Key Concept 1.1 — As native populations migrated and settled across the vast expanse of North America over time, they developed distinct and increasingly complex societies by adapting to and transforming their diverse environments.

I. Different native societies adapted to and transformed their environments through innovations in agriculture, resource use, and social structure.

The first humans arrived in the America’s tens of thousands of years ago. Most textbooks list the time-period at somewhere between 10,000-40,000 years ago during the last ice age. One of the prevailing theories is that during that ice age, sea levels dropped causing a land bridge to form between present day Russia and Alaska called the Beringia Land Bridge. However, the archeological evidence is scarce which has led to other theories such as early fishermen being blow off course. Despite the many theories on how native populations came to populate North America, this is for sure, that when here, those settlers developed quite different and increasingly complex societies by adapting to and transforming their diverse environments.

The most complex North American native societies developed in present day Mexico and the American Southwest. Groups like the Olmec and the Mayan developed highly sophisticated religions that were based of precise calculations of celestial bodies. Likewise, the Aztecs developed the expansive city of Tenochtitlan on Lake Texcoco, the site of present day Mexico City. With an estimated population of over 200,000 people, it dwarfed even the largest European cities. In the American Southwest, groups like the Anasazi, Pueblo and the Hohokam developed smaller, though still complex societies. For these cultures, it was the development of a stable food supply that allowed these cultures to grow and stabilize. About 6,000 years ago in central Mexico, natives experimented with cross breeding different types of grasses, eventually developing an early version of corn that was called Maize. Because they were no longer forced to spending their time devoted to securing food sources, these cultures could engage in other pursuits. This directly led to economic developments and social diversification among societies in these regions. For example, their cultures developed highly complex religions and militaries that had distinct ruling classes. Additionally, these cultures all adapted to and transformed their environment. For example, in the Southwest native tribes developed advanced irrigation systems that brought water to otherwise infertile regions. In present day Mexico, the Aztecs altered the physical landscape of Lake Texcoco by creating causeways from the edge of the lake to the city which was built in its center.

This same diversification and economic development was also experienced in the societies in the Northwest and areas of California, but for slightly different reasons. For example, native groups like the Chinooks found an abundant food supply in the rivers and forests of the Pacific Northwest. Rivers, that still team with salmon, provided a stable food supply that allowed their society to diversity and develop economically.

However, not all North American societies were blessed with an environment that was conducive to the growing of agricultural products. In the Great Basin and on the Great Plains, dry conditions prevented the development of Maize. However, this region also teamed with huge herds of American Bison. These large animals, numbering approximately 47 million at the time of discovery, were used by these tribes for their meat, bones and hides, and provided much of what native populations needed to survive. Consequently, tribes in the Basin and on the Plains, such as the Sioux, Apache and Shoshone, developed largely mobile lifestyles designed to follow and hunt the Bison.

On the eastern seaboard, a mixed agricultural and hunter-gatherer economy developed that favored the development of permanent villages. In what is today New York, groups like the Iroquois Confederacy relied more on hunting then their more agriculturally minded neighbors to the south such as the Powhatan and the Cherokee because in the north the ground and climate was less conducive to sustained agriculture. However, both groups often transformed their environment by conducting prescribed burns of the forests, clearing out undergrowth and making hunting easier. Often these societies were matrilineal in structure and were often organized into many smaller bands.

Finally, in the Midwest, native groups developed semi-complex societies that were fueled by an abundant mixed agricultural society that was aided by prolific trade in the Mississippi river basin. The best example of this ancient society, which flourished from 800-1600 CE, was in the city of Cahokia at the southern tip of Illinois. Growing to an estimated population of at least 10,000, the builders of this city developed a complex social hierarchy and a trade network that stretched as far south as Etowah Georgia. Like other groups they also altered the landscape, building giant mounds that were likely used for religious and ceremonial purposes as well as deforesting the land around them.
Key Concept 1.2 – Contact among Europeans, Native Americans, and African resulted in the Columbian Exchange and significant social, cultural and political changes on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean.

