How Many People Were Here Before Columbus?

*One of the few certainties: The Indian populations of North and South America suffered a catastrophic collapse after 1492*

By Lewis Lord

George Catlin, the 19th-century artist, revered the American Indians—“a numerous and noble race of HUMAN BEINGS,” he called them, “fast passing to extinction.” In the 1830s, he traveled among four dozen tribes to paint nearly 600 portraits and scenes of Indian life; most now hang in the Smithsonian. During his visits, his hosts extolled the blissful age before the settlers came, a time when tribes were much larger. “The Indians of North America,” Catlin would speculate in his diary, “were 16 millions in numbers, and sent that number of daily prayers to the Almighty.”

Few contemporaries agreed with Catlin’s lofty estimate of the Indian population before contact with the white man. “Twaddle about imaginary millions,” scoffed one Smithsonian expert, reflecting the prevailing view that Indians were too incompetent to have ever reached large numbers. Alexis de Tocqueville’s cheery assertion that America before Columbus was an “empty continent… awaiting its inhabitants” was endorsed by no less than the U.S. Census Bureau, which in 1894 warned against accepting Indian “legends” as facts. “Investigation shows,” the bureau said, “that the aboriginal population within the present United States at the beginning of the Columbian period could not have exceeded much over 500,000.”

A century later the question remains far from settled. But modern scholarship tends to side with the painter. Some experts believe that perhaps 10 million people lived above the Rio Grande in 1492—twice as many as may have inhabited the British Isles at that time. The population of the Western Hemisphere may have exceeded 15th-century Europe’s 70 million.

Driving the higher estimates is the relatively new view that most of America’s Indians were wiped out by smallpox, measles, and other Old World diseases that swept across the hemisphere far faster than the Europeans that brought them. “Population decay was catastrophic,” concluded historian William McNeill in his 1976 book, *Plagues and Peoples.*

But that still leaves unsolved the question of how many Indians inhabited the continent when the first Europeans arrived. No one, in fact, knows how many people lived *anywhere* in those days, except for perhaps a city or two in Europe. The first national censuses occurred centuries later: 1749 in Sweden, 1790 in the fledgling United States, 1801 in France and Britain; it was 1953 when China took a complete count.

George Catlin’s means of counting Indians—the guesstimate—was the only method in his day. It was the same method the Census Bureau used in 1894 when it haughtily dismissed his idea that millions of Indians once inhabited the country.

The expert whose figures would dominate scholarly thought for the first half of this century, Smithsonian ethnologist James Mooney, did his share of guessing, too. Mooney pored through historical documents for accounts of tribal populations made by soldiers, missionaries, and others. But he suspected that his sources routinely exaggerated—soldiers to paint their conquests as more heroic, missionaries to pad their tallies of souls saved. So he often took the lowest count he could find, and to be safe, reduced it. His ultimate tribe-by-tribe estimate, published in 1928, showed an Indian population of 1,150,000 north of the Rio Grande.

Mooney was estimating the population not in 1492 but in periods that followed initial contacts with white men—including encounters in the American West as late as the 19th century. The common assumption in his day was that the Indians the whites came upon were probably as numerous as the Indians of 1492. That’s what anthropologist Alfred Kroeber believed in 1934 when he produced an estimate of the entire hemisphere’s pre-Columbian population that dominated academic thought into the 1960s. Kroeber took Mooney’s tally, shrunk it a bit, and extrapolated the fig-
Article 38. How Many People Were Here Before Columbus?

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LOST PEOPLES a gallery of portraits ca. 1900 by photographer Edward Curtis
ures to the rest of North and South America. With a map and a device called a planimeter, he measured off various cultural areas and assigned each a population density. For the eastern United States, he averaged fewer than 1 person per square mile. For the many regions below the Rio Grande—the lands of the Incas and Aztecs and others that obviously had been much more populous—he assigned much higher densities. He multiplied the densities by the square miles in each region and concluded that 8.4 million people inhabited the Americas in 1492. They were neatly divided: 4.2 million in North America and 4.2 million in South America and the Caribbean.

