

Document 1
Excerpts from Geography and History Texts

The following excerpts are taken from geography and history textbooks published in the early 1800s.

“The population of this extensive country; when first visited by Europeans, consisted of numerous wild and rude tribes, in a savage state of society, and who were denominated by the early navigators, Indians, from a mistaken notion that the land they had found, bordered on the East Indies. And, since, also called aboriginals or aborigines. . . . The Indian tribes have governments peculiar to themselves, and differing from each other. They are very simple, and but a little advanced from a state of nature.

“It is melancholy to think that so great a part of mankind are sunk in ignorance, superstition, and barbarism. It should serve to increase our thankfulness that we enjoy such great privileges as we do, and excite us to a diligent improvement of them. We have reason to believe that the time will come, when all mankind will be good Christians, and live together in love and peace. . . .”

—Horatio Gates Spatford, *General Geography* (1809) pp. 64, 66, 132.

“The good and bad qualities of Indians are few, or confined to a few objects. In general, a savage is governed by his passions, without much restraint from the authority of his chiefs. He is remarkably hospitable to strangers, offering them the best accommodations he has, and always serving them first. He never forgets a favor or an injury; but will make a grateful return for a favor, and revenge an injury, whenever an opportunity offers, as long as he lives; and the remembrance is hereditary; for the child and grandchild have the same passions, and will repay a kindness or revenge a wrong done to their ancestor.”

—Noah Webster, *History of the United States* (1833), p. 64.

Understanding the Document

1. What generalizations are made in each excerpt concerning Native Americans?

Are such comments racist from our present day perspective? Explain.

2. In what ways can these generalizations influence Euro American attitudes toward Native Americans and affect future negotiations between the two cultures?
3. Find examples of statements made about Native Americans that are Eurocentric.
4. According to the last excerpt, what are “the good and bad qualities of Indians,” and what accounts for them exhibiting those traits?
5. Are these accounts “hopeful” that Native Americans will adapt to Euro-American ways? Explain.

Activities

Activity I: Assume the role of a teacher using one of these texts. Prepare a lesson that will instruct students about Native Americans. What conclusions do you think that students would draw based upon the text and the lessons?

Activity II: Most Native American peoples were primarily agriculturists, yet this aspect of Indian society is ignored in the excerpts. Have students create a list of other aspects of Native American society that are ignored or misrepresented and discuss why this occurred.

Document 2

Indian Land and Ancient Civilizations

The following excerpts are taken from *A Practical System of Modern Geography* by Jesse Olney, a popular geography text published in 1840.

“The Indians are the descendants of those who occupied the country at the time of its discovery by Europeans. Most of these prefer their own modes of savage life to those of the whites, and as the latter have extended their settlements, they have removed farther and farther back into the wilderness: at the present time but a small number of them are found east of the Mississippi River.” (p. 63)

“The Valley of the Mississippi embraces the vast region lying between the Allegheny and Rocky Mountains, watered by the Mississippi and its numerous branches. It extends 20 degrees in latitude and about 30 in longitude. If we except the Amazon, probably no other valley on the globe will compare in size with it; and it probably surpasses all others in the richness and variety of its soil, and its general adaptation to the support and comfort of civilized men. In extent it is like a continent; in beauty and fertility, it is the most perfect garden of nature. If we glance an eye over this immense region, connected by navigable rivers—if we regard the fertility of soil, the variety of productions, and if we combine those advantages offered by nature, with the moral energy of the free and active people who are spreading their increasing millions over its surface—what a brilliant prospect opens upon us through the darkness of future time! We see arts, science, industry, virtue, and social happiness already increasing in that region beyond what the wildest fancy would have dared to hope, thirty or forty years ago.” (p. 128)

