

Part I ---

Old and New Worlds Meet

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The Peoples of Eastern North America

Societies in Transition

30,000–11,000 BCE	Indian peoples migrate to North America from Asia via the Bering Strait.
11,000 BCE	The land bridge disappears as the climate warms.
5000 BCE	Agriculture begins to develop in Tehuacan Valley, Mexico.
1200 BCE	The first Mesoamerican civilization, the Olmecs, emerges.
500 BCE	Mayan civilization flourishes.
500 BCE–400 CE	Adena and Hopewell cultures develop in the Ohio Valley.
600 CE	The Mississippi mound builders emerge.
1000 CE	Eastern Woodlands societies adopt agriculture.
1200 CE	The city of Cahokia's population numbers around 30,000.
1300 CE	The "Little Ice Age" begins.
1400 CE	The Mississippi mound builders disappear. Warfare becomes common among the Eastern Woodlands peoples.
1450 CE	The Iroquois form the League of Five Nations.

1 AMERICA BEFORE COLUMBUS AND THE PROBLEM OF HISTORY

THE STORY OF the North American British colonies begins in America. For well over 12,000 years before Columbus made his accidental landfall in the Bahamas, people had been living on the North and South American continents, where they had created agricultural societies and complex cultures, developed political systems, fought wars, and formed alliances. When Europeans began to arrive, first in 1492 and then with increasing frequency during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it was these indigenous American people who decided whether the newcomers would be welcomed to stay or forced to flee for their lives. Native Americans would make key decisions that shaped diplomatic relationships, influenced the kinds of colonial societies that could be built in North America, and changed the course of empires. To understand how they influenced the colonial process – to understand why they behaved as they did – we need to begin with their story.

The problem for historians is *how* to tell that story. Unlike peoples who had developed a written language, the original Americans left no written records. Although surviving oral traditions can tell us a great deal about Native American origin stories and collective memories, they are far removed in time from the events they describe. Of course Europeans, once they arrived and began observing Native American peoples, produced all sorts of written records: descriptions, memoirs, pictures, maps, and other kinds of documents. All of these have provided historians with additional sources about Native American societies. But the testimony of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europeans about their encounters with indigenous Americans is deeply problematic as a source for twenty-first-century historians. Fifteenth-century Europeans had never imagined that the American continents existed, much less that there were people who had lived here for over 11,000 years. Thus when European observers like Christopher Columbus, Hernando de Soto, Jacques Cartier, and John White tried to understand who these people were and why they acted as they did, they were unable to comprehend this new world except in the context of their own experiences. The lens through which they viewed the Americas produced thousands of distortions and mistakes. Indeed the very term “Indian” was applied because Columbus was mistakenly convinced that he had arrived in Asia.¹

The inaccuracies that crept into the earliest European records of encounters with Native Americans in North America have persisted in shaping the way we imagine the past. For example, one of the most commonly asserted misrepresentations of Native American peoples in the early modern era was that they were simple primitives, people who had not yet been caught up in the historical processes that were transforming the rest of the world by the end of the fifteenth century.² In the past many historians

¹ The authors will employ the terms “Indian” and “Native American” interchangeably to refer to indigenous American peoples, since the use of both are generally accepted in the United States. A plurality of Americans of indigenous descent identify themselves as Indians or American Indians, but many use the term “Native Americans” instead.

² The influence of America on the development of English historical thought from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, is discussed in David Armitage, “The New World and British Historical Thought: From Richard Hakluyt to William Robertson,” in Karen Ordahl Kupperman, ed., *America in European Consciousness, 1493–1750* (Chapel Hill, 1995), 52–75.

unwittingly contributed to this distortion by portraying the Indians as the helpless victims of European colonizers who had superior technology, broader worldly experience, and more lethal diseases.