Canoe count. No one since Kroeber has made an estimate so low. In the past 40 years, scholars have sifted through thousands of volumes—from 16th-century Spanish reports of baptisms, marriages, and tax collections in Mexico to 17th-century accounts of epidemics in New England. Where the data failed to provide direct answers, the experts devised ingenious ways to draw inferences from them. Explorers, for instance, rarely estimated total populations; they tended to report only the number of warriors. Scholars now multiply the warrior counts by a correction factor such as 5 to come up with a total that includes women, children, and old men. Multiples likewise are applied to baptisms, Indian buildings, even canoes and acres of beans and corn. Archaeological sites containing heaps of oyster shells have been used to estimate how many oysters were eaten—and thus how many Indians ate them.

By the 1960s, scholars were concluding that just one spot—central Mexico—once had three times as many Indians as Kroeber had estimated in the whole hemisphere.

The highest estimate ever, made in 1966, was supported by a provocative theory. Anthropologist Henry Dobyns argued that disease reduced the Indian population by 95 percent or more throughout the hemisphere—a “depopulation ratio” that, he said, has commonly...
occurred even in modern times when epidemics strike peoples with no immunity. Dobyns took Indian populations at their nadirs—their lowest levels—and multiplied the numbers by 20 or 25. In America above the Rio Grande, for instance, the Indian population hit bottom early in this century when census figures reported 490,000; by Dobyns’s calculation that means between 9.8 million and 12.2 million Indians once inhabited what’s now the United States and Canada. For the hemisphere, he estimated a 1492 population of 90 million to 112.5 million.

Critics suspect Dobyns assumed too much. Epidemics, they say, were probably not as frequent or lethal as he claimed. Dobyns, who retired without revising his count, agrees that his method is simplistic; he proposed it “for lack of something better,” he says, and localized studies, if thorough, can be more accurate. A colleague’s on-the-scene research in Peru, for instance, convinced Dobyns that his Inca empire estimate of 30 million to 37 million Indians was perhaps 20 million too high. But in the 31 years since his Current Anthropology article, Dobyns has measured other regional populations with tools that other scholars use—warrior counts, food availability, and the like—and “fairly consistently” found that his 1966 assumptions were too low. He now believes that Florida in 1492 had perhaps 700,000 Indians—several times what he concluded in 1966. His article estimated the Caribbean’s 1492 population at a half million; he now agrees with other scholars that it was 5 million or more.

How close will scholars ever come to the real numbers? A recent effort by geographer William Denevan to reconcile the many conflicting estimates, by using the best findings of various scholars, concludes that 54 million people inhabited the Americas in 1492, including 3.8 million above the Rio Grande. But how meaningful such numbers are is the question. With decades of careful research, historian Woodrow Borah once predicted, scholars eventually may produce an estimate with a margin of error of 30 to 50 percent. “If I had to pick the most unanswerable question in the world to get into heaven, that would be a good choice,” says David Henige, a historian at the University of Wisconsin—Madison and author of the forthcoming book Numbers From Nowhere. “It is absolutely impossible to answer. Yet people have written tens of thousands of pages on it.”

Even if the absolute total is forever unknowable, there are other numbers that tell a haunting tale. In the 1960s, a Berkeley geographer, Carl Sauer, cited evidence of a 1496 census that Columbus’s brother Bartholomew ordered for tax purposes on Hispaniola (now Haiti and the Dominican Republic). The Spanish counted 1.1 million Indians. Since that sum covered only Hispaniola’s Spanish-controlled half and excluded children, Sauer concluded that 3 million Indians once inhabited the island. But a generation after 1492, a Spanish resident reported Hispaniola’s Indian population had shrunken below 11,000.

The island’s collapse was only a preview. By 1650, records suggest that only 6 million Indians remained in all of North America, South America, and the Caribbean. Subtract 6 million from even a conservative estimate of the 1492 population—like Denevan’s consensus count of 54 million—and one dreadful conclusion is inescapable: The 150 years after Columbus’s arrival brought a toll on human life in this hemisphere comparable to all of the world’s losses in World War II.