

The First Americans

Although small bands of Europeans or Asians may have crossed the oceans to the Americas, Native Americans, scholars argue, descended from Siberian hunters who migrated to North America many thousands of years ago. Between 40,000 and 32,000 BCE, an ice age froze up millions of cubic miles of ocean water, dropping sea levels by hundreds of feet. The shallow ocean floor of the Bering Sea surfaced, leaving a land bridge (called Beringia) more than a thousand miles wide connecting eastern Asia with Alaska. Vegetation grew on what had once been the ocean floor, and animals from Siberia and Alaska slowly occupied the new land. Nomadic Siberian hunters followed the big game, and each season their villages moved farther east until, thousands of years later, after several shorter ice ages, “Siberians” had become “Americans.”

For the next 15,000 years, Native American hunters spread across the Western Hemisphere, from the Arctic Circle to the tip of South America, and from the Pacific to the Atlantic. Separate bands split repeatedly from one another, and as people in different regions adapted to the land and the varying climates their ways of organizing life and looking at the world proliferated into hundreds of different cultures. Some groups remained nomadic, dependent on the natural environment, while others learned to grow their own food and liberated themselves from the need to search for it constantly. This agricultural revolution led to more sedentary lifestyles, increases in food production and population, social and religious development, and more complex divisions of labor based on sex and status. Some of the agricultural communities developed elaborate social, economic, and political systems. Native American society evolved slowly, almost imperceptibly, over 40,000 years. Languages multiplied, thousands of ethnic groups emerged, and two continents filled with human beings. But, early in the 1500s, evolution was about to become revolution. Nearly 300 years

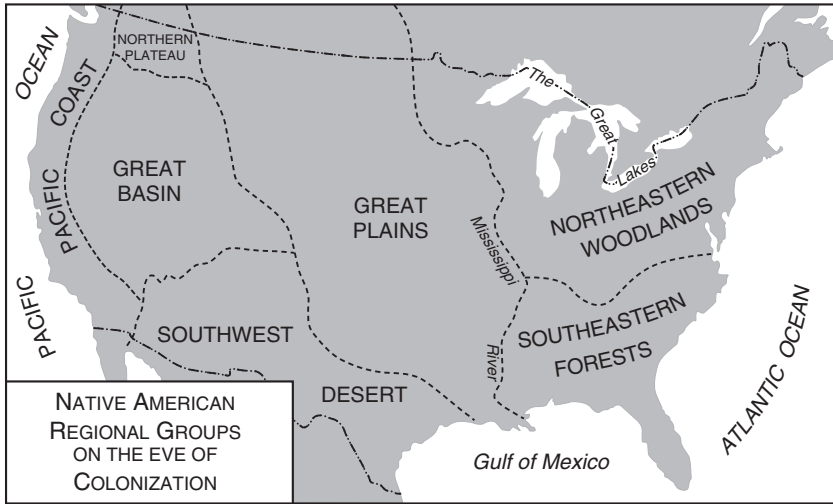


Figure 1.1 Native American regional groups on the eve of colonization.

later, a Mohegan of Connecticut would describe that transition: “The times are exceedingly altered,” he testified. “Yea, the times are turned upside down; or rather we have changed the good times.”¹

On the Eve of Colonization

When European settlers first came to the New World, Native American communities had advanced far beyond their Siberian ancestors. Native American societies in 1500 CE ranged from the primitive foraging peoples of Southern California to the advanced Aztec and Inca civilizations of Mexico and Peru. Although some historians and anthropologists believe the land may have supported several million people, most agree that in 1600 perhaps 2 million Indian people lived in what is now the United States. They were divided into more than 600 separate groups, speaking more than 200 languages, and they occupied seven major regions: the northeastern

¹ <www.archive.org/stream/historyofindians01defo/historyofindians01defo_djvu.txt> accessed November 11, 2009.

woodlands, the southeastern forests, the Great Plains, the Great Basin, the northern plateau, the southwestern desert, and the Pacific coast.