More recently, however, historians have used a range of sources that go beyond conventional written records to reconstruct the histories of indigenous American peoples in North America *before* the arrival of Europeans. Evidence about climate change has allowed historians to estimate the dates of various changes in the North American environment, while archaeological evidence has provided information about the kinds of societies indigenous peoples developed as they adapted to these changes. Evidence about the behavior of Native Americans after the arrival of Europeans has been re-examined alongside the oral traditions of contemporary Native American peoples and the findings of ethnographers so as to understand that behavior in the context of their own cultural traditions and experiences. These sources have enabled historians to understand that the economies, cultures, and political relationships of Native Americans on the eastern seaboard of North America had already undergone a wrenching historical transformation over the 500 years between approximately 1000 and 1500 CE. Well before Columbus arrived on American shores, millions of Native American peoples had been swept up by a saga of war, diaspora, relocation, and rebirth, decades before any contemporary European even dreamed that they existed.³

2 THE AMERICAS IN ANCIENT TIMES

Scholars generally agree that the first Indian peoples came to North America from Siberia by way of the Bering Strait between 30,000 and 11,000 BCE when the Ice Age lowered sea levels, creating a huge land bridge between Asia and North America. Bands of nomadic hunters followed game from eastern Siberia to Alaska, eventually penetrating both North and South America.

These first Paleo-Indian peoples were essentially hunter-gatherers, their largest quarry being mammoths, large-horned bison, musk ox, large antelope, caribou, and, ironically, horses. The rest of their diet consisted of berries, nuts, fruits, fish, birds, and wildfowl. Their material culture was simple but effective. Animals provided skins for clothing; crude shelters were found in caves, rock overhangs, or made from the branches and bark of trees; while simple canoes or even logs provided the means for crossing rivers. Flint knives and scrapers enabled food and other materials to be prepared, while fire was used for keeping warm and cooking.

³ Until 1945 the study of precontact Indian peoples was left to archaeologists. Postcontact eras were the province of anthropologists and ethnologists. American history proper was considered to begin only with the arrival of Europeans, the Indians thereafter constituting passive and disappearing bystanders. After about 1970 historians began to combine these approaches, as described in Bruce Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers: Canada's "Heroic Age" Reconsidered* (Montreal, 1985), 1–49, 164–72; and James Axtell, “The Ethnohistory of Early America: A Review Essay,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 35 (1978), 110–44. More recently they have incorporated the insights of environmental history. One important account that shows the centrality of climate change and other environmental factors to precontact Native American history is James Rice, *Nature and History in the Potomac Country: From Hunter-Gatherers to the Age of Jefferson* (Baltimore, 2009).

With the gradual warming of the earth's climate around 9000 BCE and the extinction of the larger mammals, the peoples of North and Central America were forced to adapt. First the mammoth disappeared, then the large-horned bison, followed by the horse. Although the people continued to live as hunter-gatherers, they became less migratory, confining their activities to smaller areas. Since the earth's warming had produced a rise in water levels which covered the original land bridge, people in the Americas were essentially cut off from further contact with Asia. Purely indigenous cultures developed. Different language groups became established, with a wide range of individual tongues within each group. By the time that Europeans began to arrive more than 10,000 years later, there were still more than 2,000 languages being spoken in the Americas.⁴

The most momentous phase in the early development of North American societies was the horticultural revolution. The peoples of the Tehuacan Valley of central Mexico, with its warm climate and varied plant species, including a wild ancestor of maize, were the first to develop agriculture around 5000 BCE. Elsewhere, horticulture began with the growing of beans, squash, or gourds; but invariably maize or corn was added at some point. Initially all these crops were cultivated from wild plants, but in time selection of the best seeds or hybridization through cross-pollination produced better strains, giving higher yields. In contrast to Africa, Europe, and Asia, however, no animals except dogs and turkeys (and llamas in South America) could be domesticated, since most of the large mammals that had migrated to the continent had disappeared along with the game. In many ways the lack of livestock did not matter, since the cultivation of beans and maize ensured a high-protein diet, especially when supplemented by meat from hunting.

