

Walter Williams essay answering a question on early Indigenous American history, at quora.com
[What are some examples of history done wrong? About poor coverage in history textbooks](#)



What are some examples of history done wrong?

Jonathan Hall makes a really good point about the absurdly wrong way that the history of Indigenous Americans before the European invasions is taught, and especially the inaccurate maps that have been used in history textbooks. And his inclusions of what similar types of distortions would look like if included in histories of Europe is priceless. However, even including maps like he suggested with “centers of civilizations” is problematic. What about the people living in areas that are not in a “center.”? California peoples offer a perfect example. They might not be included in one of the “civilizations” or even “centers” before 1500, but the peoples indigenous to California (both Alta and Baja) had the largest population of any area north of central Mexico.

Rather than “centers,” in over three decades of teaching North American history, at five universities, I found the “culture area” map to be the most useful for teaching American history before the coming of Europeans. Rather than a central political unit, the concept popularized by anthropologists, is of areas where people followed a generally-similar way of life.

Most historians include only a day or so discussing the thousands of years of North American history before the arrival of Europeans after 1492 CE, but I devoted one-fourth of the semester to those years. [following by other fourths: 1500–1800, 1800–1940, 1940–present]

I always began my course giving examples of origin stories from several different indigenous peoples. Then I went into what archaeologists have found in the origins of cultures of ancient Northeastern Asia, and the expansion across the then-existing land bridge between today's Siberia and Alaska, and from there southward migrations along the Pacific coastline all the way to Chile by at least 12,000 years ago.

Then, from that beginning, I taught about what kind of life those ancient “Paleo-Indians” lived as they gradually expanded across the continent. After that, I divided my lectures into ten culture areas. On the attached map these culture areas are numbered as follows. Of course, the way people lived actually varied quite a bit, even within a particular area, and especially along the boundaries. But with that caveat, in my teaching I found that this kind of map helped students conceptualize the realities much better than any of the “centers of civilization” maps.

1. SUBARCTIC

The big-game hunters of interior Alaska and most of Canada are the most direct descendants in terms of a way of life.

2. ARCTIC

The hunters of coastal animals and food sources from the ocean of the Aleut, Yupik, Inuit etc. who arrived more recently from Northeast Asia, and share many cultural and physical features of Native Siberians.

3. NORTHWEST COAST

These peoples developed settled communities and a rich material culture. They later became wealthy as part of the global fur trade, due to trading animal skins from the Subarctic hunters of the interior and from cutting large redwood trees to sell to foreign ships coming from Russia and Britain.

4. PLATEAU

This area was mainly based on hunting animals for the fur trade, but also taking advantage of greater variety of plant foods in the warmer climate.

5. BASIN

Similar in many ways to the Plateau lifestyle of small-scale foraging bands, but focused on the wild plants and animals of the warmer desert environments.

6. CALIFORNIA

The world's best example of a large population of people who lived without the trappings of governments and political organization. They did this by living in kin-based small-scale foraging bands, moving from one eco-zone to another at different times of the year to take advantage of different food sources. Because of the richly varied California climate, the diverse environments could support a large number of people.

7. MESOAMERICA

After discussing the above kin-based small-scale levels of social organization, I switched to the large-scale agricultural cultures of central and southern Mexico and Central America, beginning with the Olmec and through the classic era nations and the Mayan city-states to end with the conquest model of the Aztec Empire. By organizing the course in this order, students got an understanding of the extreme diversity of cultures that existed, and changed through time, long before the arrival of the European invaders.

8. SOUTHWEST

Moving north, showing the spread of Mesoamerican agriculture and cultural styles into today's northern Mexico and the US Southwestern states. These agricultural peoples lived in urban centers, settled villages, and small settlements. Later arrivals of Athapascan nomadic hunters from the north (ancestors of today's Daneh and Apache peoples) about 1100 CE transformed both cultures.

9. EASTERN WOODLANDS

This area of Eastern North America had a mixed culture of hunting, fishing, gathering wild plants, and their own invention of farming, was later impacted by the spread of largescale agriculture from Mesoamerica. They had large cities like Cahokia, with complex trading from the Gulf of Mexico to the Great Lakes area. When the Spanish, French, and English invaders arrived, the Eastern peoples adapted to trading in furs to adopt many European manufactured goods. But later expansion of European settlements, and many conflicts, led Eastern peoples to resist, accommodate, or flee the East by moving to Canada, Florida, or to the west.

10. PLAINS

Before 1500 there was not much settlement on the high plains, except where Eastern Woodlands peoples brought their farming way of life to river valleys. This area was transformed by the spread of horses from Spanish Mexico to the Pueblo peoples of the Southwest, and from them to the small-scale foraging bands along the eastern edge of the Rocky Mountains, like the Comanche, Kiowa, and Crow tribes. As they learned to be skillful horseback riders, they were able to move out onto the high plains to hunt the vast herds of buffalo (American bison). At the same time, Eastern Woodlands peoples like the Dakota were fleeing westward. They brought guns and other European manufactured goods they had traded in the fur trade with the French and English. They then traded these guns to the Cheyenne, and from them learned how to ride horses. With guns they could kill more buffalo and scare away other buffalo hunters. This led to the development of a new culture of buffalo hunting that was a crucial arm of the international

fur trade. But the prosperity brought by the fur trade was undercut by the expansion of English settlement across the western United States and Canada. English farmers took over most of their lands, and impoverished many of the inheritors of the Eastern Woodlands and Plains cultures.

If approached in this order, which I found to be the most effective in teaching, students could understand both the extreme cultural diversity of North America, as well as the major historical trends, from the origins of the large Mesoamerican agricultural cultures, and its spread northward into the US Southwest and the US Eastern Woodlands. Students can see that North America experienced cultural change just like other areas of the world, and it is a Eurocentric fallacy to think that “history” only begins with the coming of the Europeans.

It is a pity that textbooks in history classes still do not seem able to cover the centuries before 1500 in a way that will teach students about the real history of the Americas. This is a perfect example of history done wrong.