



Native American Cultures

Introduction

Many thousands of years before Christopher Columbus' ships landed in the Bahamas, a different group of people discovered America: the nomadic ancestors of modern Native Americans who hiked over a "land bridge" from Asia to what is now Alaska more than 12,000 years ago. In fact, by the time European adventurers arrived in the 15th century A.D., scholars estimate that more than 50 million people were already living in the Americas. Of these, some 10 million lived in the area that would become the United States. As time passed, these migrants and their descendants pushed south and east, adapting as they went. In order to keep track of these diverse groups, anthropologists and geographers have divided them into "culture areas," or rough groupings of contiguous peoples who shared similar habitats and characteristics. Most scholars break North America—excluding present-day Mexico—into 10 separate culture areas: the Arctic, the Subarctic, the Northeast, the Southeast, the Plains, the Southwest, the Great Basin, California, the Northwest Coast and the Plateau.

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The Arctic

The Arctic culture area, a cold, flat, treeless region (actually a frozen desert) near the Arctic Circle in present-day [Alaska](#), Canada and Greenland, was home to the Inuit and the Aleut. Both groups spoke, and continue to speak, dialects descended from what scholars call the Eskimo-Aleut language family. Because it is such an inhospitable landscape, the Arctic's population was comparatively small and scattered. Some of its peoples, especially the Inuit in the northern part of the region, were nomads, following seals, polar bears and other game as they migrated across the tundra. In the southern part of the region, the Aleut were a bit more settled, living in small fishing villages along the shore.

Did You Know?

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, there are about 4.5 million Native Americans and Alaska Natives in the United States today. That's about 1.5 percent of the population.

The Inuit and Aleut had a great deal in common. Many lived in dome-shaped houses made of sod or timber (or, in the North, ice blocks). They used seal and otter skins to make warm, weatherproof clothing, aerodynamic dogsleds and long, open fishing boats (kayaks in Inuit; baidarkas in Aleut).

By the time the United States purchased Alaska in 1867, decades of oppression and exposure to European diseases had taken their toll: The native population had dropped to just 2,500; the descendants of these survivors still make their home in the area today.

The Subarctic

The Subarctic culture area, mostly composed of swampy, piney forests (taiga) and waterlogged tundra, stretched across much of inland Alaska and Canada. Scholars have divided the region's people into two language groups: the Athabaskan speakers at its western end, among them the Tsattine (Beaver), Gwich'in (or Kuchin) and the Deg Xinag (formerly—and pejoratively—known as the Ingalik), and the Algonquian speakers at its eastern end, including the Cree, the Ojibwa and the Naskapi.

In the Subarctic, travel was difficult—toboggans, snowshoes and lightweight canoes were the primary means of transportation—and population was sparse. In general, the peoples of the Subarctic did not form large permanent settlements; instead, small family groups stuck together as they traipsed after herds of caribou. They lived in small, easy-to-move tents and lean-tos, and when it grew too cold to hunt they hunkered into underground dugouts.

The growth of the fur trade in the 17th and 18th centuries disrupted the Subarctic way of life—now, instead of hunting and gathering for subsistence, the Indians focused on supplying pelts to the European traders—and eventually led to the displacement and extermination of many of the region's native communities.

The Northeast

The Northeast culture area, one of the first to have sustained contact with Europeans, stretched from present-day Canada's Atlantic coast to [North Carolina](#) and inland to the [Mississippi](#) River valley. Its inhabitants were members of two main groups: Iroquoian speakers (these included the Cayuga, Oneida, Erie, Onondaga, Seneca and Tuscarora), most of whom lived along inland rivers and lakes in fortified, politically stable villages, and the more numerous Algonquian speakers (these included the Pequot, Fox, Shawnee, Wampanoag, [Delaware](#) and Menominee) who lived in small farming and fishing villages along the ocean. There, they grew crops like corn, beans and vegetables.

