

# 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

Word Count **552**

Level **520L**



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.



*Bill Bigelow is an editor of Rethinking Schools magazine. He is the co-director of the Zinn Education Project.*