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**by Steve Wiegand**  
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and history writer

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## U.S. History For Dummies® , 4th Edition

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# Introduction

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“Those who cannot remember the past,” said American philosopher George Santayana, “are condemned to repeat it.”

Generally in the 12th grade.

Lots of people think of learning U.S. history as a punishment. It’s just a subject you had to take in school. You memorized a bewildering array of dates, absorbed definitions for terms like *Manifest Destiny*, and wondered whether America really needed two presidents named Harrison. Historical figures were presented as if they were characters in a junior high school costume pageant. Their blemishes were airbrushed out, and their personalities were drained away.

Sure, you were taught George Washington warned the country about foreign entanglements in his “Farewell Address.” But it might have been more interesting to also learn he never actually gave that speech. It was printed in the newspapers. Washington didn’t like giving speeches, partly because of his false teeth, which were not made of wood but of hippopotamus ivory.

Alas, textbooks often overlook the fascinating moments and details of U.S. history. They present it as something dry and distant — events, facts, trends, movements — and don’t focus on what it really is. U.S. history is the story of people: what they thought, did, and tried to do; what they ate and drank; what made them angry; and what made them laugh.

## About This Book

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This book is not a textbook, nor is it an exhaustive encyclopedia covering everything that ever happened in the United States. Instead, it focuses on people: famous and infamous, well-known and obscure. It gives you a basic foundation of information about U.S. history. You can use it as a handy reference. Haul it off the shelf to settle an argument — or to start one.

Which brings me to a key point. This book is not 100 percent, straight-down-the-middle-you'll-agree-with-everything objective. Although I've tried to stick to the facts — or at least the most widely accepted historical interpretations of the facts — the bottom line is that my own thoughts, biases, and interpretations will inevitably intrude. It happens in every nonfiction book ever written. Sorry. If you think something is factually wrong, please let me know. If you just don't agree with something, object. You're reaffirming one of the best things about America: the right to freely express indignation.

Because U.S. history hasn't always been bright and shining, especially when it comes to topics such as slavery or the treatment of Native Americans, this book doesn't always deal with pleasant or uplifting subjects. Some of what you read may anger you, sadden you, or even make you feel a little ashamed. In that regard, America's history shares something in common with just about every country ever. But the truth is that overall, America's story is a positive one. For a nation in its third century, America still does a whole lot of things right. One of them is recognizing past mistakes and generally — and sometimes gradually — striving to do better.

Enough time on the soapbox. I'm also happy to report you can find things in this book that you won't find in other U.S. history books (which may or may not be a good thing, depending on your sense of humor or taste for trivia). Although they may be of little importance in the overall scheme of things, they're kind of fun to know — and trot out at dinner with your boring in-laws. Some examples: the Civil War general whose name helped to popularize a common term for prostitutes (Joseph Hooker); which canned meat product helped win World War II (Spam); and the major league baseball team that overcame the curse of a man with a goat (Chicago Cubs). And if you're a history purist, I think there's a mention of Manifest Destiny in here somewhere.

## Conventions Used in This Book

To help you find your way around in the book, I use the following conventions:

- » *Italics* are used both to emphasize a word to make a sentence clearer and to highlight a new word that's being defined.
- » **Bold** highlights keywords in bulleted lists.

# What Not to Read

As you ramble around the book, you'll encounter blocks of text in shaded boxes. They contain quotes; mini-profiles of both famous and semi-obscure people; the origins of things; factoids and numbers; and other historical debris. You don't need to read them to get what's going on. They're just there as little extras that I've thrown in at no additional charge. Feel free to read them as you find them, come back to them later, or save them for recitation at your next poker game.

## Foolish Assumptions

I'm assuming you picked up this book because you have some interest in U.S. history (which is why I chose the title). But it doesn't matter if you know a little or a lot about the subject. I think you may enjoy it either way, even if it's just to settle arguments about the Louisiana Purchase (Chapter 7) or what Iceland had to do with the Great Recession (Chapter 22). Enough facts are in here to make this a good (if I do say so myself) basic U.S. history book and enough trivia to irritate party guests who won't go home.

