History Research Paper Example: The Columbian Exchange

Type of paper	Research paper
Academic level	College / undergraduate
Subject	World History
Citation style	Chicago (notes and bibliography)
Length	482 words (about 2 pages, double spaced)

PROMPT

Research question: How did the Columbian Exchange reshape populations and diets in the Atlantic world between 1492 and 1800?

Model response

When Christopher Columbus reached the Caribbean in 1492, he began a process of biological exchange between hemispheres that had been separated for thousands of years. The historian Alfred W. Crosby later named this process "the Columbian Exchange," arguing that the movement of plants, animals and diseases mattered as much as conquest itself.[1] **This paper argues that the Columbian Exchange caused a demographic catastrophe in the Americas while supporting long-term population growth in Afro-Eurasia, and that the same exchange of crops underpinned the expansion of plantation slavery.**

Disease and demographic collapse in the Americas

The most immediate effect of contact was disease. Indigenous peoples of the Americas had no prior exposure to smallpox, measles and influenza, and epidemics spread ahead of and alongside European conquest. In 1520, a smallpox epidemic struck Tenochtitlan during the Spanish campaign against the Mexica, weakening the city before its fall in 1521. Estimates of the overall population decline vary widely, but historians agree that Indigenous populations fell catastrophically in the century after contact, with some regions losing the large majority of their inhabitants.[2] This collapse reshaped colonial societies, contributing to labor shortages that Europeans sought to fill with coerced Indigenous labor and, increasingly, enslaved Africans.

New World crops and Old World populations

In the opposite direction, American crops transformed diets across Europe, Africa and Asia. Potatoes, which grow well in cool climates and produce many calories per acre, became staples in

parts of northern Europe. Maize spread across Africa and southern Europe, and cassava, carried by Portuguese traders from Brazil, became a major food source in Central and West Africa. In China, maize and sweet potatoes allowed farmers to cultivate hilly land unsuitable for rice. Economists Nathan Nunn and Nancy Qian argue that these crops raised the food supply in many regions and contributed to population growth in the Old World.[3]

Sugar, slavery and the Atlantic economy

The exchange also moved Old World crops and animals to the Americas. Sugarcane, brought across the Atlantic by Europeans, became the foundation of plantation economies in Brazil and the Caribbean. Sugar cultivation was labor-intensive and deadly, and planters relied overwhelmingly on enslaved Africans. According to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, about 12.5 million Africans were embarked on slave ships bound for the Americas between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries.[4] Animals mattered too: horses, reintroduced by Europeans, transformed the economies and military power of Plains peoples such as the Comanche.[5]

Conclusion

The Columbian Exchange did not affect all societies equally. For Indigenous Americans, it brought epidemic disease and demographic collapse; for many Afro-Eurasian societies, it brought new crops that supported population growth; and for millions of Africans, it was bound up with forced migration and enslavement. Studying the exchange shows that the consequences of 1492 were biological and economic as well as political, and that environmental history is essential to understanding the making of the Atlantic world.

Notes

1. Alfred W. Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1972).
2. Charles C. Mann, *1493: Uncovering the New World Columbus Created* (New York: Knopf, 2011).
3. Nathan Nunn and Nancy Qian, "The Columbian Exchange: A History of Disease, Food, and Ideas," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 24, no. 2 (2010): 163–88.
4. "Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database," SlaveVoyages, accessed November 16, 2026, https://www.slavevoyages.org.
5. Crosby, *Columbian Exchange*.

Bibliography

Crosby, Alfred W. *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1972.

Mann, Charles C. *1493: Uncovering the New World Columbus Created*. New York: Knopf, 2011.

Nunn, Nathan, and Nancy Qian. "The Columbian Exchange: A History of Disease, Food, and Ideas." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 24, no. 2 (2010): 163–88.

SlaveVoyages. "Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database." Accessed November 16, 2026. https://www.slavevoyages.org.

Original model essay written by History HW to demonstrate structure, evidence and citation. Not a student’s submitted work. For study and reference only; follow your institution’s academic integrity rules. © 2026 History HW · historyhw.com