

We learn about Columbus, but not the Taíno people he tried to erase

By Bill Bigelow, Zinn Education Project, adapted by Newsela staff on 10.23.18

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Image 1. This Eurocentric engraving by Theodore de Bry in 1592 formed part of his America Series and showed Christopher Columbus landing on the Caribbean island of Hispaniola in 1492. De Bry published 25 books based on firsthand observations by explorers but never visited the New World. In this image we can see how he shows Columbus in a position of power and control. His books became famous and greatly influenced the European perception of the New World, Africa and Asia.

I used to be a U.S. history teacher. In my classes, I would ask students about "that guy some people say discovered America." All my students knew the answer was Christopher Columbus.

"Right. So who did he supposedly discover?" I asked.

The best answer anyone could come up with was "Indians."

I brushed that answer away. "Yes, but be specific. What were their names?" I never had a student say, "The Taínos."

"What does this tell us?" I asked. How come none of us knows the name of the people who were here first?

This is a problem with many U.S. history classes. Huge groups of people have been erased from history. Their lives have been made invisible.

Columbus Was Cruel To Native People

For the Taíno people, their removal from history began almost immediately. It started when Columbus arrived in the Americas. He landed on the island of Hispaniola. Today, Haiti and the Dominican Republic share the island.



At first, Columbus and the Taíno people got along. Columbus wrote of their friendliness. He thought he could easily overpower them. In 1494, Columbus captured at least 24 Taínos. He sent them back to Spain to be slaves. The next year, Columbus launched huge slave raids. He and the other Spaniards captured 1,600 Taínos, including children.

The Taínos fought back. Their resistance began as early as Columbus' first trip back to Spain. Columbus left behind 39 Spaniards. They were greedy and unfair to the Taínos. In response, the Taínos killed all 39 Spaniards and burned their fort.

They Did Their Best To Resist

Later, Columbus returned to the Americas. He came with 17 ships and more than 1,200 men. Columbus demanded that the Taínos give him certain amounts of gold and cotton. Those who refused were punished.

In response, the Taínos attacked Spanish forts and killed Spanish soldiers. They hid food from the Spaniards. They continued to resist for almost a year.

History textbooks do not say much about this grim story. They have tried to find a happy ending instead.

Taíno People Celebrate Their Culture

But this story has no happy ending.

However, there is a hopeful one to be found in the strength of the Taíno people. The Taínos were not all killed off by Columbus and other Europeans. Members of the native group are still alive today. They are celebrating their Caribbean culture.

Sadly, their memory has been erased from our classrooms. How else can we explain students' ignorance of the name Taíno? We must work to remember the people who were here first. Their lives mattered 500 years ago. They still matter today.

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Quiz

- 1 What information will the reader find in the section "Columbus Was Cruel To Native People"?
- (A) what kind of culture the Taínos celebrate
 - (B) what Columbus did with the first Taínos he captured
 - (C) what Columbus demanded that the Taínos give him
 - (D) what kind of ending history textbooks write about the Taínos
- 2 If readers are looking for information about whether any Taínos survive today, which section should they read?
- (A) introduction [paragraphs 1-6]
 - (B) "Columbus Was Cruel To Native People"
 - (C) "They Did Their Best To Resist"
 - (D) "Taíno People Celebrate Their Culture"
- 3 The author has an opinion about the ways that U.S. history is taught in schools.
Which selection from the article shows this?
- (A) I used to be a U.S. history teacher. In my classes, I would ask students about "that guy some people say discovered America."
 - (B) I brushed that answer away. "Yes, but be specific. What were their names?"
 - (C) This is a problem with many U.S. history classes. Huge groups of people have been erased from history.
 - (D) However, there is a hopeful one to be found in the strength of the Taíno people.
- 4 The author thinks that the story about Columbus and the Taíno people he met when he arrived in the Americas has an unhappy ending.
Why does the author think this?
- (A) because Columbus treated the Taínos badly and killed many of them
 - (B) because the history textbooks say the ending is an unhappy one
 - (C) because most students do not care to learn about the story of the Taínos
 - (D) because Columbus and the Taínos lived hundreds of years ago