“The Western States are remarkable for the remains of antiquity with which they abound. These consist of the ruins of forts or fortifications, mounds of earth, or graves, walls, hearths, &c. To judge from these works, the nation that constructed them, must have been far more civilized, and much better acquainted with the useful arts than the present Indians. From the lofty trees with which they are overgrown, it is concluded a long period must have elapsed—perhaps 1000 years—since the desertion of these fabrics, and the extinction of the people by whom they were erected. They are found in the vicinity of each other, spread over the great plains from the southern shore of Lake Erie to the Gulf of Mexico, generally in the neighborhood of the great rivers. Their structure is regular, and they have been supposed to warrant the opinion of the existence, in ancient times, of great cities along the Mississippi. The mummies, or dried bodies enveloped with coarse cloth, and found in some of the saltpetre caves of Kentucky, indicate the existence formerly of a race in these parts, different from that of the

present Indians, and that had probably become extinct long before the discovery of this continent by Columbus.” (p. 130)

“INDIAN TERRITORY—This Territory embraces a large extent of country, noted for its numerous rivers, its extensive forests, mild climate and abundance of game. The United States’ government set apart this Territory for the future residence of those Indians who have emigrated from the States east of the Mississippi. The present population is not far from 75,000. The tribes that have made the greatest advances towards civilization, are the Cherokees, Choctaws, Creeks, and Shawnees. A number of missionaries reside among them and have exerted a happy influence on their habits, manners, and moral condition. . . . What Desert is in the western part of this territory? By what is this Desert traversed? Did you ever see a Buffalo? An Indian?” (pp. 146–47)

“MISSOURI TERRITORY—This is an extensive region remarkable for its large rivers and immense prairies. It is inhabited by Indians and wild animals, with the exception of a few posts held by troops of the United States. For the most part, this country is a plain more or less covered with grass, and in many places very fertile. The richest and most valuable lands are found on the margins of the rivers, which are usually covered with well-timbered forests. At a short distance, however, the trees disappear, and the soil becomes dry and barren. Indeed, some parts of this territory, especially towards the Rocky Mountains, are almost a moving sand, and may be likened to the Great Sahara or African Desert.” (pp. 147–48)



Jesse Olney

Dictionary of American Portraits
Dover, 1967

Understanding the Document

1. What general attitude is revealed about Native Americans? In what ways would Euro-American use of the land differ from that of Native Americans?
2. The description of the region “between the Allegheny and Rocky Mountains” in the second paragraph could not be more flattering if it was an advertisement for western expansion. Is that what it is? What would be the impact on Indians?
3. A statement in the second paragraph refers to “. . . the moral energy of a free and active people. . . .” What is “moral energy”? Why might the author make reference to it in the context of this paragraph?
4. In the final sentence of the second paragraph the author links arts, science and industry with virtue and social happiness. In what way is this statement damaging to future relations between Euro-Americans and Native Americans?
5. The author describes the remains of ancient civilizations in paragraph three. Why does the author assume these people were unrelated to Indians of the early 1800s?
6. Contrast the description in paragraph 2 with the descriptions of Indian Territory and Missouri Territory. What might be the implications for Indian policy of describing the Great Plains as “likened to the Great Sahara?”

Activities

Activity I: Assuming the role of a U.S. senator knowledgeable about this information, create a policy for the treatment of Native Americans that would be politically feasible.

Activity II: Conduct research about the Mississippian Culture in ancient America. Compare the comments in the third paragraph with your findings. Why have modern textbooks only recently included information about ancient American civilizations, while Olney’s text, written in 1840, refers to great cities along the Mississippi River?

Document 3

Indian Government

The following excerpt on Indian government is taken from Bishop Davenport's *A New Gazetteer or Geographical Dictionary*, published in 1837. (p. 7)

“There is established in each society a certain species of government, which prevails over the whole continent of America, with exceeding little variation; because over the whole of this continent the manners and way of life are nearly similar and uniform. Without arts, riches, or luxury, the great instruments of subjection in polished societies, an American [Indian] has no method by which he can render himself considerable among his companions, but by superiority in personal qualities of body or mind. But, as nature has not been very lavish in her personal distinctions, where all enjoy the same education, all are pretty much on an equality, and will desire to remain so. Liberty, therefore, is the prevailing passion of the Americans [Indians]; and their government, under the influence of this sentiment, is, perhaps, better secured than by the wisest political regulations. They are very far, however, from despising all sort of authority; they are attentive to the voice of wisdom, which experience has conferred on the aged, and they enlist under the banners of the chief in whose valor and military address they have learned to repose a just and merited confidence. . . . His power, however, is rather persuasive than coercive; he is revered as a father, rather than feared as a monarch. He has no guards, no prisons, no officers of justice, and one act of ill-judged violence would pull him from his humble throne. The elders in the other form of government, which may be considered as a *mild* and *nominal* aristocracy, have no more power. In most countries, therefore, age alone is sufficient for acquiring respect, influence, and authority. It is age which teaches experience, and experience is the only source of knowledge among a savage people.”

