

FACING EAST FROM INDIAN COUNTRY

A Native History of Early America

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PROLOGUE: EARLY AMERICA AS INDIAN COUNTRY

NOT LONG AGO, I visited St. Louis. As I first entered my hotel room, its window framed an unremarkable nighttime urban vista. Nineteen stories below, two venerable bridges spanned the Mississippi. On the right, on the opposite bank, a modern-day grain elevator owned by an agribusiness conglomerate dominated a dreary postindustrial skyline. In the center, demanding all attention, were the gaudily flashing lights of two riverboat casinos. Yet as I walked closer to the window to draw the curtains against the casinos' glare, Eero Saarinen's Gateway Arch suddenly entered the picture from the right. To take in its vastness, I had to shift my line of vision in a way that made the bright lights and bridges disappear. From a perch about one-third as high as the arch, I gazed through it facing east, toward the country that early nineteenth-century folks who lit out for the territories thought they had left behind.

Saarinen intended his monument to be viewed from the opposite direction, facing west, from the Illinois side of the river. But unless they can walk on water, all who actually visit must approach it the way I looked through it, facing east. They find that the arch is rooted in an urban national park, the Thomas Jefferson National Expansion Memorial. If they descend into the earth beneath its base to board a tram to the top, they discover a Museum of Westward Expansion that movingly portrays the impact of Euro-American conquest on Native Americans. Aboveground, though, the museum is invisible. Nothing can be seen except the gleaming arch itself and, behind it, green terraces that rise from the riverbank to the dome of the old St. Louis Courthouse, which, viewed from Illinois, the arch was designed to frame. It is not just any courthouse. There, in

1847 and again in 1850, an enslaved African-American couple named Dred and Henrietta Scott sued for their freedom. Although the second trial's jury of local Whites decided in their favor, every higher level of a judicial system devoted to the protection of American liberties refused to agree. In 1858, speaking for a Supreme Court more deeply divided on why than on whether freedom must be denied, Chief Justice Roger Brooke Taney declared that people like the Scotts were "regarded as beings of an inferior order" who "had no rights the white man was bound to respect."¹

Haunting courtroom; subterranean museum; triumphal arch dominating both. Perhaps no other plot of ground in the United States more eloquently symbolizes how freedom and unfreedom, expansion and dispossession, entwined to create the nation's story than does this park named for a president whose own life so profoundly wove together the same conflicting strands. Part of that national story is the persistent idea that the west was a land of new beginnings. Did not Jefferson famously declare "that the earth belongs in usufruct to the living; that the dead have neither powers nor rights over it"?² Yet those who poured through St. Louis in the early 1800s could not so easily abandon their past, and neither could Jefferson's nation. Trends that played themselves out west of the Mississippi grew from three hundred years' experience in the east. Between the early sixteenth century and the early nineteenth, ugly patterns of racial antagonism took root, but the course of their growth was not nearly so straightforward as might be suggested by the old saying about Pilgrims who fell first on their knees and next on the aborigines. Whites and Indians had to *learn* to hate each other—had even to learn that there were such clear-cut "racial" categories as "White" and "Indian"—before "westward expansion" across a steadily advancing "frontier" could become the trajectory for a nation that was itself a belated result of the same learning process. Perhaps the strangest lesson of all was that in the new nation Whites were the ones entitled to be called "Americans." Indians bizarrely became something else.