Once a group of people began to rely on horticulture for their food, profound consequences followed. Cultures were radically altered as communities became more settled to allow the planting, harvesting, and protection of their crops. Horticulture also allowed the support of larger populations, which in turn permitted greater diversification and specialization. It is no coincidence that the beginnings of agriculture corresponded with the appearance of ceramics and the first advances in metallurgy. Specialized skills encouraged trade and the growth of towns. These in turn required more complex administrative systems, which led to the emergence of temporal and religious elites.

The eventual results in Central America and the Andean highlands were the highly complex, densely populated civilizations of the Olmecs, Mayas, Toltecs, Aztecs, and Incas. Each of them could lay claim to impressive technological achievements. In North America the Olmecs, who were active between 1200 and 500 BCE, built large temple mounds faced with stone. They also devised irrigation systems and carved huge heads from blocks of basalt, suggesting not only craftsmanship but sophisticated beliefs and organizational ability. The Mayas, who thrived from 500 BCE to 700 CE, wove elaborate cotton textiles, used gold and silver to fashion intricate jewelry, and constructed large stone buildings incorporating the corbeled vault. Equally impressive was their development of hieroglyphic writing carved in stone or painted on paper, invention of an elaborate calendar based on detailed observation of the solar system, and knowledge of

⁴ The main North American language groups were Wakashan, Salishan, Penutian, Siouan, Iroquoian, Algonquian, Muskogean, Caddoan, Hokaltecan, Azteco-Tanoan, Athapaskan, and Eskimo Aleut.

mathematics. The Aztecs, recent arrivals to central Mexico from further north, managed by the fifteenth century to create an empire of six million people. At its height their capital city of Tenochtitlan had a population of more than 100,000. Built on an artificial island in the middle of a lake and joined to the mainland by stone causeways, Tenochtitlan contained numerous squares, paved streets, stone temples, and other buildings that astounded the Spanish on their arrival in 1519.

North of the Rio Grande the pace of technological, social, and political development was slower, partly as a result of climatic conditions in the aftermath of the Ice Age and partly because it took time before plants bred for cultivation in southern latitudes could be adapted for cultivation much further north. In the Southwest, among the Hohokam and Anasazi pueblo peoples, new varieties of corn, squash, and beans, all originally Mesoamerican plants, began to be cultivated around 2000 BCE. Over time the Hohokam and Anasazi developed complex systems of irrigation to bring water to their crops in the arid climate of the Southwest. They built permanent towns in which they lived in structures made of adobe or stone, grew cotton which they wove into cloth, and developed extensive trade ties with people in Mesoamerica as well as further north by about 700 CE.

In the lower Mississippi Valley and adjacent areas, horticulture first began to emerge after 1500 BCE. Evidence suggests that peoples in these regions may have cultivated edible plants like gourds, sunflowers, goosefoot, and marsh elder, independent of the plant domestication taking place in Mesoamerica around the same time. Eventually the people here acquired the ability to grow maize as well. But just as in the Southwest, the adoption of full-time horticulture was slow; people in the Mississippi Valley region grew plants only to supplement what they could reap from hunting and gathering of wild foods for some time.

Gradually, beginning around 500 BCE, societies organized around part-time or full-time farming emerged in the Midwest and the Southeast. The people in these societies all developed certain cultural practices in common: all built mounds for burial and other religious purposes; all developed urban settlements; all practiced some form of horticulture; all possessed pottery; and all were familiar with copper for making ornaments and tools. Peoples who were part of the Adena cultural complex, in the Ohio Valley, were still largely hunter-gatherers but practiced some horticulture, notably cultivation of gourds and other squashes. As the Adena peoples shifted to agriculture they became more territorial, building burial mounds to commemorate the dead and filling them with numerous practical and ornamental objects to support the deceased in the afterlife. Then came the Hopewell peoples, whose culture flourished not only in the Ohio Valley but in adjacent areas along the Illinois and Miami rivers, from about 100 BCE to 400 CE. Like the Adena peoples, the people of the Hopewell culture built mounds to honor the dead and for other religious purposes, but their mounds comprised concentric circles and other geometric patterns instead of simple squares. Others were grouped together inside an enclosure to elevate houses or other secular structures, suggesting that the Hopewell people lived in sizable towns. Their burial mounds contained material originating from great distances, such as obsidian from the Rockies, copper from Lake Michigan, and conch shells from Florida, evidence that the Hopewell were engaged in widespread trade and commerce.