Life in the Northeast culture area was already fraught with conflict—the Iroquoian groups tended to be rather aggressive and warlike, and bands and villages outside of their allied confederacies were never safe from their raids—and it grew more complicated when European colonizers arrived. Colonial wars repeatedly forced the region's natives to take sides, pitting the Iroquois groups against their Algonquian neighbors. Meanwhile, as white settlement pressed westward, it eventually displaced both sets of indigenous people from their lands.

The Southeast

The Southeast culture area, north of the Gulf of [Mexico](#) and south of the Northeast, was a humid, fertile agricultural region. Many of its natives were expert farmers—they grew staple crops like maize, beans, squash, tobacco and sunflower—who organized their lives around small ceremonial and market villages known as hamlets. Perhaps the most familiar of the Southeastern indigenous peoples are the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek and Seminole, sometimes called the Five Civilized Tribes, who all spoke a variant of the Muskogean language.

By the time the U.S. had won its independence from Britain, the Southeast culture area had already lost many of its native people to disease and displacement. In 1830, the federal Indian Removal Act compelled the relocation of what remained of the Five Civilized Tribes so that white settlers could have their land. Between 1830 and 1838, federal officials forced nearly 100,000 Indians out of the southern states and into “Indian Territory” (later [Oklahoma](#)) west of the Mississippi. The Cherokee called this frequently deadly trek the [Trail of Tears](#).

The Plains

The Plains culture area comprises the vast prairie region between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains, from present-day Canada to the Gulf of Mexico. Before the arrival of European traders and explorers, its inhabitants—speakers of Siouan, Algonquian, Caddoan, Uto-Aztecan and Athabaskan languages—were relatively settled hunters and farmers. After European contact, and especially after Spanish colonists brought horses to the region in the 18th century, the peoples of the Great Plains became much more nomadic. Groups like the Crow, Blackfeet, Cheyenne, Comanche and Arapaho used horses to pursue great herds of buffalo across the prairie. The most common dwelling for these hunters was the cone-shaped teepee, a bison-skin tent that could be folded up and carried anywhere. Plains Indians are also known for their elaborately feathered war bonnets.

As white traders and settlers moved west across the Plains region, they brought many damaging things with them: commercial goods, like knives and kettles, which native people came to depend on; guns; and disease. By the end of the 19th century, white sport hunters had nearly exterminated the area's buffalo herds. With settlers encroaching on their lands and no way to make money, the Plains natives were forced onto government reservations.

The Southwest

The peoples of the Southwest culture area, a huge desert region in present-day [Arizona](#) and [New Mexico](#) (along with parts of [Colorado](#), [Utah](#), [Texas](#) and Mexico) developed two distinct ways of life.

Sedentary farmers such as the Hopi, the Zuni, the Yaqui and the Yuma grew crops like corn, beans and squash. Many lived in permanent settlements, known as pueblos, built of stone and adobe. These pueblos featured great multistory dwellings that resembled apartment houses. At their centers, many of these villages also had large ceremonial pit houses, or kivas.

Other Southwestern peoples, such as the Navajo and the Apache, were more nomadic. They survived by hunting, gathering and raiding their more established neighbors for their crops. Because these groups were always on the move, their homes were much less permanent than the pueblos. For instance, the Navajo fashioned their iconic eastward-facing round houses, known as hogans, out of materials like mud and bark.

By the time the southwestern territories became a part of the United States after the Mexican War, many of the region's native people had already been exterminated. (Spanish colonists and missionaries had enslaved many of the Pueblo Indians, for example, working them to death on vast Spanish ranches known as *encomiendas*.) During the second half of the 19th century, the federal government resettled most of the region's remaining natives onto reservations.

The Great Basin

The Great Basin culture area, an expansive bowl formed by the Rocky Mountains to the east, the Sierra Nevadas to the west, the Columbia Plateau to the north, and the Colorado Plateau to the south, was a barren wasteland of deserts, salt flats and brackish lakes. Its people, most of whom spoke Shoshonean or Uto-Aztecan dialects (the Bannock, Paiute and Ute, for example), foraged for roots, seeds and nuts and hunted snakes, lizards and small mammals. Because they were always on the move, they lived in compact, easy-to-build wickiups made of willow poles or saplings, leaves and brush. Their settlements and social groups were impermanent, and communal leadership (what little there was) was informal.

