Gift of the Nile

Build on What You Know Have you ever received a gift that was very important to you? How did it affect your life? The Nile River was so important to Egypt that 2,500 years ago, an ancient Greek historian called Egypt “the gift of the Nile.”

Geography of Ancient Egypt

ESSENTIAL QUESTION Why was the Nile River important?

The Greek historian knew what he was talking about. The Nile River fed Egyptian civilization for hundreds of years.

The Longest River The Nile is 4,160 miles long—the world’s longest river. It begins near the equator in Africa and flows north to the Mediterranean Sea. In the south it churns with cataracts. A cataract (KAT•uh•RAKT) is a waterfall. Near the sea the Nile branches into a delta. A delta is an area near a river’s mouth where the water deposits fine soil called silt. In the delta, the Nile divides into many streams.

The river is called the upper Nile in the south and the lower Nile in the north. For centuries, heavy rains in Ethiopia caused the Nile to flood every summer. The floods deposited rich soil along the Nile’s shores. This soil was fertile, which means it was good for growing crops. Unlike the Tigris and Euphrates, the Nile River flooded at the same time every year, so farmers could predict when to plant their crops.
Red Land, Black Land The ancient Egyptians lived in narrow bands of land on each side of the Nile. They called this region the black land because of the fertile soil that the floods deposited. The red land was the barren desert beyond the fertile region.

Weather in Egypt was almost always the same. Eight months of the year were sunny and hot. The four months of winter were sunny but cooler. Most of the region received only an inch of rain a year. The parts of Egypt not near the Nile were a desert.

Isolation The harsh desert acted as a barrier to keep out enemies. The Mediterranean coast was swampy and lacked good harbors. For these reasons, early Egyptians stayed close to home.

REVIEW What did the floods of the Nile River provide for farmers?

Land of Plenty

ESSENTIAL QUESTION How did Egyptians use the land around the Nile?

Each year, Egyptian farmers watched for white birds called ibises (EYE•bihs•uhz), which flew up from the south. When the birds
arrived, the annual flood waters would soon follow. After the waters drained away, farmers could plant seeds in the fertile soil.

**Agricultural Techniques** By about 2400 B.C., farmers used technology to expand their farmland. Working together, they dug irrigation canals that carried river water to dry areas. Then they used a tool called a shaduf (shah•DOOF) to spread the water across the fields. These innovative, or new, techniques gave them more farmland.

**Egyptian Crops** Ancient Egyptians grew a large variety of foods. They were the first to grind wheat into flour and mix the flour with yeast and water to make dough rise into bread. They grew vegetables such as lettuce, radishes, asparagus, and cucumbers. Fruits included dates, figs, grapes, and watermelons.

Egyptians also grew the materials for their clothes. They were the first to weave fibers from flax plants into a fabric called linen. Lightweight linen cloth was perfect for hot Egyptian days. Men wore linen wraps around their waists. Women wore loose, sleeveless dresses. Egyptians also wove marsh grasses into sandals.

**Egyptian Houses** Egyptians built houses using bricks made of mud from the Nile mixed with chopped straw. They placed narrow windows high in the walls to reduce bright sunlight. Egyptians often painted walls white to reflect the blazing heat. They wove sticks and palm trees to make roofs. Inside, woven reed mats covered the dirt floor. Most Egyptians slept on mats covered with linen sheets. Wealthy citizens enjoyed bed frames and cushions.