

How did trade change the world?

As Europe's trade expanded, a global exchange of people, goods, technology, ideas—and even diseases—began. Historians call this transfer the Columbian Exchange, after Christopher Columbus. The Columbian Exchange transformed the economies of Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Americas.

Merchants introduced foods from the Americas to Europeans. Two of the most important crops were corn and potatoes. In Europe, these crops became essential to daily life. Corn was used to feed livestock, producing larger, healthier animals. This resulted in more meat, leather, and wool. Potatoes helped Europeans feed more people from their land.

Europeans acquired other foods from Native Americans, such as squash, beans, and tomatoes. Tomatoes greatly changed cooking in Italy, where tomato sauces became widely used. Chocolate was a popular food from Central America. By mixing chocolate with milk and sugar, Europeans made candy.

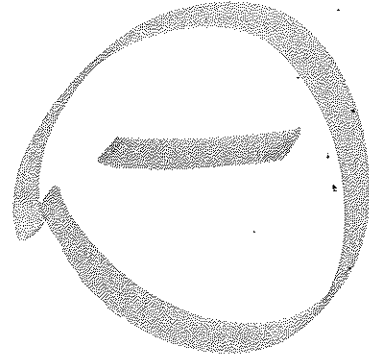
American settlers planted many European and Asian grains, such as wheat, oats, barley, rye, and rice. Coffee and tropical fruits, such as bananas, were brought to the Americas as well. Eventually, coffee and banana farms employed thousands of workers in Central America and South America.

Explorers and settlers also brought pigs, sheep, cattle, chickens, and horses to the Americas. Raising chickens changed the diet of many people in Central and South America.

The lives of Native Americans on the Great Plains changed when they acquired horses. Horses provided a faster way to travel. As a result, Native Americans became more efficient at hunting buffalo for food and at fighting enemies.

Europeans obtained sugarcane from Asia and began growing it in the Caribbean. This caused a migration, or movement of people. To plant and harvest the sugarcane, over time Europeans enslaved millions of Africans and moved them to the Americas.

In addition to slavery, the Columbian Exchange spread diseases from one area to another. When Europeans arrived in America, they were carrying viruses that were new to Native Americans. These diseases were deadly and eventually killed millions.



The Columbian Exchange

Background Information

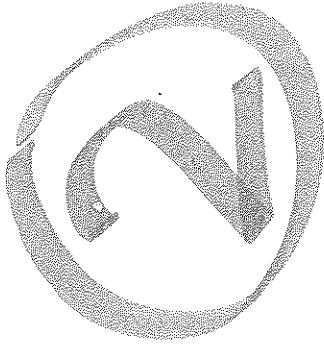
When Europeans reached the Americas in the fifteenth century, they began a circular exchange that had lasting effects. Many animals found in Europe did not exist in the Americas. The reverse was also true.

Llamas were the only large domesticated animals used to carry goods in the Americas. A llama is small compared to a cow or horse, however, and can only carry about 200 pounds. Europeans gradually brought pigs, cattle, goats, and sheep, as well as horses, to the Americas. Native Americans were terrified of horses because they were so large. However, they soon learned how much work horses could do that humans had done before.

Unfortunately, the Europeans also accidentally brought deadly human diseases to the Americas. With the Spanish came smallpox, malaria, measles, bubonic plague, typhoid, yellow fever, and cholera. Millions of Native Americans died from the resulting epidemics.

The greatest economic benefit for the Americas and the rest of the world came from the foods exchanged between them. Corn, potatoes, manioc, peanuts, tomatoes, squash, pineapples, papaya, and avocados were crops from the Americas. Rice, wheat, barley, oats, rye, turnips, onions, cabbage, lettuce, peaches, pears, and sugar were products of other continents. Today the exchange is so complete that corn or maize is the staple crop of some African peoples. Wheat from Europe is a major output of American farms and countries as far south as Argentina. Rice is mass-produced in Brazil.

The exchange continues even today, although it is no longer called the Columbian Exchange. Some of the effects of this exchange have been harmful. Killer bees from Africa have severely impacted the bee industry in the Americas. Zebra mussels came from Europe and today cover the bodies of ships in the Americas. Modern technology has increased the speed of such exchanges and spread them across the planet.



SETTING THE STAGE The colonization of the Americas dramatically changed the world. It prompted both voluntary and forced migration of millions of people. It led to the establishment of new and powerful societies. Other effects of European settlement of the Americas were less noticeable but equally important. Colonization resulted in the exchange of new items that greatly influenced the lives of people throughout the world. The new wealth from the Americas resulted in new business and trade practices in Europe.

The Columbian Exchange

The global transfer of foods, plants, and animals during the colonization of the Americas is known as the Columbian Exchange. Ships from the Americas brought back a wide array of items that Europeans, Asians, and Africans had never before seen. They included such plants as tomatoes, squash, pineapples, tobacco, and cacao beans (for chocolate). And they included animals such as the turkey, which became a source of food in the Eastern Hemisphere.

Perhaps the most important items to travel from the Americas to the rest of the world were corn and potatoes. Both were inexpensive to grow and nutritious. Potatoes, especially, supplied many essential vitamins and minerals. Over time, both crops became an important and steady part of diets throughout the world. These foods helped people live longer. Thus they played a significant role in boosting the world's population. The planting of the first white potato in Ireland and the first sweet potato in China probably changed more lives than the deeds of 100 kings.

Traffic across the Atlantic did not flow in just one direction, however. Europeans introduced various livestock animals into the Americas. These included horses, cattle, sheep, and pigs. Foods from Africa (including some that originated in Asia) migrated west in European ships. They included bananas, black-eyed peas, and yams. Grains introduced to the Americas included wheat, rice, barley, and oats.

Some aspects of the Columbian Exchange had a tragic impact on many Native Americans. Disease was just as much a part of the Columbian Exchange as goods and food. The diseases Europeans brought with them, which included smallpox and measles, led to the deaths of millions of Native Americans.