After European contact, some Great Basin groups got horses and formed equestrian hunting and raiding bands that were similar to the ones we associate with the Great Plains natives. After white prospectors discovered gold and silver in the region in the mid-19th century, most of the Great Basin's people lost their land and, frequently, their lives.

California

Before European contact, the temperate, hospitable [California](#) culture area had more people—an estimated 300,000 in the mid-16th century—than any other. It was also more diverse: Its estimated 100 different tribes and groups spoke more than 200 dialects. (These languages derived from the Penutian (the Maidu, Miwok and Yokuts), the Hokan (the Chumash, Pomo, Salinas and Shasta), the Uto-Aztecan (the Tubatulabal, Serrano and Kinatemuk; also, many of the “Mission Indians” who had been driven out of the Southwest by Spanish colonization spoke Uto-Aztecan dialects) and Athapaskan (the Hupa, among others). In fact, as one scholar has pointed out, California’s linguistic landscape was more complex than that of Europe.

Despite this great diversity, many native Californians lived very similar lives. They did not practice much agriculture. Instead, they organized themselves into small, family-based bands of hunter-gatherers known as tribelets. Inter-tribe relationships, based on well-established systems of trade and common rights, were generally peaceful.

Spanish explorers infiltrated the California region in the middle of the 16th century. In 1769, the cleric Junipero Serra established a mission at San Diego, inaugurating a particularly brutal period in which forced labor, disease and assimilation nearly exterminated the culture area’s native population.

The Northwest Coast

The Northwest Coast culture area, along the Pacific coast from British Columbia to the top of Northern California, has a mild climate and an abundance of natural resources. In particular, the ocean and the region’s rivers provided almost everything its people needed—salmon, especially, but also whales, sea otters, seals and fish and shellfish of all kinds. As a result, unlike many other hunter-gatherers who struggled to eke out a living and were forced to follow animal herds from place to place, the Indians of the Pacific Northwest were secure enough to build permanent villages that housed hundreds of people apiece. Those villages operated according to a rigidly stratified social structure, more sophisticated than any outside of Mexico and Central America. A person’s status was determined by his closeness to the village’s chief and reinforced by the number of possessions—blankets, shells and skins, canoes and even slaves—he had at his disposal. (Goods like these played an important role in the potlatch, an elaborate gift-giving ceremony designed to affirm these class divisions.)

Prominent groups in the region included the Athapaskan Haida and Tlingit; the Penutian Chinook, Tsimshian and Coos; the Wakashan Kwakiutl and Nuu-chah-nulth (Nootka); and the Salishan Coast Salish.

The Plateau

The Plateau culture area sat in the Columbia and Fraser river basins at the intersection of the Subarctic, the Plains, the Great Basin, the California and the Northwest Coast (present-day [Idaho](#), [Montana](#) and eastern [Oregon](#) and [Washington](#)). Most of its people lived in small, peaceful villages along stream and riverbanks and survived by fishing for salmon and trout, hunting and gathering wild berries, roots and nuts. In the southern Plateau region, the great majority spoke languages derived from the Penutian (the Klamath, Klikitat, Modoc, Nez Perce, Walla Walla and Yakima or Yakama). North of the Columbia River, most (the Skitswish (Coeur d’Alene), Salish (Flathead), Spokane and Columbia) spoke Salishan dialects.

In the 18th century, other native groups brought horses to the Plateau. The region’s inhabitants quickly integrated the animals into their economy, expanding the radius of their hunts and acting as traders and emissaries between the Northwest and the Plains. In 1805, the explorers [Lewis and Clark](#) passed through the area, drawing increasing numbers of disease-spreading white settlers. By the end of the 19th century, most of the remaining Plateau Indians had been cleared from their lands and resettled in government reservations.

Article Details: