

The American People

Union of Saints

How Americans Came to Be

The United States is home to a unique people whose identity developed over centuries through history, geography, shared civic principles, and the contributions of many cultures. While many early American colonists were of British ancestry, the American people gradually became a distinct nation with their own institutions, customs, and constitutional system. Understanding this history helps explain both the character and the cultural richness of the American experience.

The First Peoples of America

Long before European exploration, North America was home to hundreds of Indigenous nations. These societies developed complex governments, trade networks, agricultural systems, spiritual traditions, and languages over thousands of years. Their histories form the earliest chapters of the American story and continue to be an important part of the nation's heritage.

Among these nations were the Wabanaki, Haudenosaunee, Wampanoag, Cherokee, Navajo (Diné), Lakota, Pueblo peoples, and many others. Each nation possessed its own culture, traditions, and relationship with the land. Collectively, they contributed to the rich cultural foundation of North America.

European Settlement

Beginning in the late fifteenth century, Europeans established settlements throughout North America. Colonists arrived from England, Scotland, Ireland, France, Spain, the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden, Portugal, and many other regions. Each group brought its own language, customs, religious traditions, legal practices, and agricultural knowledge.

These communities often adapted to their new surroundings while maintaining elements of their cultural heritage. Over time, interactions among Indigenous peoples, European settlers, and later arrivals formed the development of American society. Regional identities also evolved as different colonies developed their own customs and systems of government.

The British Colonies

By the eighteenth century, Great Britain governed thirteen colonies along the Atlantic coast. Although the colonists were British subjects, their daily lives increasingly differed from those of people living in Britain. Distance, local government, economic conditions, religion, and frontier life all contributed to the growth of a distinct identity.

Many colonists gradually came to think of themselves not only as English, Scottish, Welsh, or Irish, but also as Americans. Shared experiences in the colonies fostered a growing sense of unity despite differences in ancestry and religion. This emerging identity laid the foundation for a new nation.

The American Revolution

The American Revolution, fought between 1775 and 1783, transformed the colonies into an independent nation. In 1776, the Declaration of Independence announced the colonies' decision to separate from Great Britain and establish self government. Following the war, the Treaty of Paris formally recognized the independence of the United States.

The Revolution marked more than political independence. It also represented the emergence of an American civic identity based upon constitutional government, representative institutions, individual liberty, and the rule of law. Americans were no longer simply British colonists living overseas but citizens of a new republic.

The Growth of the American People

The American people did not develop from a single ancestry or ethnic group. Instead, the nation grew through the contributions of Indigenous peoples, European settlers, Africans and their descendants, and later immigrants from every inhabited continent. Each generation added new ideas, traditions, and experiences to the American story.

As families established roots across the country, many blended their ancestral traditions with a shared American identity. Citizens often maintained pride in their cultural heritage while participating in the civic life of the United States. This combination of many backgrounds and shared constitutional principles remains one of the defining characteristics of the nation.

Americans and the British

Although Americans and the British share historical connections, they are distinct peoples with separate national identities. The British are citizens of the United Kingdom, while Americans are citizens of the United States. Each nation has developed its own government, legal traditions, political institutions, culture, and national history.

Many Americans trace some portion of their ancestry to the British Isles, but American identity extends far beyond any single ancestral origin. It reflects the combined influence of Indigenous nations, European settlement, African heritage, and generations of immigration. The result is a nation that has both unique and shared histories.

What It Means to Be an American

The term **American** may be understood in both a historical and a legal sense. Historically, the American people developed over centuries through the experiences of the continent's

Indigenous peoples, early colonial communities, and the generations of families who established roots in North America. Legally, an American is generally understood to be a citizen of the United States.

American citizenship describes a person's legal relationship with the United States and the rights and responsibilities that accompany it. American ancestry or heritage, by contrast, refers to a person's historical, familial, cultural, or ethnic origins. Although these concepts often overlap, they are not identical and describe different aspects of identity.

Many Americans also identify with their ancestral heritage, such as Cherokee, Acadian American, Irish American, Italian American, Mexican American, or countless others. These identities reflect the historical origins of individuals and families while existing alongside a shared American identity. Together, they illustrate how the nation's history has been formed by both distinct ancestral traditions and a common constitutional and civic framework.

Conclusion

The American people evolved through centuries of historical development rather than from a single event or a single ancestry. Indigenous nations laid the earliest foundations of life on the continent, while later generations of settlers and immigrants contributed additional traditions, knowledge, and institutions. The American Revolution transformed these communities into citizens of an independent republic. The history of the United States is a tapestry woven through generations of American heritage, reflecting both distinct ancestral traditions and a shared national story.