The nations of the northeast lived between the Mississippi River and the Atlantic coast, north of the Carolinas and the Ohio River Valley. In New England, they included the Penobscots, Pennacooks, Pequots, Narragansetts, and Wampanoags. In the Hudson River Valley, the Five Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy—composed of the Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas, Senecas, and later the Tuscaroras—reigned supreme. And between the Great Lakes and the Ohio River were such peoples as the Eries, Sauk and Fox, Ottawas, Kickapoos, Shawnees, Ojibways, Menominees, and Miamis. Except for the buffalo hunters of the Illinois plains and the nomadic foragers of the far north, they lived in settled agricultural villages and cultivated corn, squash, and beans in communal gardens. They lived in wigwams or bark houses surrounded by protective stockades, and they hunted game for both food and clothing. Except for the highly centralized Iroquois Confederacy and the Algonquian-based Illinois Confederacy, each nation was independent.

The southeastern nations lived between the Mississippi River and the Atlantic coast and south of the Ohio River Valley. They included the Cherokees of North Carolina and Tennessee; the Timucuas and Calusas of Florida; and the Choctaws, Chickasaws, Creeks, and Alabamas on the Gulf Coast. Most were sedentary farmers who raised corn, beans, and tobacco; hunted small game; and gathered nuts, seeds, and wild rice. They lived in farming towns of mud plaster homes.

A different society emerged on the Great Plains. The Blackfeet, Dakotas, Sioux, Crows, Cheyennes, Comanches, Pawnees, and Kiowas were nomadic hunters whose social and economic life revolved around the buffalo. Bearing portable tepees, they moved frequently chasing the buffalo herds. The buffalo provided meat, which they ate fresh or dried; skins for blankets, moccasins, clothes, and covering for tepees; hair and tendons for strings; stomachs for water bottles; and horns for cups and spoons. The hunters even turned the buffalo tongue into a hair brush and buffalo fat into hair oil. The seventeenth-century acquisition of the horse from the Spaniards vastly increased their range.

For Indians living in the Great Basin—the area between the Rocky Mountains and the Sierra Nevadas that includes present-day Utah, Nevada, southern Idaho, eastern Oregon, and eastern California—life was primitive. Water was precious, agriculture difficult, and the people extremely poor. Roving bands of Utes, Paiutes, Gosiutes, Monos, Panamints, and

