Many students learn the phrase, “In 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue.” But Columbus was not the first foreign explorer to land in the Americas. Neither he nor those that came before him discovered America—because Indigenous Peoples have populated the Western Hemisphere for tens of thousands of years. European contact resulted in devastating loss of life, disruption of tradition, and enormous loss of lands for Indigenous Peoples in the Americas. It is estimated that in the 130 years following first contact, Native America lost 95 percent of its population.

Indigenous Peoples of the Western Hemisphere immediately experienced enslavement and theft of resources by the explorers turned settlers. Colonies created by the Portuguese, Spanish, French, Dutch, and English grew throughout the Americas and increasingly encroached upon Native lives and lands. Warfare, enslavement, and forced relocation disrupted and altered the lives of Indigenous Peoples in the Americas. Celebrating Columbus and other explorers like him dismisses the devastating losses experienced by Indigenous Peoples of the Western Hemisphere in the past and the ongoing effects of colonialism today.

Indigenous Peoples are still here. Contemporary Native Americans have led numerous movements to advocate for their own rights. Native people continue to fight to maintain the integrity and viability of Indigenous societies. American Indian history is one of cultural persistence, creative adaptation, renewal, and resilience. Native Peoples, students, and allies are responsible for official celebrations of Indigenous Peoples’ Day in such states as Maine, Oregon, Louisiana, New Mexico, Iowa, and Washington, DC. Indigenous Peoples’ Day is celebrated on the second Monday of October and recognizes the resilience and diversity of Indigenous Peoples in the United States.

We promote including Indigenous perspectives, like those of the Taíno Peoples, to provide a more complete narrative when teaching about Columbus. We encourage students to advocate for Indigenous Peoples’ Day as a replacement for Columbus Day in their school, city, state, and beyond.

Try these culturally sensitive activities and resources:

- Check out “Indivisible: African–Native American Lives in the Americas” to learn about the connections between Columbus, loss of Native life, and the slave trade.
- Be sure to include contemporary examples in your lessons! Taíno Peoples continue to live in Puerto Rico and other parts of the U.S. Read the article “Taíno Survival: Back into History” in American Indian Magazine.
- Read the article “From the Shadows of History: Taíno at the Vatican” in American Indian Magazine.
- Read about the continuance of Taíno life in the article “This Culture, Once Believed Extinct, Is Flourishing” in Smithsonian Magazine.
- Explore NMAI's Mesoamerican and Caribbean collections in the Infinity of Nations website.