I. European expansion into the Western Hemisphere Generated intense social, religious, political, and economic competition and changes within European societies.

European efforts to expand and explore the greater world were grounded in a desire to find new sources of mineral wealth as well as the growing economics and military competition between European countries. Additionally, European exploration was influenced by their desire to spread Christianity to different parts of the world. This exploration was driven by new technologies and organization methods to radically altered the economies of Europe. These processes eventually led to contact between the Eastern and Western Hemisphere resulting to a wave of cultural interaction that influenced the development of North America.

In the 13th and 14th century, Europeans were introduced to the greater outside world thought the Crusades, the Spanish Reconquista as well as the travels of Marco Polo. These events introduced Europeans to products and technologies that would fuel their ability to explore. For example, spices from India and silk from China quickly became desired by the nobility to flavor their food and adorn their bodies. Soon Portuguese, Spanish and Italian seafarers were attempting to find sea passages to India and Asia. These early explorations were aided by new technologies often adapted from Arabic merchants. The Compass and Sextant allowed the adventures to chart distance and direction. New designs for ships, such as the Caravel and new triangular sail design called the Lateen Sail facilitated the long-distance travels of these early adventurers by allowing them to sail into the wind and in shallow water.

Columbus spent eight years seeking financial support for his plan to sail west from Europe to the ”Indies.” Finally, in 1492, he succeeded in winning the backing of Isabella and Ferdinand. The two Spanish monarchs were then at the height of their power, having just defeated the Moors in Granada. They agreed to outfit three ships and to make Columbus governor, admiral, and viceroy of all the lands that he would claim for Spain.

After sailing from the Canary Islands on September 6, Columbus landed on an island in the Bahamas on October 12. His success in reaching lands on the other side of the ocean brought him a burst of glory in Spain. But three subsequent voyages across the Atlantic where disappointing he found little gold, few spices, and no simple path to China and India.

Columbus died in 1506, still believing that he had found a western route to Asia. However, many Spaniards viewed Columbus as a failure because they suspected that he had found not a valuable trade route, but a ”New World.” Today, some people scoff at Columbus for having erroneously giving the people he encountered the name “Indians.” Even the land that he had explored was named for someone else, Amerigo Vespucci, another Italian sailor. Columbus’s critics also point out the many problems and injustices suffered by the natives of the Americas after Europeans arrived and took over their land.

Nevertheless, most historians agree on Columbus’s importance. Modern scholars have recognized his great skills as a navigator and his daring commitment in going forth where nobody else had ever dared to venture. Furthermore, Columbus’s voyages brought about, for the first time in history, a permanent interaction between people from all over the globe. He changed the world forever.

Europeans and the original inhabitants of the Americas had developed vastly different cultures over the millennia. The contact between them resulted in the Columbian Exchange, a transfer of plants, animals, and germs from one side of the Atlantic to the other for the first time. Europeans learned about many new plants and foods, including beans, corn, Sweet and white potatoes, tomatoes, and tobacco. They also contracted a new disease, Syphilis. Because of the new foodstuffs, European populations quickly rebounded, greatly increasing their desire for commercial goods. Additionally, as mineral wealth poured into Europe the feudal system began to collapse and a capitalist system began to develop.

II. The Columbian Exchange and development of the Spanish Empire in the Western Hemisphere resulted in extensive demographic, economic, and social changes.