The Mississippian cultures, emerging around 600 CE, initiated the largest and most complex phase of mound-building activity. Mississippian peoples' mounds comprised large platform edifices grouped around a central plaza. The size and complexity of these sites indicate towns and cities of thousands of inhabitants, suggesting that the Mississippian cultures by now depended primarily on agriculture for their subsistence. The greatest of the Mississippian cities was Cahokia, near present-day St. Louis. Cahokia had an enclosed area of several square miles, containing over 100 earthworks. Thirty thousand people may have lived there at the city's height around 1200 CE. Archaeologists working in Cahokia have uncovered copper chisels, awls, and punches (for piercing leather), needles, harpoons, spear points, and knives, showing that the Mississippian people had developed technologies for working in metal. A small percentage of the dead appear to have been buried with copper brooches, bracelets, gorgets, and clasps for decorative purposes, evidence that Mississippians had developed hierarchical societies, in which members of a high-status group possessed considerably more wealth than the majority of the population. Non-elite Mississippians, in contrast, still used arrowheads, scrapers, knives, hoes, and axes made of bone, shell, or stone.

The advantage of agriculture for a population is its ability to produce more food per acre than hunting and gathering, so that populations can grow and societies become more complex. The disadvantage of agriculture is that it makes a population dependent on particular patterns of rainfall and sunshine. In the event of climate change, hunting and gathering societies in the ancient world would generally move on and adapt, but fully agricultural societies could be devastated. This seems to be what happened to



Figure 1 Cahokia mounds, circa 1150. Painting by William R. Iseminger. Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site.

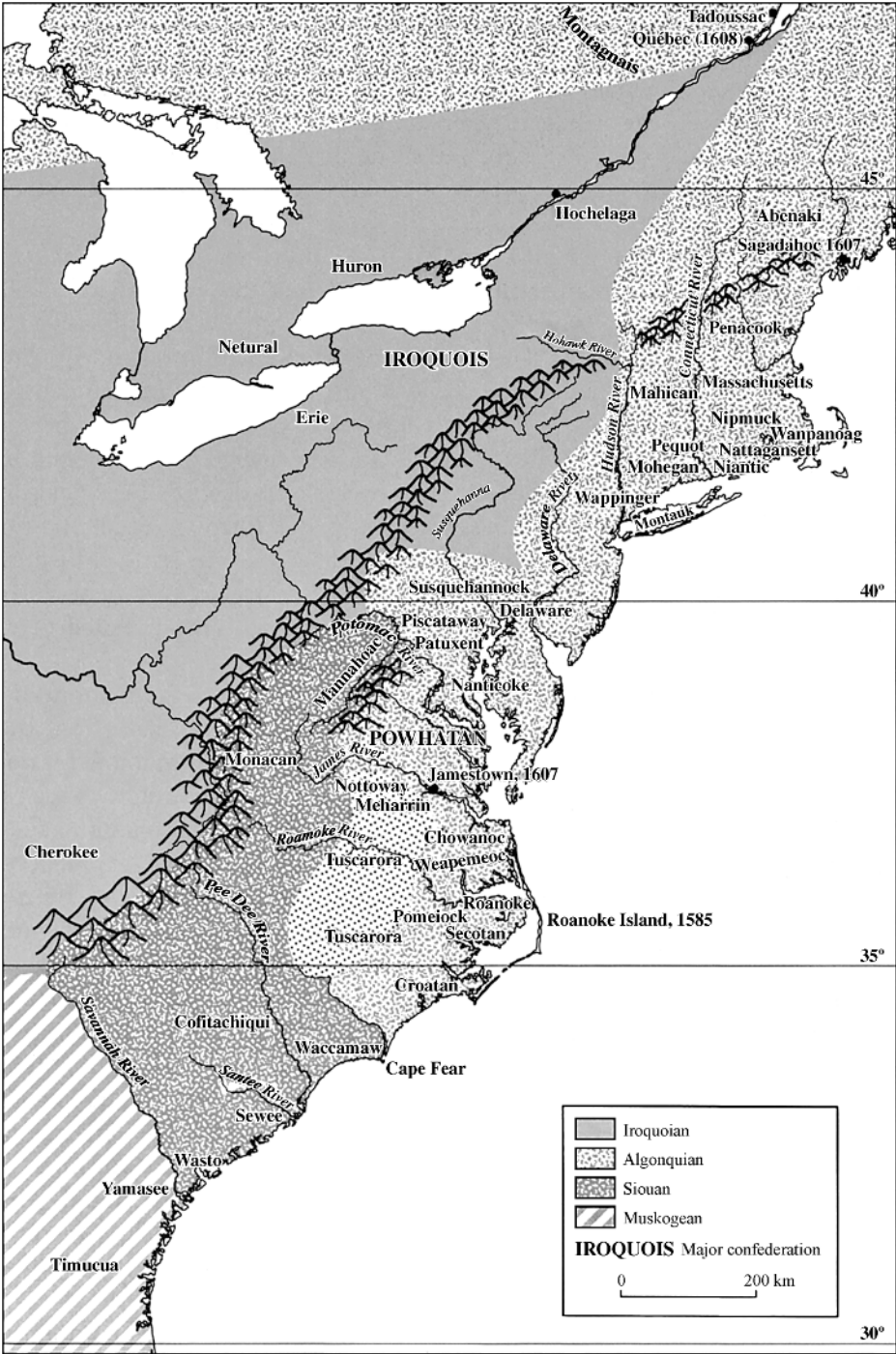
people of the Hohokam and the Anasazi cultures. Between 1100 and 1350 a shift in rainfall patterns led to food shortages, and the Hohokam and Anasazi people abandoned their settlements and migrated to other parts of the Southwest, reorganizing new communities and becoming integrated with other groups in their new locations. Similarly, a cooling of the climate after about 1300 in the Mississippi Valley made farming less productive and created food shortages. The Mississippian mound builders abandoned their cities and towns and migrated south and east, where they reorganized themselves into smaller communities.

In addition to forcing communities to split up and move, climate change commonly produced stresses that increased conflict. Forensic evidence from sites across the continent suggests that rates of violent death increased between 1000 and 1500, most likely caused by increased competition for scarce resources. In the large societies of the Southwest and the Mississippi Valley, internal discord apparently contributed to societal collapse. These societies reorganized themselves into much smaller tribes and chiefdoms, whereupon they were often beset by intense rivalries and shifting coalitions. The main legacy of these peoples' shared past was often a set of enduring rivalries between their new communities.

3 THE EASTERN WOODLANDS, 1000–1300

By 1000 CE the horticultural revolution had spread eastwards, and most Indian peoples in the Eastern Woodlands region, along the Atlantic coast of North America between Florida and southern Canada, began to adopt horticulture for at least part of their diets. A minority of Indian peoples, especially those who lived in cold climates with very short growing seasons such as in northern Canada, spurned farming as a way of life, most likely because they had little incentive to engage in the tedious labor required to grow crops where the land would yield so little and game was still abundant. (Conversely, North American people in temperate regions with rich resources and a low population density, like California, refused to adopt horticulture too, probably because they had no need to give up hunting and gathering.) However, most Eastern Woodlands Indians began farming for at least part of their subsistence, and once they did, particular social and cultural patterns tended to follow.