## Beyond the Book

You got more than you bargained for when you bought this book. In addition to what you're reading right now, this product also comes with a free access-anywhere Cheat Sheet that puts scads of facts about U.S. history at your fingertips. You'll be able to make substantive points in discussions about politics, impress potential employers as a well-rounded individual, and convince people you actually remember something from 11th grade. To get this Cheat Sheet, simply go to [www.dummies.com](http://www.dummies.com) and search for "U.S. History For Dummies, 4th Edition Cheat Sheet" in the Search box.

This product also comes with an online test bank of practice questions to test your knowledge. To gain access to the online practice:

1. Register your book or ebook at [Dummies.com](http://Dummies.com) to get your PIN. Go to [www.dummies.com/go/getaccess](http://www.dummies.com/go/getaccess).
2. Select your product from the dropdown list on that page.
3. Follow the prompts to validate your product, and then check your email for a confirmation message that includes your PIN and instructions for logging in.

If you do not receive this email within two hours, please check your spam folder before contacting us through our Technical Support website at <http://support.wiley.com> or by phone at 877-762-2974.

Now you're ready to go! You can come back to the practice material as often as you want — simply log on with the username and password you created during your initial login. No need to enter the access code a second time.

Your registration is good for one year from the day you activate your PIN.

## Icons Used in This Book

Throughout the book, you can find icons in the margins or alongside boxed sidebars that alert you to particular aspects or features of history. Here's what they mean:



TECHNICAL  
STUFF

The names, numbers, and other stats behind the news are the focus of this icon.



REMEMBER

This icon alerts you to a fact or idea that you may want to stash in your memory bank.

## Where to Go from Here

Congratulations! By reading this far, you've already learned something about U.S. history: It doesn't bite, induce deep comas, or poke you in the eye with a sharp stick. Read a few more pages, and you may get the itch to keep going even further.

Remember, history is the story of people.

And people are the most interesting story of all.



# 1

## **Getting Started with U.S. History**

**IN THIS PART . . .**

The early settlers make their way in a new land.

The colonies establish themselves.

The American Revolution leads to the creation of a new country.

#### IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Tracing America's roots
- » Establishing a national identity
- » Dealing with growing pains
- » Fighting wars of a different kind
- » Donning a new look for a new millennium

## Chapter **1**

# America: A Short Biography

**L**ong before it was a nation, America was an idea, a dream, a fanciful tale. For most of humankind's history, it didn't exist as anything but a blank slate, waiting to be filled. Eventually it was filled, with people who came for all sorts of reasons and with all sorts of ideas on how to assemble a country. Sometimes the ideas and the people clashed. But out of the clashes and struggles grew a country founded on a system of government that made it unique in the world.

America was lucky to have great leaders in bad times, when it most needed them. It had abundant natural resources, generally peaceable neighbors, and plenty of room to grow. And boy, did it grow. But before all this could happen, someone had to transform it from a fantasy to a very real place. This chapter gives you the lowdown on how that came about and directs you to the places in the book that give you the nitty-gritty in more detail.

# They Came, They Saw, They Stayed

The first Americans probably wandered over from Asia about 14,000 years ago, which in geologic terms is an eye blink ago. Over the succeeding four or five millennia, they spread out over the North and South American continents.

There weren't a whole lot of these first Americans, at least not in what became known as the United States of America, but they were wildly diverse in their customs and culture. Many of the differences had to do with the environment in which they settled. Around AD 985, Northern Europeans popularly known as *Vikings* showed up on the North American continent but stuck around only long enough to irritate the Native Americans.

But two things — greed and imagination — prodded other Europeans into taking their place. Looking for a new route to the riches of the East (particularly spices), explorers such as an Italian weaver's son named Christopher Columbus thought they might sail west around the globe until they hit Asia. Of course, the Americas got in the way. Rather than reverse course, Columbus and his counterparts refocused their priorities to exploring and exploiting the New World.

The exploiting part of that plan included enslaving or killing off the native population. Sometimes the killing was deliberate; sometimes it was inadvertent, through the introduction of diseases for which the Native Americans had no defenses, for example. See Chapter 2 for more details on Native Americans and explorers.