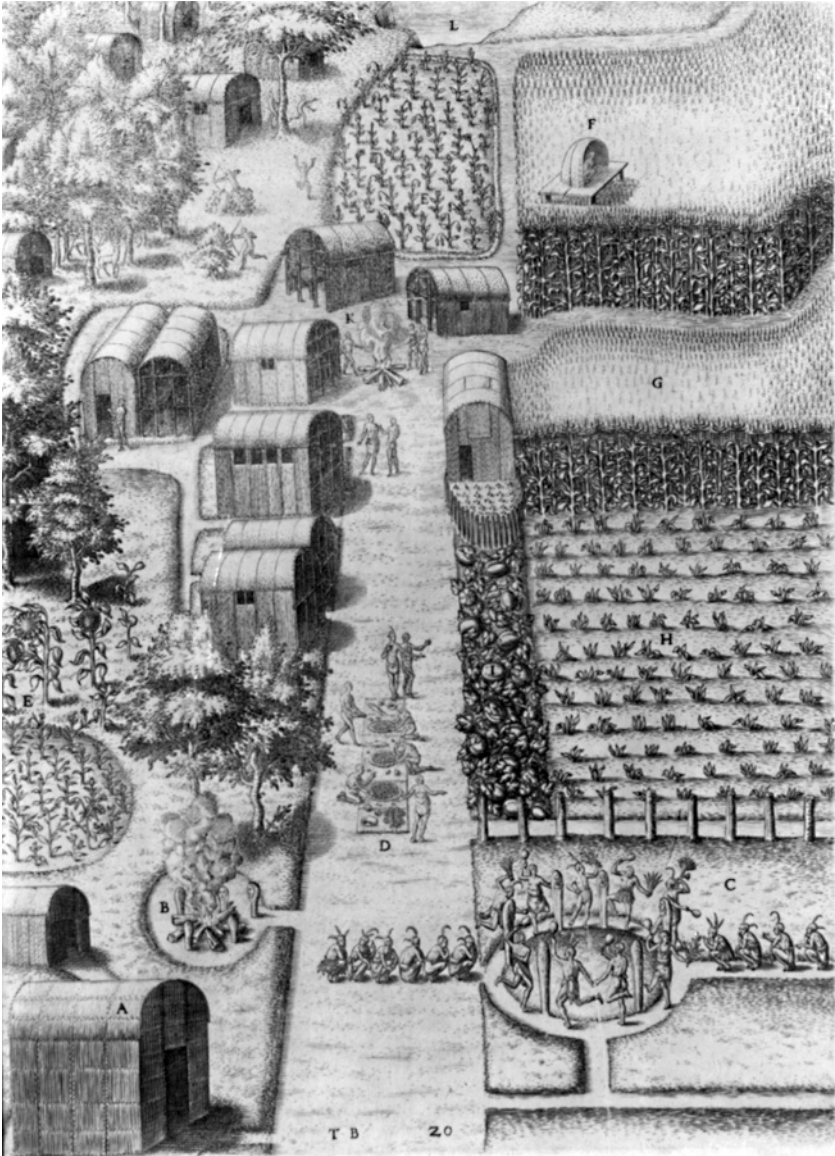


Figure 1.2 This engraving of an Indian village in North Carolina, by Theodor de Bry after John White's sketch, reveals the complexity of Native American society. (Library of Congress)

Shoshones populated the region. With little agriculture, they had no permanent villages, and groups of extended families subsisted on small game, berries, roots, nuts, seeds, and insects. Here survival was problematic and prosperity unknown.

The plateau Indians, such as Flatheads, Yakimas, Nez Percés, Walla Wallas, and Klamaths—lived between the Rockies and the Cascade Mountains in a generally nonagricultural environment. Most tribes hunted for small game, gathered berries and roots, and fished for giant salmon. Relatively poor and politically decentralized, they lived in semipermanent villages along the major salmon rivers and streams.

Two cultures developed in the Southwest. The Navajo rose to power at the “four corners” junction of Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado; the Apaches dominated southeastern Arizona and southwestern New Mexico. They were fierce, nomadic hunters given to raiding neighboring settlements. They lived in tepees when moving through open country and in brush shelters in the mountains.

The second southwestern culture comprised the sedentary, even urban societies of the Hopi, Zuñi, and Pueblo of Arizona and New Mexico. Despite dry weather, they raised corn, squash, and beans. They also domesticated poultry, sheep, and cattle; wove cloth; and into rocky hillsides built towns of multistoried adobe dwellings. Labor was specialized, social structure complex, and the culture as sophisticated as any in the United States.

Two more groups appeared on the Pacific coast. In Southern California, more than 100 nations—including the Yuroks, Salinan, and Chumash—lived in nomadic villages and gathered acorns, seeds, shellfish, roots, and berries. Most were excellent artisans. In northern California, Oregon, and Washington another coastal culture included the Umpquas, Coos, and Tolowas. An abundant supply of fish and game permitted the development of stable communities. They built gable-roofed plank homes and, unlike most other Indians, believed in private property. Native American cultures had enormous variety. Thus, when European settlers arrived, there were already hundreds of different ethnic groups in America.

Native American Worldviews

Most Indian people were polytheistic. They worshiped many gods but acknowledged the presence of a great, omnipotent, spiritual force permeating the universe and timing the cycles of nature. The Great Spirit was

known by different names—Manitu to Algonquians, Orenda to the Iroquois, and Wakan Tanka to Lakota Sioux—but most tribes believed that the Great Spirit infused the natural world with divinity.

Among the abundance of creation stories was the memory of the Cayuses in Oregon of springing originally from the heart of a giant beaver in the Palouse River. The Diné (Navajo) believed that human beings had emerged from four subterranean underworlds. For the Iroquois, life on earth began when the wife and daughter of the Great Spirit fell out of the sky and were rescued by a water bird which placed them on the back of a giant turtle. The turtle became the earth and the Great Spirit's wife began the process of creation.

