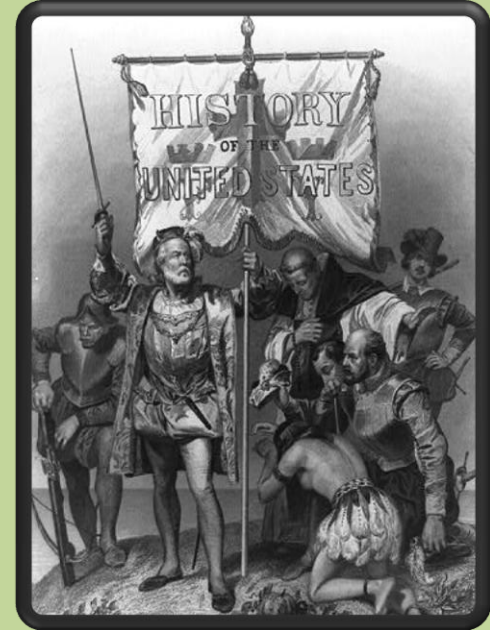


What was the Columbian Exchange?

Christopher Columbus borrowed money , sailed the wrong way, to find what he thought were the coastal islands of Eastern India. His “discovery” has had a centuries long impact for both fortune and catastrophe. His voyages brought Europeans (and their economic, political, and biological cultures) into contact with aboriginal peoples of the New World (and their cultures)—and both of these cultures came into contact with African cultures as slaves were ripped from their homes and brought chained to the New World. These world cultures exchanged habits, food, animals, disease, and trade. While the impact lasted hundreds of years and effects many parts of the globe; a look at the exchange along the east coast of North America reveals much.



This online image depicts an old History text book with Columbus on the front. 1858. May 2010. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Library Online Catalog. LC-USZ62-93475. < <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/93511215/> >

European crops...

Europeans naturally brought their own crops to the New World. These included wheat, apples, rice, dandelion, and chickweed. Yes, they brought weeds as well. Seeking larger plots to plant most Europeans also cut down trees and other tall vegetation—which only exposed native flora to an overabundance of sunlight thus changing the original botanical landscape considerably. Amerindians named one of the weeds “Englishmen’s Foot” to denote that it had never grown here before the English came.



This online image depicts Columbus Landing in the New World. Online image print. Unknown date.. May 2010. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Library Online Catalog. LC-DIG-pga-02023. <<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3a46292//>>



New World Plants

The contribution of the New World to the Old in the form of plants and ultimately food was a significant event in the history of the world. Maize, white & sweet potatoes, squashes, chilies, and manioc all became important sources of food around the globe. For most of the first 150 years of European expansion into the New World, the Europeans sought out sources for gold and other valuable trade items—but the Europeans also began to quietly become prosperous trading food stuffs. Another native crop—tobacco—became a critical exchange. Used as a leisurely diversion rather than food, tobacco became known as “gold leaf”.



This online image of a print by Currier & Ives celebrates Columbus. 1892. May 2010.. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Library Online Catalog. LC-DIG-pga-661
<<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/90715954/>>



Large Scale

As European population grew so did the demand for larger scale food production. With the rise of Africa and Europe came the African slave trade to build dams, dig drainage ditches, and cultivate the semi-aquatic rice. We begin to see that the Columbian Exchange was no simple matter of wheat coming east and potatoes going west. Farming and growing techniques were “exchanged”. Political and ethical ideals were also exchanged, but with European values at the time dominating. In this way, the exchange of rice also meant the exchange, or institutionalization, of slavery in the New World.



An online image of an engraving of Columbus. Unknown date. May 2010..
Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs
Library Online Catalog LC-USZ62-1784
<<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3a05534/>>



Animal Exchange

Only a few New World animals moved east—squirrels, muskrats, and turkeys mostly. But many Old World animals came to the Americas—and, like crops, they also changed the military and political landscape. Europe sent cattle, horses, chickens, geese, & rabbits. Horses roamed free from fences and were a significant military engine for Europeans.



An online image of Columbus returning to Court. Unknown date. May 2010. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Library Online Catalog. LC-DIG-pga-02996.
<<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/pga.02996/>>



And finally, disease

The most immediate and significant change brought by the Columbian exchange was death from disease. Early records talk of Indians dying “quickly”; and the ravages of smallpox nearly wiping out entire native populations. Colonial leaders, missionaries, and traders all testified to the deaths of many. Only a comparatively few Europeans in turn fell ill to chagas disease (a mild fever and swelling) and venereal syphilis.



An online image of Columbus at Court. 1884. May 2010. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Library Online Catalog LC-DIG-pga-03133. Lithograph. <<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/pga.03133/>>



What happened as a result??

As we see, this exchange was decidedly uneven if we focus only on eastern North America from 1500-1700. Indian populations saw their native crops dispersed, land forms changed, and their peoples decimated by disease. They saw their use of tobacco fund an Empire. The combination of New World crops and Old World crops helped feed the growing European population that dominated the continent. In similar fashion, African slaves forced to come to the New World unwittingly, became a part of the Columbian Exchange as their forced labors further entrenched European control over the New World.

Traditionally, historians have not included other items in this exchange—like the armored sailing ships, forged steel swords, or other technologies of the Europeans. When included with the biological evidence, the Columbian Exchange reshaped much of the world.