First, peoples who adopted farming became more sedentary. Instead of living together in small bands whose members moved from one place to another depending on the time of year, Eastern Woodlands peoples began increasingly to live in permanent or semi-permanent villages of 100 or 200 inhabitants near the land they farmed. Farming produced considerably more food than hunting and gathering alone, and populations grew to a substantially greater density than in the past. Estimating the population of the region has been fraught with controversy, as early estimates were based on the observations of Europeans who wanted to convince their sponsors that the land was thinly inhabited. Another problem is that by the time most European observers came to eastern North America, diseases brought by the Spanish may have already caused dramatic depopulation. Current estimates based on the best evidence suggest that before 1492, as many as five million people lived north of the Rio Grande in what would later become the United States. Of these some 30,000 lived in the vicinity



Map 1 Eastern Woodlands coastal peoples, circa 1530–1608.

of the lower Chesapeake Bay and 150,000 in what would become New England, the two regions which Englishmen would first attempt to colonize.⁵

These were linguistically diverse peoples, representing four main linguistic groups by the fifteenth century. Algonquian-speaking peoples occupied the coastal regions from Newfoundland to northern Carolina, though a number also resided around the Great Lakes. Siouan peoples inhabited the coastal areas of the Carolinas. Muskogean peoples lived in Georgia and the Floridas, and Iroquoian peoples lived almost entirely inland from the St. Lawrence Valley and the area southwards to the piedmont of Virginia and the Carolinas. Within each of these language groups there were distinct dialects and some people spoke multiple languages. Common linguistic roots did not necessarily mean close political or cultural ties. Still, many Indian peoples appear to have been receptive to alliances and cooperation with others with whom they shared linguistic similarities. It was relatively common for part or all of a tribe to migrate, particularly if its members had suffered significant population losses, and become integrated into another tribe with a similar language.

Farming techniques were adapted to the environment of the particular region. Because there were no domesticable animal species in North America, the use of animal-drawn plows was of course impossible. Trees were abundant, so clearing the land was a major problem. Trees could be killed by girdling the bark from the trunk and burning the undergrowth, but this did not remove the stumps. Hence planting was done by digging holes between the stumps and then heaping soil around the plants as they grew. Eventually stumps were removed by scorching the roots, though by then the soil had lost much of its fertility. As a result, every 10 or 20 years the inhabitants typically moved to another site. The restricted ability to practice intensive agriculture to some extent limited the density of the population. Most people lived in villages rather than cities.

Despite these constraints, the Indians' farming techniques were efficient and highly productive. Women did all of the farming, using wooden hoes tipped with flint or shell to cultivate tobacco, maize, beans, and squash, which were sown together in the same plot. This method allowed the beans and squash to use the maize for support and also

⁵ Debates about the size of indigenous American populations before Columbus are longstanding. It suited nineteenth- and many early twentieth-century historians to believe that the Indians were few in number to justify their displacement, and early twentieth-century demographers estimated a precontact population of only around one million people north of the Rio Grande and about 10 million throughout the rest of the Americas. The first widespread attempt to reassess the population of the indigenous inhabitants occurred only in the 1960s, when there was greater readiness to acknowledge America's ethnic diversity. Historical anthropologist Henry Dobyns estimated in 1966 that before European contact, as many as 12 million people may have lived north of the Rio Grande and another 80 to 90 million in Central and South America. Although more recent estimates are somewhat lower, it is clear that the subsequent impact of European diseases reduced this population dramatically during the first 300 years of contact with Europeans. The early view is well represented by the work of James Mooney, "Population," in *Handbook of American Indians North of Mexico* (Washington, 1910), and A. L. Kroeber, *Cultural and Natural Areas of Native North America* (Berkeley, 1939). For more recent estimates and analyses, see Henry F. Dobyns, "Estimating Aboriginal American Population: An Appraisal of Techniques with a New Hemisphere Estimate," *Current Anthropology*, 7, 395–416; William M. Denevan, ed., *The Native Population of the Americas in 1492* (Madison, 1976; rev. edn, 1992); Henry F. Dobyns, *Their Number Become Thinned: Native American Population Dynamics in Eastern North America* (Knoxville, 1983); and Russell Thornton, *American Indian Holocaust and Survival: A Population History Since 1492* (Norman, 1987). For an account of the historical debate, see John D. Daniels, "The Indian Population of North America in 1492," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 49 (1992), 298–320.