Most Native Americans shared the idea of a sacred geography, a region of the world inherently superior to everywhere else, a land the Great Spirit considered special. For most Indian peoples, that special place was their own tribal homeland. Tribes had never been static, permanent residents of any region. The ancestors of Navajos and Apaches started out in the Yukon and ended up in Arizona and New Mexico. The Ojibways and Ottawas had their origins in southern Canada where they remained until the late sixteenth century. When game supplies played out, their ancestors found new hunting grounds, heading west to Lake Huron over the course of 50 years before splitting up. The Ottawas ended up near Lake Nipissing and the Ojibways in northern Minnesota. Several Sioux groups left the Ohio Valley in the early 1500s, reached the Upper Mississippi Valley in the 1700s, and then in the early nineteenth century scattered out across the northern plains, where they domesticated the horse and became buffalo hunters. In spite of the migrations, Native Americans developed powerful spiritual connections to their homelands.

A sense of sacred geography imbued their faith. While Europeans had a teleological view of creation, in the religious worldview of most Indians their homeland was a manifestation of the sacred. In fact, many Indians believed that when divine powers created the world, they had started with their homeland. For the Cupeño people of California, the Great Spirit began the creation of the world by forming Eagle Nest Mountain. Black Mesa in Arizona housed the spirit of the universe for the Hopis, as did the Grand Canyon for the Havasupais and Blue Lake for the New Mexico Taos. In his 1968 novel *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, the Pulitzer winner N. Scott Momaday explained the cosmic significance of a sacred landmark to his people. "To look upon that landscape in the

early morning,” he writes, “with the sun at your back, is to lose the sense of proportion. Your imagination comes to life, and this, you think, is where Creation began.”

Most Native Americans believed that the creation of human beings had followed closely on the heels of the creation of the world. Susceptible to the ethnocentrism that has been a lethal vice throughout the world, they commonly viewed their own origins as exceptional. When Manitu or Honeawoat or Orenda finished the creation of the world, he turned his attention to peopling it. Wakan Tanka, for example, surveyed the Black Hills, joined with Earth Mother, and the first man sprouted from the Black Hills soil like a plant; when he had reached full height, he walked away as a Lakota Sioux. Sometime later, as Lakota people flourished, Wakan Tanka saw to the creation of everybody else. Among most Native Americans, their word for themselves reflected that sense of unique origins. Biloxis of the Gulf Coast identified themselves as Tanek Aya, or “The First People.” In North Carolina, the Cherokees referred to themselves as Ani-Yunwiya—“Real People” or “Original People.” Chiricahua Apaches of Arizona were the N’de, or “First People.” Buffalo-hunting Arapahos of Colorado and Kansas called themselves Inuñaina, or “Our Real People.” The Yakimas of Washington were Yah-ah’-Kimas (“Original People”) and the Comanches of Texas the Nemenuh (“Best People”).

For Native Americans, the environment was holy, possessing a cosmic significance more important than its material riches. They viewed the earth as a gift of the gods that had to be protected and worshiped. Chief Smohalla of the Wanapum tribe expressed this view of the environment when he said:

God ... commanded that the lands and fisheries should be common to all who lived upon them; that they were never to be marked off or divided, but that the people should enjoy the fruits that God planted in the land, and the animals that lived upon it, and the fishes in the water. God said he was the father and earth was the mother of mankind; that nature was the law; that the animals, and fish, and plants obeyed nature, and that man only was sinful.

You ask me to plow the ground! Shall I take a knife and tear my mother’s bosom? Then when I die she will not take me to her bosom to rest.

You ask me to dig for stone! Shall I dig under her skin for her bones? Then when I die I cannot enter her body to be born again.