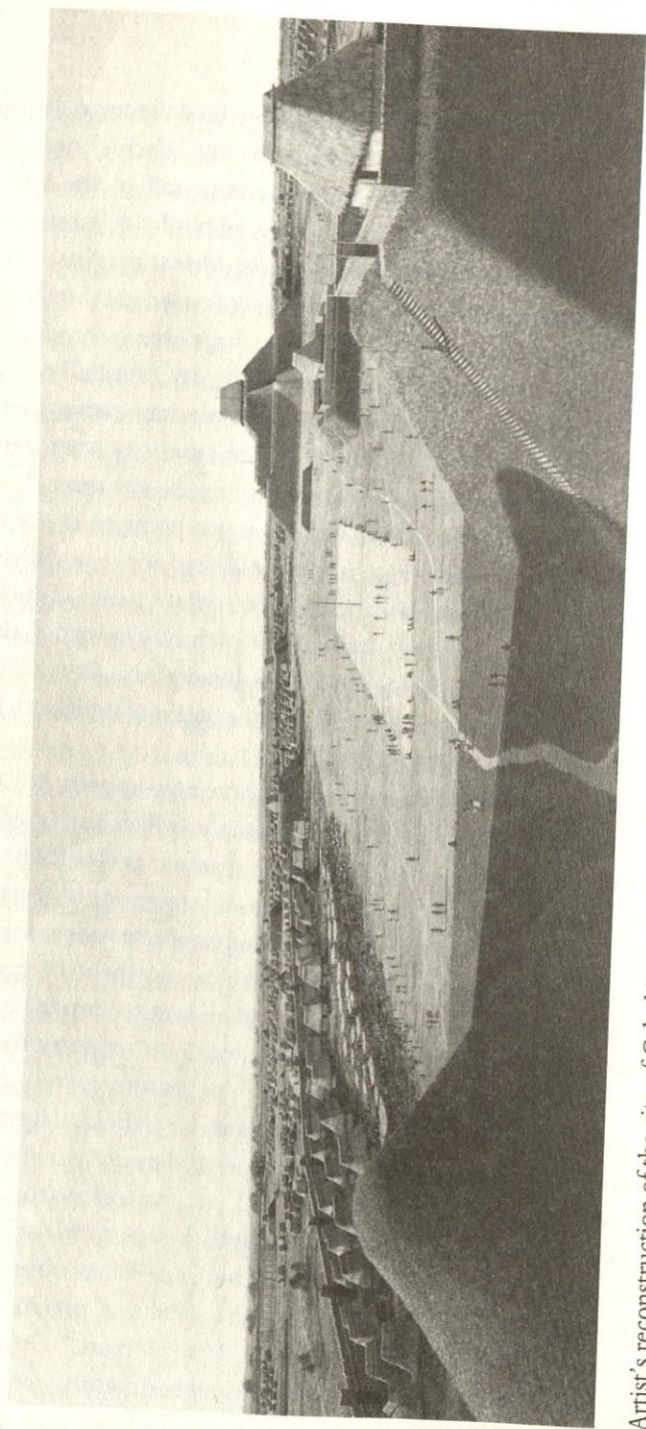


It was not always so. Throughout the period before the United States declared its independence, the vast majority of eastern North America was neither English nor French nor Spanish territory. It was,

clearly, Indian country, and Europeans most often used the term *American* to describe descendants of the original inhabitants. Had I been in St. Louis a thousand years ago, I would have found myself in the cultural heartland of that eastern Indian country. I would not have been able to rise nineteen stories in the air to look across the Mississippi, but I could have climbed to a considerable height on a since-leveled earthwork that was the centerpiece of a ceremonial site or perhaps even a major town. Had my eyesight been particularly sharp and the day especially clear, I might have just been able to glimpse the far more impressive earthen mounds of what was probably the largest American city that existed north of Mexico before the late eighteenth century, the site near East St. Louis known today as Cahokia. In its heyday it was home to more than twenty thousand people. Towering a hundred feet above a fifty-acre artificial plaza, its main temple mound covered sixteen acres at its base and contained twenty-two million cubic feet of hand-deposited earth. Surrounding the temple and plaza, at least a hundred smaller mounds supported ceremonial structures or covered the accumulated burials of generations of the city's elite residents.³

Cahokia and such other major centers as those now known as Coosa and Etowah in Georgia, Moundville in Alabama, and Natchez in Mississippi were home to highly stratified societies, organized as chiefdoms and characterized by a sharp divide between elites and commoners, a specialized artisanry, widespread trading networks, and elaborate mortuary rituals, to which the burial mounds attest. Surrounding networks of agricultural hamlets provided food to support the urban centers, where priests and chiefs who probably called themselves "Great Suns" apparently conducted rituals centered on the solar cycle and the seasons to ensure the success of crops and the power of the community. At Cahokia, for example, a massive woodhenge, or circle of posts, served as an astronomical observatory, and the main plaza was oriented on a perfect north-south line to trace celestial movements. Chiefs displayed their power by dispensing to their followers and to visitors from far and wide ritual objects that symbolized the sun, the cardinal directions, and agricultural productivity.⁴

These societies, which scholars now call "Mississippian," flourished during the global climatic warming trend from approximately 900 to 1350 known as "the Medieval Optimum." This increase of a few degrees in average annual temperature was the same one that led Norse adventurers



Artist's reconstruction of the city of Cahokia, c. 1100 A.D.