helped fertilize the soil, since the beans replaced the nitrogen taken by the maize. During the 1580s, the English observer John White in Roanoke, Virginia, noted that a first sowing of corn was made in April, with further sowings in May and June, so that successive crops could be harvested from midsummer until the fall. His companion Thomas Harriot elaborated, commenting that an acre of corn yielded “at least two hundred London Bushelles,” whereas in England 40 bushels of wheat per acre was considered a good yield. On the other hand, Englishmen William Strachey and Henry

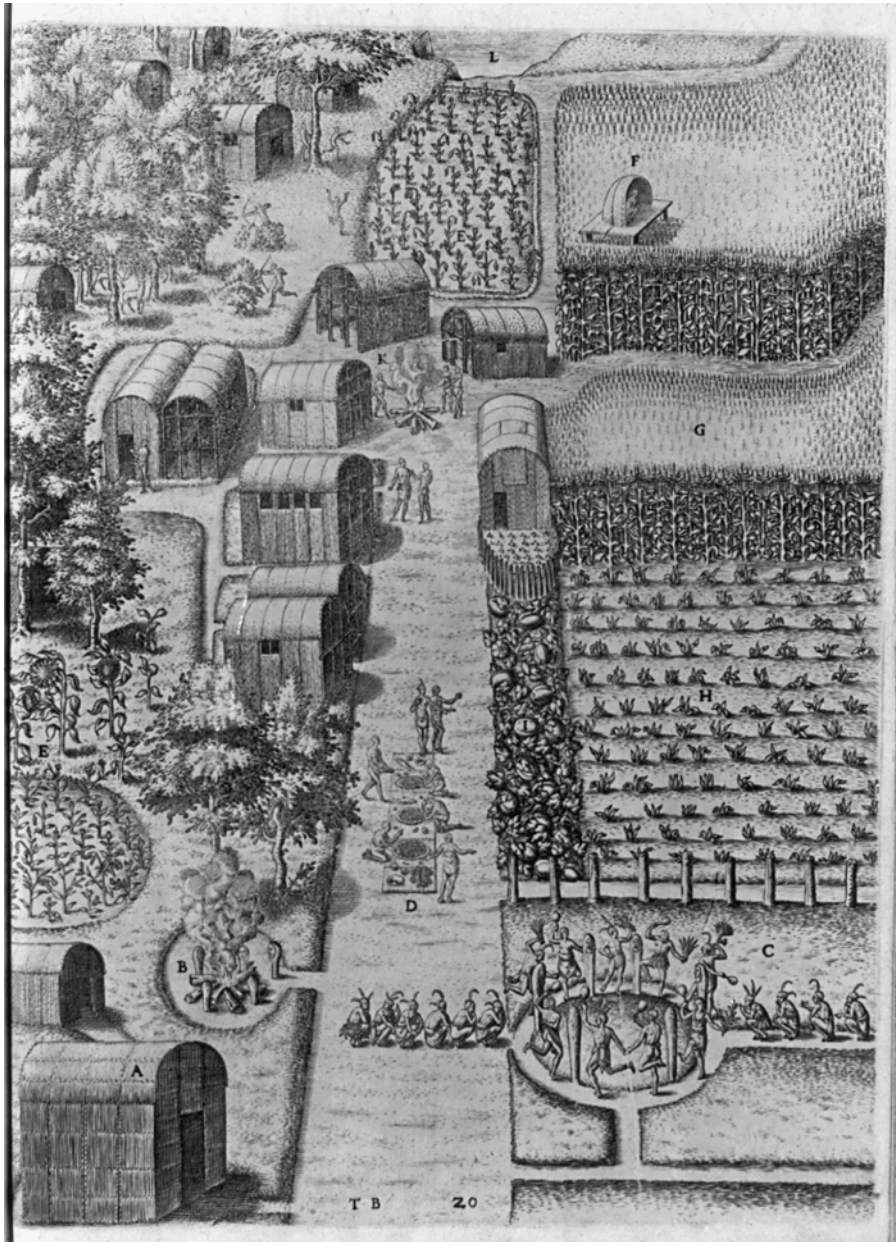


Figure 2 The Indian town of Secotan, by John White. Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

Spelman described the fields at Jamestown as small, while White's drawing of the town of Secotan near Roanoke in 1585 shows trees close to the settlement and only small cultivated plots in between. These observations suggest that a village of 20 or 30 dwellings would typically have about 200 to 300 acres under cultivation.⁶

Horticulture provided between 30 and 70 percent of food requirements, depending on the time of the year and location. Peoples like the Timucuas in Florida enjoyed a long growing season and probably secured two-thirds of their subsistence from horticulture. The Abenakis, on the other hand, who lived just south of the St. Lawrence River in Canada, probably secured less than 50 percent of their food by such means. In any case, other food sources besides domesticated plants were still abundant, and people continued to rely on game, fish, and wildfowl to supplement the food supplies produced in the fields. The particular mix depended what was available and whether a settlement was near the coast, by a river, or on high ground inland. Meanwhile the combination of farming, hunting, and fishing largely determined patterns of work and social life.

Since the women of a village did the majority of the farming, they generally stayed in or near the village for most of the year so they could be close to their fields to cultivate and harvest the crops. During the colder months women had other work to keep them occupied. They built the houses and made baskets, mats, and cooking implements, pounded