Spanish exploration and conquest of the Americas were accompanied and furthered by widespread deadly epidemics that devastated native populations and by the introduction of crops and animals not found in the Americas. Spanish conquest of the new world was mostly carried out by explorers called conquistadores. As they traveled though the new world they brought with them deadly epidemics such as smallpox to which the native populations had no natural defense. Because of the biological exchange native population plummeted by as much as 90% helping to facilitate the conquest. Some of the most famous conquistadores included the conquests of the Aztecs in Mexico by Hernan Cortés, and the conquest of the Incas in Peru by Francisco Pizarro secured Spain’s initial supremacy in the Americas. Not only did the conquistadores bring with them disease but they also introduced to the America’s sugar cane, bluegrasses, pigs, and horses, as well as the wheel, iron implements, and guns. Animals like the horse transformed the way that the natives of the plains lived by increasing their mobility and ability to hunt Bison.
As the Spanish settled, they bought with them an economic system that was first deployed on the islands off the coast of Africa called the encomienda system. This system was an early version of the plantation system they typically grew cash crops such as sugarcane or mined from precious metal like gold and silver. Early Encomienda’s utilized local native populations as the source of labor. However, harsh treatment on the part of the Spanish combined with dangerous labor condition, malnutrition and disease killed much of the workforce. Additionally, given their knowledge of the terrain, natives often took the opportunity to escape and run away. As a result, the Spanish soon turned to West African groups to provide labor for the mines and plantations. Coastal African empires would capture slaves from smaller tribes on the interior and sell them to European traders for manufactured products.

Soon the Spanish colonies developed a diverse and multiethnic population. As a result, the Spanish developed a caste system that incorporated a carefully defined social hierarchy. At the top of the social pyramid was a group called the Peninsulares, these were Spanish people born in Spain, next would be the Creoles, those of European descent but were born in the colonies. Next was the mixed population of the Mestizos and Mulattoes. The former was a mix of Native American and European descent and the latter was a mix of European and African descent. At the bottom was Native Americans and African slaves.

III. In their interactions, Europeans and Native Americans asserted divergent worldviews regarding issues such as religion, gender roles, family, land use, and power.

Often, the interactions between Europeans and Native Americans resulted a series of cultural misunderstandings rooted in fundamental differences between their societies. These differences often centered around issues such as religion, gender roles land use and power. Because of these misunderstandings and interactions, wars, rebellions, as well as adaptations took place among the different groups.

Native American religion was often animistic and polytheistic before contact with Europeans. However Spanish and French missionaries undertook the task of converting Natives to Christianity. Often, early conversion efforts met with mixed results as Natives were eager to add another god to their pantheon while missionaries were vexed at Natives refusal to give up traditional practices. The Spanish turned to a policy of forced conversions, most notably with the Pueblo in the American Southwest. The direct result of this policy was the Pueblo Revolt, often called the Pope rebellion, which killed as many as 400 Spanish. Natives did eventually adopt many aspects of Christianity; the notable is the patron saint of the Americans: Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Gender roles and land use were often very different between Native Americans and the Europeans. Often, Native societies were structured in a matrilineal way as opposed to the male dominated Europeans. Additionally, Natives did not believe in the ownership of land leading to early confusion and conflicts when European groups attempted to buy land from them.

Because of the misunderstands, Europeans often believed that Native Americans were “savages” that were less than human. This was often used as a justification was the inhuman treatment, brutality and enslavement that Natives were subjected to. However, one European who dissented from the views of most Europeans toward Native Americans was a Spanish priest named Bartolomé de Las Casas. Though he had owned slaves in land and slaves in the West Indies and had fought in Wars against the Indians, he eventually became an advocate for better treatment for Indians. He persuaded the king to institute the New Laws of 1542. These laws ended Indian slavery, halted forced Indian labor, and began to end the encomienda system which kept the Indians in serfdom. Conservative Spaniards, eager to keep the encomienda system, responded and successfully pushed the king to repeal parts of the New Laws. This eventually led to the Valladolid Debate. The debate over the role for Indians in the Spanish colonies came to a head in a formal debate in 1550-1551 in Valladolid, Spain. On one side, Las Casas argued that the Indians were completely human and morally equal to Europeans, so enslaving them was not justified. On the other side, another priest, Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, argued that Indians were less than human. Hence, they benefited from serving the Spaniards in the encomienda system. Neither side clearly won the debate. Though Las Casas was unable to gain equal treatment for Native Americans, he established the basic arguments on behalf of justice for Indians.