



# Learning Circle

## The 'Empty' Land

One of the many myths that arose regarding the colonization of North America is that the colonists were moving into a relatively 'empty' continent. Yes, there were the native people that had been encountered along coastlines and small villages here and there, but there was plenty of empty land that the settlers could move into without any problem... So they did, cutting down trees and building cabins. The cleared land was used for farming and small communities along the shore of rivers and lakes grew into larger communities. Settlers kept pushing further inland creating new farms and settlements as they went. There was so much land...

I will discuss the concepts of land ownership, reciprocal economics and land use that helped lead to these misconceptions another time. Right now I simply want to address the question of how empty was the land? Because there was no hard data (like a census) we have to rely on estimates of populations size and some historical written records in letters and reports. Wikipedia (see link below<sup>1</sup>) summarizes the results of 10 different researchers who have offered estimates of pre-Colombian population size. The size ranges from 1 to 7 million for Canada and the USA. Other authors offer anywhere from 3 to 18 million. So not exactly empty.

However, between 1492 and the next hundred years, while there were not many settlements yet and Europeans has not moved too far inland, the effect of contact had a much less obvious and unintended impact on indigenous populations. Disease transmission went both ways between the new and old worlds but there are many arguments that the arrival of diseases such as smallpox, typhus, measles, influenza, bubonic plague, cholera, malaria, tuberculosis, mumps, yellow fever and pertussis had a greater impact on North Americans than the diseases that moved from North American to Europe. Depending on who you read, the estimates vary between a 25 to 80% loss of life in indigenous populations through 200 years. And while those contacts at the shoreline with European fishermen may not have been in any way violent, they may have led to disease transmission which had far reaching effects. And in populations with no previous resistance, disease is easy to transmit over far distances as people travelled from place to place hunting, fishing, trading and going about their lives.

There is a counter argument that disease was not the only factor at play. This includes the effect of colonization where North Americans were being pushed out of their traditional territories and losing access to resources that would have helped them to better survive epidemics, for example, losing access to traditional food sources, medicinal resources, hunting grounds etc. Also, in this time period different European nations also encouraged warfare between tribes when it suited their interests to do so (as European politics and wars were carried out in the new colonies). Plus the displacement (both forcible and inadvertent) of populations pushed people who may have had peaceful relationships to violence when people were forced to move. Or forced into areas without the resources to support the increase in population in their traditional way of life. This also led to great loss of North American lives. (another article...)

Some of the many reasons why Europeans thought they were moving into an empty continent, whether that was true or not.

Respectfully submitted  
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<sup>1</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Population\\_history\\_of\\_the\\_Indigenous\\_peoples\\_of\\_the\\_Americas](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Population_history_of_the_Indigenous_peoples_of_the_Americas)