

Differing Views of Land Ownership

The New World that was "discovered" and distributed by the English had been occupied for centuries by various Indian nations. In time, the Indians and the Europeans discovered that each had quite different ideas about land ownership—a cultural difference that had a profound effect on the history of the United States.

There were a great many Indian tribes in the Americas, and each understood itself to be a nation, with a different language and culture than all others. "Indian" is nothing more than a vague catch-all name (first used by Columbus, who mistakenly thought he had landed in India). Native Americans had their own names, their nations, and each name usually translated as, simply, "The People." However, although Indian cultures were quite varied, most shared a similar understanding of the meaning and the stewardship of land.

Long before the first European settlers came to America, Indians had developed an advanced economy. Indian tribes traded extensively with each other, and many had some form of money. None, however, had any institution like the "land title" of the Europeans. They had no tradition of "alienating", or relinquishing all rights, to land. Many thought that this showed Indian social development to be more primitive than that of the Europeans. But the Native Americans had developed sophisticated legal systems that incorporated treaties, elaborated rights and specified ways to resolve arguments.

A great many treasures of art and oral literature have been passed down from prehistory. Indian cultures and religions were enmeshed with nature, for they felt themselves entwined with the universe. Mother Earth and Father Sky were more than mere expressions; they represented the Indians' very being. Land, a part of the universe, belonged to all, particularly the tribe. Individual land ownership did not exist, since all were entitled to the fruits of nature. Users' rights were protected and specified in various traditions, but there was no such things as land "ownership". Generally, individuals could clear as much land as needed for farming; this land would remain in a family's possession as long as they continued to use it. Once it was abandoned, anyone else could cultivate it.

Indians readily understood and entered into treaties concerning rights to land use, but the idea of land sales was alien to them—and it is likely that, because of difficulties in translation of each others' languages, neither the natives nor the settlers understood this vital difference, at first.

When President Franklin Pierce offered to buy the lands of Chief Seattle's tribe, his response illustrated how hateful the idea of giving up land was to his people:

The great -- and good, I believe -- White Chief sends us word that he wants to buy land. But he will reserve us enough that we can live comfortably. This seems generous, since the red man no longer has rights he need respect...

So your offer seems fair, and I think my people will accept it and go to the reservation you offer them. We will live apart, and in peace.... It matters little where we pass the rest of our days. They are not many. The Indians' night will be dark. No bright star shines on his horizons. The wind is sad. Fate hunts the red man down. Wherever he goes, he will hear the approaching steps of his destroyer, and prepare to die, like the wounded doe who hears the step of the hunter....

We will consider your offer. When we have decided, we will let you know. Should we accept, I here and now make this condition: we will never be denied to visit, at any time, the graves of our fathers and our friends.

Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every hillside, every valley, every clearing and wood, is holy in the memory and experience of my people. Even those unspeaking stones along the shore are loud with events and memories in the life of my people. The ground beneath your feet responds more lovingly to our steps than yours, because it is the ashes of our grandfathers. Our bare feet know the kindred touch. The earth is rich with the lives of our kin.

In his speech, Seattle accepts the inevitability of the plans of "the Great White Chief". But, nevertheless, he asserts his people's moral right to walk on the land whenever they wish, forever. This, of course, is not compatible with the Europeans' concept of "private property" in land.

Inevitably, as settlements grew and the desire for further expansion increased, the cultures of these Native Americans and of Europeans came into conflict. Treaty after treaty relocated the Indians, moving them farther west and robbing them of their habitat. Corrupt and devious means were used to compel them to forfeit their lands. In many cases, the Indians had little idea of what the settlers meant in denying them access to their lands. Lacking the technology and weapons of the Europeans, the Indians were eventually relocated and forced to subsist in a total area of only 200,000 square miles, in a continent of over six million square miles which they had once wholly occupied.

Extended Thinking Questions

1. What was the Native American perspective of nature and land?
2. How did the Native American view of land ownership differ from the European perspective?
3. What does Chief Seattle mean when he insists on the condition that: "we will never be denied to visit, at any time, the graves of our fathers and our friends"?
4. How did the European perspective of land ownership negatively affect the Native Americans?