

# The Significance of the Natives in the Colonies

Directions: Read the excerpt from "Significance of the American Indian" and identify the authors point of view according to the four characteristics he uses to make his claim.

Objective: US1.1 A. SWBAT identify the causes of the French and Indian War \*

--	--	--	--	--

**Summarize:** Analyze the quote "What American society owes to Indian society as much as to any source, is the mere fact of its existence," as way to summarize the reading. Write a paragraph referencing the examples from above as your evidence.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

Harvard historian and noted student  
decades ago that

ten as if history were a function solely  
act that till well into the nineteenth  
a principle determinants of historical  
frontier history . . . are repeatedly non-  
done for us in regard to the one force  
everywhere. Disregarding Parkman's  
have made shockingly little effort to  
cultures, the thinking, and the feel-  
y little effort to understand how all  
societies.

to wrote these words, in some ways  
derogatory labels have been ex-  
ic sections surveying the Indian's  
interpretative level where we form  
sidered. Yet their role in American  
cultural texture is to be clearly seen.  
ve discerned the significance of  
ling power that Native Americans  
evident that Europeans could not  
it drawing upon the accumulated  
this century's creative pilgrims of  
ns significantly shaped America's  
ined the European level with the  
et they could not prevent the souls  
neirs." For land and its indigenous  
ry" to the "soil of every country,"  
d to body, so there is a relationship  
d, even some physical characteris-  
dianize themselves in the second  
ystery of the American earth" He  
haracter, flowering forth from the  
hich conquered the land—Yankees  
of the American people" which he  
ds of his American patients.  
ne creative American writers have  
an history must be granted before  
One of America's finest twentieth  
claimed:

enslavement, not discovery. No, we  
r world. The blood means nothing;  
n the blood, moves the blood.

A noted contemporary literary critic, Leslie Fiedler, having listened carefully  
to creative writers past and present, asserts, "everyone who thinks of him-  
self as being in some sense an American feels the stirrings in him of a second  
soul, the soul of the Red Man." Just as the name "American" originally ap-  
plied strictly to Native Americans, only in time becoming a self-descriptive  
term for European immigrants, so too other aspects of the culture and per-  
sonality of the Indian gained imprint on the scroll of America's heritage and  
character.

Some recent historians have embraced this perspective. Thus Francis  
Jennings, in an important interpretative work, *The Invasion of America*,  
argues:

Modern American society evolved from that web of interrelationship  
[between Englishmen and Indians], and if much of the Indian contribution  
is not immediately visible nowadays, neither is very much of the Anglo-  
Saxon. We are not less the offspring of our ancestors because their bodies  
have been buried.

Begin  
Here

"Modern America" grew out of "colonial America." Without the "colonial  
mold" today's culture would be quite different. In that epoch, Indians  
helped in the "exploration, development, settlement and cultivation of the  
continent." While we usually consider only Europeans "pioneers," they ac-  
tually "were pupils in the Indian school," for Natives contributed "the expe-  
rience and knowledge of millennia of genuine pioneering." Thus, simply  
stated, Jennings says: "What American society owes to Indian society, as  
much as to any source, is the mere fact of its existence."

More than land the frontier included people. While certain sections  
were sparsely populated, no "free land," no empty space existed on this con-  
tinent if one recognizes aboriginal land title. The frontier, in fact, marked the  
place where cultures met, where interaction and exchange transpired. Fron-  
tier historians have highlighted great truth: the frontier was important. But  
it was important not only because it marked a geographic boundary, for in  
America the emergent *American* way, to the extent it differed from Europe's,  
reflects the experience and wisdom of the ancient, rooted, land-wise Native  
American cultures as well as the challenging land itself.

From this vantage point the frontier saga further needs re-thinking and  
re-telling in ways more appreciative of the Indian's significance in American  
history. Europeans in touch with Native Americans embraced many of their  
ways to survive, for despite their technological prowess they lacked the eco-  
logical wisdom needed to survive in the New World. Struggling to stay  
alive, they found many Indian ways preferable to those of Europe, even if  
they failed to acknowledge their source. Much about the frontier experience,  
and thus about American history, becomes more intelligible when seen with  
Indian dimensions. To make this evident, let us briefly consider only four  
examples: exploration; fur trade; agriculture; and medicine. Each example

READ AS whole Group

could be treated at length, and many more examples could be cited, but these four will suffice.

While European "explorers" have been repeatedly extolled and their importance recognized, virtually none of them travelled without Indian guides over Indian trails and waterways. Immediately after landing on Hispanola, Christopher Columbus took aboard Indian guides to help him navigate the nearby islands. Hernando De Soto and Francisco de Coronado, sweeping through vast reaches of North America, continually employed and depended upon Native guides. The daring Vérendryes, father and sons, who journeyed far beyond the Great Lakes across the Dakotas to the Black Hills, went nowhere without Indian guides and turned back on one trip when their guides refused to go farther. Such explorers certainly saw country which was new to them, and, most importantly, reported their journeys, but the American continent had long been "opened" and charted by those Native hunters and traders who had actually explored it. While we often concentrate on the "explorers," who they were was less consequential than what they learned. They learned what their Native guides showed them, so the content of explorers' accounts came from Indian sources. The trails, mountain passes, navigable streams, etc., which enabled Americans to press westward, were revealed to them by Native Americans. Without Native guides few "explorers" would have survived to share their discoveries.