Understanding the Document

1. What generalizations are made about Native American government? In what ways might such generalizations be detrimental to U.S.-Indian relations?
2. According to this excerpt what is the basis of the chief's authority?
3. How is the power of the chief described?
4. Why is liberty the "prevailing passion" of Native Americans?
5. Why is age alone seen as sufficient for acquiring respect, influence and authority in Native American societies?
6. If "... experience is the only source of knowledge among a savage people," what has experience taught many Native American tribes about Euro-Americans?
7. How could Euro-American perceptions of Native American governments influence political relationships between the two cultures?

Activity

Activity I: The paragraph describing Native American government discusses at some length the relationship between age and leadership in tribal societies. To what extent is age a factor in selecting leaders in our society today? Support your answer with at least three examples. To what extent should it be a factor in selecting leaders? Does American society today attribute general characteristics to certain age groups?

Document 4

The Five States of Society

The following excerpts, taken from William Channing Woodbridge's *Rudiments of Geography* published in 1822, delineate the accepted definitions of the five states of society in the world, from the perspective of the United States in the early nineteenth century. Other excerpts include some related comments about government and religion. The last excerpt from Woodbridge's volume is a map.

Men are found in five different states of society; the Savage, Barbarous, Half-Civilized, Civilized, and Enlightened.

1st. The Savage state is that which men gain their support chiefly by *hunting, fishing or robbery*, dress in skins, and generally live in the open air, or in miserable huts. They have little knowledge of agriculture or the mechanic arts, no division of lands or system of laws, and they seldom collect in towns or villages.

2nd The Barbarous state is that in which nations subsist by agriculture, or the pasturage of cattle and sheep, with some knowledge of the mechanic arts. They collect in villages and have some regular forms of government and religion, but *no written language or books*.

Savages and Barbarians are usually cruel and revengeful, and oblige their women to labor like slaves.

3rd The Half-Civilized state is like that of the Chinese, and other nations in the south of Asia, who understand agriculture and many of the arts as well, and have *some books and learning*, with established laws and religion. Still *they treat their women as slaves*, usually keeping them in confinement, and have many other customs like those of barbarous nations.

4th The Civilized state which is found in Poland and South America. Civilized nations are those in which the sciences and arts are well understood, especially the art of printing, and *females are treated as companions*. Many of their customs are still barbarous, and most of the people remain in the grossest ignorance.

5th Enlightened nations are those in which knowledge is more general, and the sciences and arts are found in the greatest perfection, as in most of the nations of Europe.

(pp. 48–9)

GOVERNMENT

The first kind of government in the world was the *Patriarchal*, in which every father, or *patriarch*, governed his own family and servants. Some patriarchs became governors of many kindred families, or a tribe, and were called *chiefs*. The government of savage and barbarous nations is usually that of patriarchs, or chiefs. (p. 50)

