

## **Words to Watch For**

Historic markers and monuments exist to define the history of a specific place or landscape. The people who sponsor the markers carefully choose the few words that appear on the marker to enhance their own perception of that history. At times, these words convey meanings that obscure the actual story of the place.

### **Discover**

Often used to describe the first visit to an area by Europeans, as in "Columbus discovered America." The use of the word "discover" suggests that the European is the first human being to see or experience a place, implying that a land or place was empty or void of people before the arrival of Europeans, thus obscuring the actual fact that millions of people were already living on this continent. Additionally, the "Doctrine of Discovery" is an actual legal construct. In the fifteenth century, several Popes issued Papal Bulls that formulated the Doctrine of Discovery to define how European powers would split up the lands of the Western Hemisphere. That Doctrine, first expressed in the 1493 Papal Bull, *Romanus Pontifex*, defines any person who is not Christian as less than human. This Doctrine conveys to the rulers of Christian, European nations the rights of conquest, mineral exploitation, and land ownership over any indigenous peoples who are not Christian. In 1823, the United States Supreme Court adopted the Doctrine of Discovery into U.S legal policy. The Doctrine of Discovery still used today in court cases seeking to narrow the sovereign rights as well as human rights of the indigenous peoples.

### **Settle, Settled - Settlement - First Settlers**

Usually said of European immigrants, their farms, and their towns. Those phrases have the meaning of "bringing to an end, becoming resolved, fixed, established, or quiet." Although the immigrants might have felt that their journeys were coming to an end, the terms have also been used to convey the notions that they were the first people to bring "civilization" to a wilderness. In that context, those phrases reinforce the Doctrine of Discovery's contention that indigenous peoples did not have full title to the lands where they lived.

Four countries, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States are known in the international arena as "Settler States" because these states were created by immigrant peoples who used the Doctrine of Discovery to assume title to lands where indigenous peoples already lived.

### **Wilderness**

The word "wilderness" comes from the Old English word for "wild beast." Wilderness carries the concepts of being an "unsettled" and "uncultivated" region left in its "natural condition". A wilderness may be perceived as "uninhabited" or "worthless for cultivation." A wilderness can be covered with dense vegetation or forests. A wilderness can be a very large, extensive area, such as a desert or ocean, that is perceived to be "barren or empty" or a wasteland. A wilderness is anything characterized by confusing, frightening, or dangerous.

The definitions of "wilderness" resonate deep in the heritage and language of European Christians. The "wilderness" was where the Israelites wandered before entering the Promised Land. The wilderness is where Christ fasted for 40 days and nights. The Puritans, for example,

compared themselves to the Israelites, who possessed a special covenant with God to populate this "new" Promised Land. Early Europeans viewed indigenous peoples as part of the wilderness - as the Canaanites who lacked a special covenant or promise. This perception reinforced the Doctrine of Discovery's claim that non-Christian peoples are less than human and lack full title to the land where they lived. Together these notions reinforce the immigrants' contention that they had a superior right to be on the land that was already occupied.

### **Civilization - Civilized - Uncivilized - Progress**

The idea that Europeans bring civilization or progress (idea of order and "higher" level of culture) to the places to which they migrated suggests that the people who were already there were inferior, even barbaric, and deserved to be displaced. The place the Europeans called "wilderness" was already home to many people who had highly evolved cultures, ways of life, and relationship to the natural world that was viewed as fearful to the European newcomers. The use of the word "civilization" in relation to settlers is another way to express the Doctrine of Discovery, reinforcing the legitimacy of their claim to the land.

### **Empty Land**

The idea that this continent was empty is also linked to the Doctrine of Discovery. The term is the translation of the Latin, "terra nullius" - which had a legal connotation. If a place was considered "empty" of people, empty of cultivated land, and empty of civilization, that land was fair game to be acquired. Although this continent had millions of people living in every climate, every landscape, the European settlers often described the land as empty.

### **Massacre**

"The act or an instance of killing a large number of humans indiscriminately and cruelly." Some times markers use the word to describe a situation when indigenous people were defending their own homes and the numbers of deaths were small. The word "massacre" is more often used to describe deaths of early immigrants from Europe - even though millions of indigenous people died as a result of their encounters with those immigrants. The indiscriminate use of the word "massacre" contributes to the belief that all Indigenous People are savages - and that Indians were an obstacle to civilization - and deserved to be eliminated.

### **Passive voice with no subject**

Markers that describe massacres often use a passive construction, leaving out the "who" did the massacre. A marker in Chemung County about the Clinton Sullivan campaign says that Clinton and Sullivan "were commanded" to attack the Indians. The sentence conveniently leaves out the fact that General George Washington gave the order to initiate the military campaign resulted in massacre of people as well as destruction of villages and crops.