You ask me to cut grass and make hay and sell it, and be rich like white men! But how dare I cut off my mother's hair?²

The use and ownership of land was the source of important environmental conflict between Native Americans and Europeans. Impatient with Native American economic values, whites considered Indian land-use methods inefficient, incapable of extracting the most from the soil. That fact alone, some believed, justified taking the land—peacefully if possible but violently if necessary. Moravian minister John Heckewelder complained about an Indian's horses eating grass on his land:

My friend, it seems you lay claim to the grass my horses have eaten, because you had enclosed it with a fence: now tell me, who caused the grass to grow? Can you make the grass grow? I think not, and nobody can except the great Manni-to. He it is who causes it to grow both for my horses and for yours! See, friend! The grass which grows out of the earth is common to all; the game in the woods is common to all. Say, did you never eat venison and bear's meat? ... Well, and did you ever hear me or any other Indian complain about that? ... Besides, if you will but consider, you will find that my horse did not eat all your grass.³

The sheer number of European settlers began almost at once to displace Indian people, pushing them toward the vacant land to the west.

European ethnocentrism also guaranteed conflict. Convinced of their own religious and moral superiority, Europeans approached Native Americans from two different but equally destructive social perspectives. Some looked on the Native Americans as savages requiring no more ethical consideration than beasts of the field. By denying their humanity and creating negative stereotypes, whites rationalized economic and military assaults on Native Americans. Some Europeans accepted the humanity, if not the cultural equality, of Indians. Instead of annihilating them, they wanted to transform Indian people into settled farmers owning private property and professing Christianity. Though more humane than the other point of view, this missionary impulse proved equally detrimental to Native American culture.

² *Fourteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology* (1896), pt. 2, p. 721.

³ John Heckewelder, *Account of the History, Manners, and Customs of the Indian Nations, Who once Inhabited Pennsylvania and the Neighboring States* (Philadelphia, 1819), p. 86.

Indian Resistance

The first years of colonial life were relatively peaceful. In Quebec a flourishing fur trade developed between the Indians and the French colonists, but as soon as it became apparent that with the arrival of English colonists more and more land would be taken from them, the Indians began to resist. For years the Algonquian-speaking nations of Virginia and North Carolina, linked together in a loose alliance under the leadership of Powhatan, had assisted the Jamestown settlers. Important cultural exchanges took place from the very beginning of the Chesapeake colonies. Europeans excelled in transportation and the use of iron for tools and weapons; Indians were far more advanced in regional geographic knowledge and economic adjustment to the land. Members of the Powhatan confederacy in Virginia were quick to make use of English kettles, traps, fishhooks, needles, and guns, and they passed on to the English their knowledge of fishing; of raising tobacco, corn, beans, squash, rice, and pumpkins; and their use of herbs and dyes.

In 1622, the peace was shattered. Powhatan had died in 1618, and a more aggressive relative, Opechancanough, had replaced him. During the next few years, as tobacco production became more profitable, the white population increased. Feeling enormous pressures from their increasing numbers, the Indians grew increasingly resentful. On March 22, 1622, they attacked colonial settlements throughout Virginia, killing 347 people and destroying dozens of villages. More than a third of white settlers died. Throughout 1622 and 1623, the English settlers pursued the Indians relentlessly, crushed the Powhatan Confederacy, and annihilated most Native American participants in the uprising. Rather than trying to assimilate the remaining peaceful Indians, the colonists imposed a scorched-earth policy. Arbitrary treaties and forced land sales removed the Indian people still living in eastern counties.

Sporadic conflicts erupted throughout the next few decades, most notably in 1644, when Opechancanough himself rebelled, but Virginia would never again be threatened with extinction. After Opechancanough's rebellion, the Virginians dealt with the Indians differently. Tired of wars and of Native American resistance to English culture, the Virginians "reserved" land north of the York River as a permanent Indian homeland. For the next thirty years, the reservation policy worked, and the two peoples even established a valuable fur trade. But it was only

a temporary expedient. As the white population increased, pressure to open reservation land to settlement intensified. Convinced that only the reservation policy could guarantee peace, Virginia Governor William Berkeley refused to open it, but white settlers moved north anyway. Nathaniel Bacon, an English-born member of the colonial council, demanded the opening of reservation lands, greater militia protection for western settlers, and wars of extermination against the Indians. In 1676, when Berkeley still refused, Bacon took matters into his own hands. Marching against Jamestown, his supporters slaughtered peaceful Indians along the way and burned the colony's leading settlement. By 1677, Bacon's Rebellion was over, and so was Indian resistance in Virginia. Divided politically and vastly outnumbered by Europeans, Native Americans declined militarily. By 1680, with 1,000 Indians left out of an original population of more than 30,000, the clash of cultures was over in Virginia.