Following the explorers, the fur traders helped make America. Men like George Croghan and Jim Bridger, riding point along the frontier from the sixteenth century onwards, certainly helped open western lands to European settlers. But they were properly called fur traders. The furs themselves which provided such a profit for men and companies were largely gathered by Indians and traded at posts which they allowed to flourish on their lands. To the extent the celebrated "mountain men" mastered the mountains, they did so by learning how to hunt and trap like Indians. In granting the fur trade's great significance, for it was a major industry in colonial days and provides a major chapter in the development of the American West, those Indians who provided the furs and taught Anglo-Americans how to survive on the land must be recognized.

Indians gave American agriculture some of its distinctiveness. This is rather well known if inadequately appreciated. The work of Native agronomists, carefully cross-breeding and cultivating diverse strains of such crops as maize, potatoes, beans, tobacco and cotton, has proved enduringly significant. Europeans and their descendents have done little to domesticate wild indigenous plants. They simply took the Indian-domesticated varieties and profited from them. They also imitated Indian agricultural methods, especially in growing maize which became and continues to be one of the most essential New World food crops. Indian food crops, properly tended, harvested, stored and freely shared with Europeans, certainly shaped the economic and social structures of America and of the world as well.

Group 1  
"Explorers"  
"Guides"  
scouts

Group 2  
"Fur"

Group 3

me  
by  
ren  
as  
tur  
hav  
dru  
  
exl  
Nc  
tio  
In  
ha  
tic  
av  
ap  
so  
  
pe  
cc  
cc  
m  
h  
"  
o  
w  
  
c  
n  
f  
t  
c  
t

more examples could be cited, but

been repeatedly extolled and their  
of them travelled without Indian  
ays. Immediately after landing on

aboard Indian guides to help him  
De Soto and Francisco de Coronado,  
th America, continually employed

daring Vérendryes, father and sons,  
kes across the Dakotas to the Black  
ides and turned back on one trip

Such explorers certainly saw coun-  
nportantly, reported their journeys,  
en "opened" and charted by those

tually explored it. While we often  
were was less consequential than  
eir Native guides showed them, so

e from Indian sources. The trails,  
which enabled Americans to press  
Native Americans. Without Native

ved to share their discoveries.  
aders helped make America. Men  
ding point along the frontier from

y helped open western lands to  
y called fur traders. The furs them-  
men and companies were largely

which they allowed to flourish on  
d "mountain men" mastered the  
to hunt and trap like Indians. In

e, for it was a major industry in  
apter in the development of the  
ided the furs and taught Anglo-

st be recognized.  
ome of its distinctiveness. This is  
ated. The work of Native agrono-

ting diverse strains of such crops  
on, has proved enduringly signif-  
ve done little to domesticate wild

ndian-domesticated varieties and  
ndian agricultural methods, espe-  
l continues to be one of the most

ood crops, properly tended, har-  
peans, certainly shaped the eco-  
l of the world as well.

Less widely appreciated is the Indian achievement in medicine. Native medicines, often more effective (or at least less lethal) than those prescribed by European doctors, frequently underlay the "folk" medicine and home remedies of frontier families. Indian awareness of the need for such things as vitamin C, for example, preceded its European discovery by two centuries. With a vast knowledge of indigenous herbs Native American healers have, as Virgil Vogel so nicely shows, added much to our knowledge of drugs, healing and health.

To mention exploration, fur trade, agriculture and medicine is not to exhaust the list of American Indian contributions to the material culture of North America. The growing body of literature delineates such contributions, though much remains to be done. (For example, no definitive study of Indian agriculture, based upon both historical documents and agronomy, has been produced, despite the importance of the subject.) Such contributions deserve considerable elaboration, and doing so would expand one's awareness of this nation's real roots. Doing so would also increase one's appreciation for the wisdom and integrity of "primitive" peoples who were so often sophisticated and perceptive in their adaptation to their world.

Better understanding of whom Native Peoples were and what happened to them helps one see how their lifestyles and values impregnated colonial and national cultures in America. Beyond the more clearly evident contributions to the nation's material culture one can glimpse some non-material contributions to its character. The English language, for example, has become laced with Indian words and expressions—the Choctaw word "Okay" being an obvious example. The love of freedom noticed by so many observers in Indian society certainly influenced the commitment to freedom which distinguishes the American tradition.

Some have even suggested that there is a sense in which the prototypical Americans have been in some ways yoked to the Indian example. The national hero of the nineteenth century was Daniel Boone, not only a bold frontiersman but one who, even if forced "to become an Indian," was authentically *American*. Evaluating the nation's literature and imaginatively constructing the people's evolution from Daniel Boone to the "hippies" of the 1960s, literary critic Leslie Fiedler says:

~~We are tempted to say that it is the woodsman which the ex-European becomes beside his Red companion: the hunter, the trapper, the frontiersman, the pioneer, at last the cowboy—or maybe only next-to-last, for after him comes the beatnik, the hippie, one more wild man seeking the last West of Haight-Ashbury in high-heeled boots and blue jeans. But even as he ceases to be beatnik and becomes fully hippie, the ultimate Westerner ceases to be White at all and turns back into the Indian, his boots becoming moccasins, his hair bound in an Indian headband, and a string of beads around his neck—to declare that he has fallen not merely out of Europe, but out of the Europeanized West, into an aboriginal and archaic America.~~