagine two worlds evolving separately for thousands of years—then colliding in a meeting that would reshape the planet forever. When Christopher Columbus reached the Americas in 1492, he thought he was in Asia. He called the people he encountered "Indios," because he was convinced that he had reached one of the islands of Southeast Asia—land many Europeans called the Indies.

Although Columbus likely died believing he had reached Asia, we know today that he had stumbled upon a New World—civilizations with complex languages, rich traditions, and thriving cities, all developed entirely apart from the old world. What followed was a wave of exchange, conflict, and irreversible change that would touch every part of the world.

The Old World from which Columbus arrived was deeply interconnected. For thousands of years, the people of Europe, Asia, and Africa had exchanged goods, ideas, and even diseases—through trade routes or war. But across the ocean in the Americas, civilizations rose in complete isolation.

***First Landing of Columbus on the Shores of the New World*, from an 1892 engraving by Currier & Ives.**

While the Old World had been connected by trade and conquest, the peoples of the Americas had built civilizations along a very different path—one that began thousands of years earlier with the first human migrations into a vast, uncharted land. Some of the earliest widespread evidence of human presence in the Americas comes from 13,000-year-old spear points found near Clovis, New Mexico—though earlier sites exist. By 10,000 years ago—long before the rise of civilizations in Mesopotamia, Egypt, or China—humans had spread throughout North and South America, from Alaska to the Caribbean to Tierra del Fuego, the windswept southern edge of the New World.

As people spread across the continents, they developed distinct languages and cultural traditions. By 1492, the population of the Americas is estimated to have been between 50 and 75 million—though estimates vary widely. The indigenous peoples included hundreds of ethnic groups who spoke more than 160 distinct languages, reflecting great diversity across the hemisphere.

Their societies ranged in complexity from simple to sophisticated. The Maya, Incas, and Aztecs developed monumental architecture that required great mathematical skill to build, while the Yanomami of Brazil and Venezuela continue to this day to live a lifestyle similar to nomadic cultures from thousands of years earlier.

The indigenous civilizations of the New World did not use the wheel for transportation. Although the wheel was known—wheeled toys have been found in Mesoamerican sites—it was not adopted for practical use. This was partly because much of the land, especially in the Andes, was too mountainous for wheeled vehicles. Societies across the Americas adapted in different ways, building cities, trade networks, and monumental architecture without relying on wheeled transport.

Additionally, the wheel had limited use because few animals in the New World were suitable for pulling plows or carts. Many large mammals, such as mammoths and giant ground sloths, became extinct thousands of years before European arrival, likely due to a combination of human hunting and climate change. The few remaining large mammals, including bears, bison, moose, and jaguars, were not suited for domestication. In the Andes, people used llamas to carry goods, but llamas are unpredictable and too small to support the weight of an adult rider.

But while the civilizations of the Americas thrived in isolation, that very isolation left them unprepared for what was coming. When Europeans crossed the Atlantic, they brought more than goods and ideas—they also brought diseases. Smallpox, measles, and influenza, familiar enemies in the Old World, swept through the Americas with devastating speed. The Native Americans had never encountered these diseases and had no inherited immunity—the kind of resistance that builds over generations of exposure. Within a generation, as many as 85 percent of the indigenous population had died. Often, diseases swept along trade routes through Native American villages long before the first foreigners arrived. Entire communities vanished—not from warfare, but from illnesses they had never known, and had no defenses against.

The Europeans' greatest weapon in their quest to conquer the New World was one they didn't even know they carried: disease.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Fill in the Blanks

The peoples of Europe, Asia, and Africa have been t__a__i__g goods, i__e__s, and d__s__a__es for thousands of years through t__a__e and w__r. But, when C__r__s__o__h__r C__l__m__us sailed to America in 14___, he unwittingly discovered cultures that had developed apart from the O__d W__r__d. The Native Americans Columbus encountered included 3___ major ethnic groups that spoke over 1___ distinct languages.

The Europeans carried diseases such as s__a__l__ox, influenza, and m__a__l__s to America. The idigenous people had not been e__p__s__d to those d__s__a__es, so their i__mu__e systems were not p__e__a__ed for their introduction. As a result, approximately *s__v__n__e__n out of twenty Native Americans fell *v__ct__m to d__s__a__e in the years following their first *e__c__u__t__r with E__r__p__a__s.

Answer in complete sentences

1. Why did Christopher Columbus call the people he encountered in America “Indios”?

2. What was significant about what archaeologists found near Clovis, New Mexico?

3. Provide two reasons the indigenous people of the Americas did not use the wheel as a tool.

*4. What theory does the author present as a reason why Europeans were more resistant to disease than the indigenous people of the Americas?

*This is a higher order learning question. Any reasonable answer will be graded as correct.