Painting by Lloyd K. Townsend. Courtesy of Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site, Collinsville, Illinois.

to colonize a once-and-future frozen waste and accurately call it Greenland, while briefly finding the Newfoundland coast a welcoming locale. Throughout eastern North America, well beyond the Mississippian heartland, the warm period fostered a burst of agricultural creativity, focused on improved varieties of two old crops, squash and maize, and one new one, beans. As the agricultural revolution gradually spread, for the first time these "Three Sisters," rather than hunting and gathering, became the principal food source for Native people throughout the east, with the exception of far northern regions where the growing season was too short. In most societies, farming came to be women's work, and female kin groups controlled the fields, the food they produced, and the houses in which those who ate it lived. Men were responsible for the animal-protein side of the diet and, as a result, spent much of their time away from the female-dominated world of the village. Seasonal hunting, fishing, and fowling camps were where most male labor took place. The "forest," Native people taught, belonged to men; the "clearing," to women.⁵

In the middle of what Europeans reckoned as the fourteenth century, the warm period came to an end, replaced by a "Little Ice Age" that would continue into the 1800s. By 1492 many of the Mississippian cities were in decline, victims of decreased agricultural productivity resulting from climatic change, of the inherent instability of chiefdoms as long-term political systems, and perhaps of a loss of faith in religious leaders whose authority rested on their pretensions to control the forces that allowed crops to flourish. As populations dispersed and polities reinvented themselves, the southeastern heartland came to be dominated by speakers of Muskogean languages, whose descendants would come to be known in the eighteenth century as Creeks, Choctaws, and Chickasaws. Eastward and northward from the Muskogean area were speakers of languages of three other major linguistic stocks, all of them inhabiting a landscape of agricultural villages and dispersed fishing and hunting territories but none of them approaching the Mississippian level of population density, social stratification, or political centralization. Siouan speakers dominated the southern Piedmont. Iroquoian speakers, divided for many centuries between a southern group consisting of ancestors of the Cherokees and Tuscaroras in present-day Georgia, Tennessee, and North Carolina and a northern group including the Iroquois, Hurons, Susque-

hannocks, and others encircling Lakes Erie and Ontario, occupied most of the east's midsection. Surrounding them in a vast inverted U from the Ohio River through most of present-day Canada and down the coast to the Chesapeake were speakers of Algonquian languages. Each of these great linguistic groupings had even less in common than did the Germanic and Romance families of Europe, and each contained several related but mutually unintelligible languages further diversified into countless local dialects. Nearly everywhere, villages composed of 500 to 2,000 people were the norm; these might be linked in loose regional confederacies or short-lived more tightly centralized polities, but for the most part each community was independent of the others.⁶

Indian country was decentralized and diverse, but not disconnected. Routes of trade and communication, most of them millennia old and following the great river systems, crisscrossed the continent. The goods that moved along them were, for the most part, few and rare—rarer and perhaps more valuable than the gold and spices that western Europeans of the same era traveled the world to acquire. Some closely neighboring peoples might exchange crucial resources—corn, for instance, for meat or fish—and some at slightly greater distance may have controlled access to particularly valuable quarries that provided the raw material for stone tools or weapons. But long-distance exchange centered on exotic substances such as marine shells and beads made from them, chunks of rare minerals such as mica, and pieces of copper cold-worked into various forms. The presence of such items at archaeological sites deep in the continental interior—of shell beads from the mid-Atlantic and Gulf coasts, of copper from the Great Lakes region, of quartz from the Rocky Mountains—attests to the existence of such trade. The fact that exotic goods are most often found in cemeteries and burial mounds suggests that their primary value was believed to be spiritual rather than utilitarian, or rather that their utility rested on concerns deeper than mere food, drink, and shelter.⁷

Later Indian stories that describe such items as gifts from “underwater grandfathers” or spirit beings further suggest both their rarity and their great significance to those who acquired them. That they were described as gifts rather than as commodities also suggests something about how such goods moved along the ancient communication routes; they proba-

bly passed from hand to hand in small-scale reciprocal exchanges, rather than through the marketplace behavior that Europeans would recognize as trade. Nonetheless, reciprocity did not necessarily imply equality, and such exchanges often confirmed differential access to power, spiritual as well as political. Underwater grandfathers had more power than those on whom they bestowed their gifts, and so did the intermediary figures who in turn gave such gifts to others. Leaders enhanced, if they did not acquire, their status by access to tribute and control of exotic commodities. They displayed their lofty status by wearing rare, spiritually charged goods such as copper or shell on their bodies and by claiming titles such as *mamanatowick* (paramount chief), which shares Algonquian linguistic roots with *manitou* (spiritual power).⁸

Exact statistics will never be known, but in 1492 the diverse but interconnected area east of the Mississippi may have been home to more than 2 million Native people.⁹ In subsequent decades those numbers shrank rapidly as European colonists unwittingly brought with them epidemic diseases to which Indians had no immunity. Still, as late as 1700, the Euro-American population barely exceeded 250,000, and the colonists were confined almost exclusively to coastal and riverine enclaves, most very near the Atlantic seaboard. By 1750 the population balance had shifted decisively, with Europeans and their enslaved African workforce exploding to nearly 1.25 million and the Native population probably shrinking to less than 250,000. Nonetheless, the vast area between the Appalachians and the scattered French outposts on the Mississippi remained almost entirely in Indian hands. It would take until the eve of U.S. independence for the number of Euro- and African Americans to exceed 2 million and return the population of the east to the level it probably sustained in 1492.¹⁰ And it would take until nearly 1820 for the United States to gain hegemony between the mountains and the Mississippi. Only then could the kind of relentless westward expansion that the St. Louis arch symbolizes become possible.