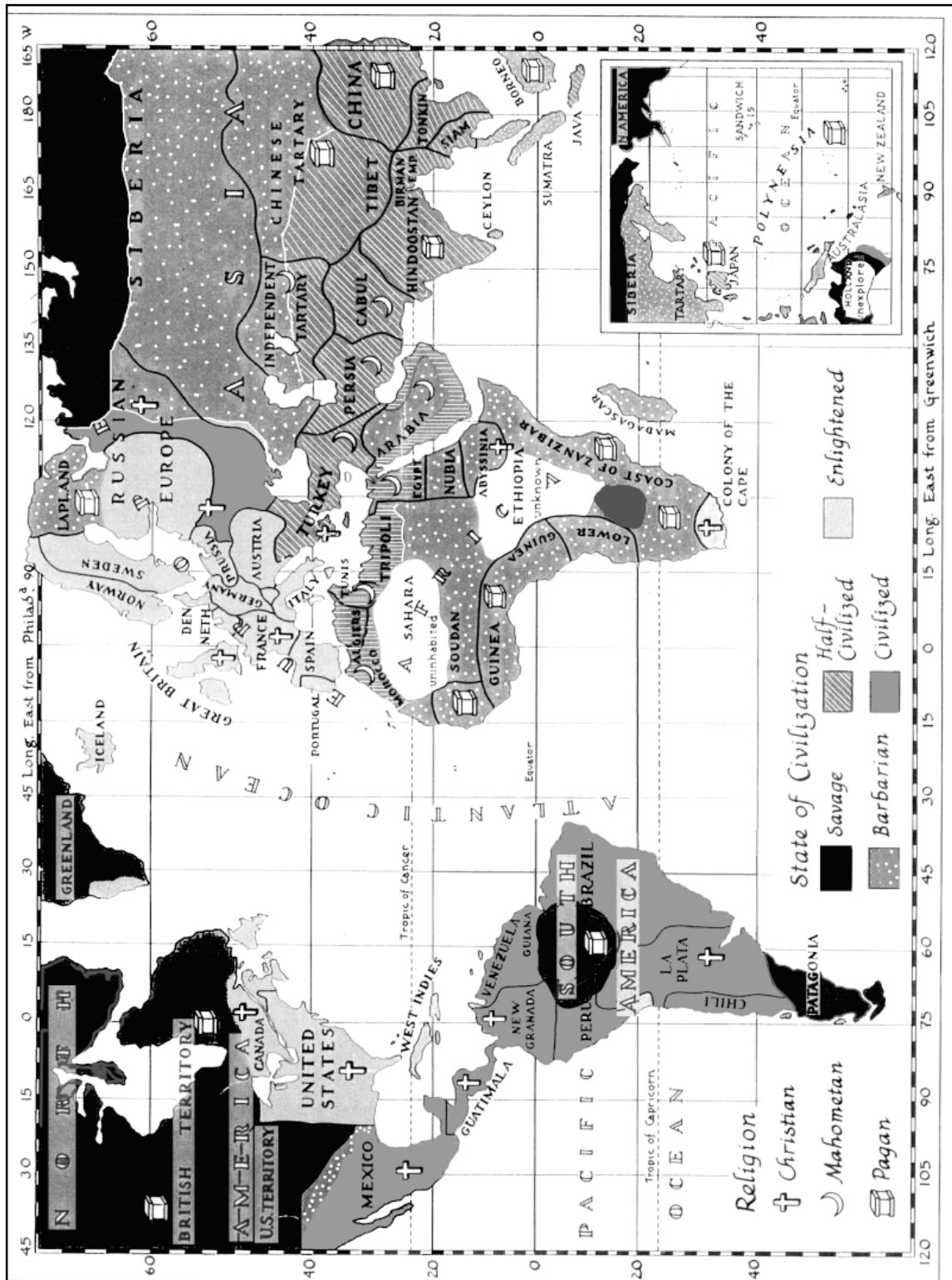
RELIGION

It is supposed that there are more than 700 millions of people on the earth, of whom 400 millions are Pagans, 200 millions Christians, 90 or 100 millions Mahometans, and 8 or 10 million Jews. The savage, barbarous and half-civilized nations of the world are either Pagans or Mahometans; except the Abyssinians, who profess to be Christians; but their religion is very corrupt. (p.52)

Understanding the Documents

1. What criteria are used to distinguish one stage of civilization from another?
2. To what extent are these criteria Eurocentric?
3. To what extent are the comments about religion and government Eurocentric?
4. What parallels can be drawn between religion, government and state of civilization?
5. What does the map suggest about the influence of certain religions on the level of civilization? Which religion is the most advanced? Least advanced?
6. What parts of the world contain the highest level of civilization? The lowest?
7. In what part of the world do the highest and lowest forms of civilization share a common boundary?
8. In the United States, what people (culture) occupied the area west of the Mississippi River? What is their state of civilization? What is their religion?
9. How could the ideas presented in the text and map justify Euro-American attitudes and government Indian policy?

Civilization Map of the Inhabited World



Source: adapted from William Channing Woodbridge, *Rudiments of Geography*, 1822