

“SAVAGE”

Noah Webster, the author of the first new dictionary produced in the United States in 1828, included the following definition:

Savage, n. A human being in his native state of rudeness; one who is untaught, uncivilized or without cultivation of mind or manners. The savages of America, when uncorrupted by the vices of civilized men, are remarkable for their hospitality to strangers, and for their truth, fidelity and gratitude to their friends, but implacably cruel and revengeful towards their enemies.

Questions:

1. By this definition, Indians were savages who were **uncivilized**. What did “uncivilized” mean?
2. What do you think Webster and other Americans felt was “**civilized**”?
3. How are the definitions of savage, uncivilized, and civilized different in a contemporary Webster’s Dictionary?

Discussion: This definition reveals the mixed feelings that many white Americans felt about the Indians.

On the one hand was the so-called “**noble savage**” belief that Indians were good by nature (“remarkable for their hospitality to strangers, and for their truth, fidelity and gratitude”) because civilized society had not taught them to be otherwise. On the other hand was the “**cruel savage**” belief that Indians were violent, cruel, and revengeful.

Regardless of whether white Americans viewed Indians as noble or cruel, they were always defined both as savages and as **heathens** - persons who did not believe in God and were in need of conversion to Christianity. Nowhere was there any understanding that the actions of white settlers might be to blame for some of the cruelty, revenge, and violence they encountered among the Indians. It was easier to regard the Indians as fundamentally different from and inferior to whites.