The emergence of an aggressively expansionist Euro-American United States from what used to be the Indian country of eastern North

America is a problem to be explained, not an inevitable process to be traced from the first planting of English seeds on Atlantic shores to their flowering in the trans-Mississippi west. This book argues that the nature of that problem can fruitfully be explored through something like the visual reorientation I experienced when I faced east from my St. Louis hotel room. Like that of tourists contemplating Saarinen's Arch from the Illinois shore, our usual perspective on early American history faces west: the plot lines flow from Europe across the Atlantic and thence to the Mississippi. Words like "invasion" and "conquest" may now trip more easily from our tongues than quaint phrases like "the transit of civilization," yet the "master narrative" of early America remains essentially European-focused. While American Indians might make "contributions" to the dominant culture—corn, moccasins, snowshoes, or even, some wishfully tell us, constitutional democracy—Native people remain bit players in the great drama of a nation's being born and spreading, for better or worse, westward across the continent.¹¹

Yet if we shift our perspective to try to view the past in a way that faces east from Indian country, history takes on a very different appearance. Native Americans appear in the foreground, and Europeans enter from distant shores. North America becomes the "old world" and Western Europe the "new," Cahokia becomes the center and Plymouth Rock the periphery, and themes rooted in Indian country rather than across the Atlantic begin to shape the larger story. The continent becomes a place where diverse peoples had long struggled against and sometimes worked with one another, where societies and political systems had long risen and fallen, and where these ancient trends continued right through the period of colonization. The process by which one particular group composed of newcomers from Europe and their descendants—themselves a diverse and contentious lot—came to dominate the others becomes a much more complicated, much more interesting, much more revealing, if no less tragic, tale.

But visualizing such a story in any detail is more complicated than looking through a different portion of a hotel window. In reexamining Plymouth Colony, for example, we might readily check the urge to look westward across the plow of a Pilgrim patriarch and instead try to peer eastward over the shoulder of a Wampanoag woman hoeing her corn.

Yet, as we try to imagine how that woman might have made sense of the newcomers, we come up against the hard realities that she left no direct record of her thoughts and that even her dialect of the Massachusetts Algonquian language has long since ceased to be spoken. In these and other ways, the paucity of historical sources and the enormous distances in time and culture that yawn between the twenty-first and seventeenth centuries make it impossible to see the world through her eyes. We can only try to look over her shoulder—to appreciate the conditions in which she lived, to reconstruct something of the way in which her people might have understood the world, to try to hear Native voices when they emerge from the surviving documents, to capture something of how the past might have looked if we could observe it from Indian country. And still our vision remains clouded.

So the chapters that follow are as much about how we might develop eastward-facing stories of the past as about the stories themselves. As they proceed chronologically from the era of the Native discovery of Europe through the period when the United States became the continent's aggressively dominant power, they do not attempt an exhaustive treatment of the three centuries of eastern North American history they survey. Nor do they maintain a single point of view, a uniform mode of narration, or a consistent kind of evidence. Instead, they explore different ways of facing east appropriate for understanding something—though certainly never everything—about particular periods. Their aim is less to uncover new information than to turn familiar tales inside out, to show how old documents might be read in fresh ways, to reorient our perspectives on the continent's past, to alternate between the general and the personal, and to outline stories of North America during the period of European colonization rather than of the European colonization of North America.

"Any written history involves the selection of a topic and an arbitrary delimitation of its borders," the great American historian Charles A. Beard long ago observed. "This selection and organization—a single act—will be controlled by the historian's frame of reference composed of things deemed necessary and of things deemed desirable."¹² At this point in our fractious nation's experience, it seems more than necessary and desirable to find frames of reference capable of embracing the common, if

often excruciating, origins of the continent's diverse peoples. A story line that follows only the exploits of the English-speaking few strips the past of much of its real drama, its explanatory power, and—increasingly in a century when people of European descent are again expected to become a minority in North America—its relevance for the present. Facing east on our past, seeing early America as Indian country, tracing histories truly native to the continent, we might find ways to focus more productively on our future. For better or worse, this native history belongs to us all.