New England also cycled through the pattern of European land pressure, tribal rivalries, and ethnic conflict. With a proud sense of mission, the Puritans had set out to build the Kingdom of God in the New World. For a few years, hatred of the Narragansetts, Wampanoags, and Pequots for one another weakened Indian resistance. When a smallpox epidemic wiped out thousands of Native Americans in 1633 and 1634 Puritans interpreted it as an act of God. But the Pequots were not convinced. They had moved into southern New England late in the 1500s, and ever since the founding of Massachusetts and Connecticut they had worried about Puritan expansion. Occasional acts of mutual brutality occurred between 1631 and 1636. In 1637, however, when Pequots allegedly killed several whites in Connecticut, the colonists retaliated with a vengeance. Puritan armies drove to Long Island Sound, shooting and burning more than 600 Pequots. By 1638, the Pequots were nearly extinct.

Some 40 years later, New England experienced another bloody racial conflict. Born in 1616 near what is now Warren, Rhode Island, King Philip became chief of the Wampanoags in 1662. Resentful of white settlements, violations of land titles, and assaults on individual Native Americans, on July 4, 1675 he attacked many English settlements. Joined by the Narragansetts, Nipmucs, and Penobscots, the Wampanoags eventually destroyed 20 New England towns and killed more than 3,000 people. Victory was only temporary, however, for in the battle of the Great Swamp in December 1675, Philip witnessed 1,000 warriors die. By late 1678, he too

was dead and a colonial army had cleared southern New England of Native Americans, opening the area to white settlement.

In the South, the conflict continued. Along the coastal plains of North Carolina, the Tuscaroras had lived peacefully for years, raising hemp, corn, and orchard fruits; despairing of white encroachment, in 1711 they killed 130 colonists. Exploited in the fur trade and frightened of white immigration, they joined the Creeks, Catawbas, Appalachees, and Santees and killed more than 400 colonists. Not until the Cherokees joined the whites in 1716 did the rebellion end. The Yamasees and Creeks retreated into the wilderness.

Anglo-French rivalry exacerbated Indian–white relations. Both France and England wanted the Ohio Valley, and Indian people were caught in the middle. Except for the Iroquois, most sided with the French, who did not pose quite the same threat as the English. French settlements in Canada were not nearly as large as the English colonies, and because the French were more interested in trade and commerce than in agriculture they did not usually push the Indians off the land. It was only natural for Indians to cast their lot with the French.

During the eighteenth century, the French and the English fought four colonial wars in North America. In each case, the English and most Iroquois fought the French and other northeastern nations. Not until 1763 did the French admit defeat and cede Canada. The Iroquois reaped the prestige and spoils of victory, but thousands of English, Scots-Irish, and German settlers began pouring across the Appalachians to take land from defeated “French-loving” Indians. Settlement pressures and unscrupulous land speculators angered the Indians, especially Pontiac, chief of the Ottawas. In 1763, he forged a coalition of Delawares, Miamis, Kickapoos, and Shawnees and attacked white settlements in the Ohio Valley. To mollify Pontiac and relieve the pressure on the western nations, Parliament issued the Proclamation of 1763, which prohibited further white settlement in the region. After three more years of fighting, Pontiac signed a peace treaty with England. Except for some nations in upstate New York and along the Gulf Coast, most Indians had been pushed from the eastern seaboard.

Indian resistance was doomed to failure. For one thing, the European population dwarfed them. Except during the first half of the seventeenth century, Indians were always outnumbered. They won some battles but never wars. Worse, they had no immunity to European diseases. Smallpox,

influenza, scarlet fever, whooping cough, and diphtheria decimated Indian communities. Between 1607 and 1776, the European and African population in the British colonies grew to about 2.5 million people while the Indian population dropped to about 600,000. Finally, the westward shift of the white economy destroyed the Indian economy. As the white population increased, the small game disappeared, the buffalo herds were slaughtered, and the land itself was denied to them.