## Catching up to the Spanish

Spain got a head start in the Americas, mainly because it was the first to get enthusiastic about exploring the Americas. But other European countries eagerly sought to catch up. France split its efforts between colonizing and just carting off resources like fish and furs. But the English took steps to make their presence more permanent.

English settlements were founded for both economic and ecclesiastical reasons. In the South, colonists hoped to make money by growing tobacco, and later, cotton. To make their enterprises more profitable, they imported slaves from Africa. It was a practice that would prove far costlier in terms of human misery than the crops were ever worth.

In the North, settlers who had fled religious persecution established colonies based more on religious principles than making a buck (although they weren't averse to the latter). Like the Spanish, English settlers often found the easiest way

to deal with the Native Americans was to shove them aside or kill them. The English colonies grew rapidly. Chapter 3 has the stories of Pilgrims, Puritans, and entrepreneurs.

## It's revolutionary!

It was probably of small comfort to the Native Americans, but the French and British also spent an inordinate amount of time killing each other. Throughout much of the 18th century, the two nations squared off in a series of wars that were fought in both Europe and the New World. When the dust settled, Britain had cemented its position as top dog among the European powers in North America. But a new power — whose members increasingly called themselves *Americans* — was beginning to assert itself.

Stung by slights both real and imagined from the mother country, American colonists grew restless under British control. In 1776, after a series of provocations and misunderstandings, the colonies declared themselves independent. Details about the pre-Revolution period are in Chapter 4.

The American Revolution took seven years for the colonists to win. To do so took a brilliant leader in George Washington, a timely ally in France, and healthy helpings of tenacity and luck. Chapter 5 has the details.

Making a country out of the victorious colonies also took tenacity, luck, and genius. Over the summer of 1787, a remarkable group of men gathered in Philadelphia to draw up the rules for the new nation. The United States of America elected Washington as its first president, set up a reasonable financial system, and avoided war with European countries long enough to get itself established. All these events are in Chapter 6.

## Putting America on the Map

Thomas Jefferson was a great example of America finding the right man at the right time. He helped the country make a smooth transition from one political party being in charge to another. Plus, he had the imagination to pull off a pretty big land deal — the Louisiana Purchase. That not only doubled the size of the country, it gave Lewis and Clark a good reason for an expedition. Meanwhile, the U.S. Supreme Court asserted itself as a co-equal branch of government. That's all in Chapter 7, along with fighting pirates and getting into another war with Great Britain. (Spoiler alert: It ended in a draw.)

## Nationalizing a nation

The end of the War of 1812 also marked the fading of the Revolution generation. People increasingly began to identify themselves as Americans rather than New Yorkers or Virginians. But it wasn't the end of tensions among sections of the country when their interests diverged. Those divergent issues included fights over banking, tariffs — and especially slavery.

With the invention of the cotton gin, growing the fiber became quite profitable in the South, and along with a surge in sugar growing, made the region intensely dependent on slave labor. Many people in Northern states opposed slavery, for a variety of moral, political, and economic reasons. A fight over the question of allowing slavery to spread was avoided, at least temporarily, with a fragile compromise in 1820.

Beyond its borders, the United States was nervously watching European nations who were avariciously watching former Spanish colonies in Latin America gain their independence. In 1823, Pres. James Monroe formally warned Europe to keep its hands off the Americas.

Not all the political squabbling was international. In 1824, a crusty military-man-turned-politician named Andrew Jackson lost a hotly contested and controversial election to John Quincy Adams. In 1828, Jackson avenged the loss after one of the sleaziest campaigns (by both sides) in U.S. history.

As president, Jackson found himself confronted by a theory — most eloquently championed by South Carolina Sen. John C. Calhoun — called *nullification*. It held that states could decide for themselves which federal laws they did and did not have to obey. The theory served to deepen the divide between North and South.

Despite a national recession brought on by speculation and shady financial dealings, Americans were busy coming up with ways to make life better. Improvements in equipment triggered a boom in railroad building. The development of steel plows and rolling harvesters greatly enhanced grain production. And the invention of the telegraph signaled the start of a national communications medium.

Down in Texas, meanwhile, American expatriates led a successful revolt against Mexico and then waited for nine years to become part of the United States. The annexation of Texas, in turn, helped start another war. Chapter 8 has a lot of stuff in it.