the corn, processed meat and animal skins, and did all the other things necessary in the village itself. Women also nursed infants and were expected to rear both girls and boys while they were young, although the training of boys usually fell to their uncles (generally considered to be boys' closest adult male kin) as they grew older.

Meanwhile, the men of a village hunted and fished, meaning they spent much of their time away. The principal hunting seasons were fall and early winter when animals were at their prime weight. Deer constituted the most readily available source of meat; bear, fox, raccoon, and beaver were also caught. Since the habitats for these large animals were often at some distance from the village, most adult men left their villages and traveled during the winter hunt, sometimes for weeks at a time. Most animals were either snared or hunted with bows and arrows. However, over time Indian men had also developed ingenious techniques to make hunting easier and more productive. Deer were often caught with the help of fire, being driven by the flames into an ambush. The large trees were not normally affected by such conflagrations, which typically destroyed only the saplings and other undergrowth. Such fires thus not only cleared the woodlands but encouraged the growth of grasses that attracted the deer to return. Fire also helped rid an area of insects and made travel to and from the hunting grounds easier. In addition, clearing the brushwood around a village made it more difficult for an enemy to approach unseen. The undergrowth was often fired twice a year, which accounted for the "parklike" appearance of many woods to the early Europeans.

Before the spring the men generally returned to the village to remain through the summer. For the rest of the year they hunted or fished close to home, sometimes moving to a temporary camp close to the village. One source of meat that could often be

⁶ As suggested above, the observations of European artists and writers necessarily have to be treated with caution. John White's figures tend to have European rather than Indian faces, and he may have emphasized the beauty and orderliness of many aspects of Native American life in order to appeal to potential investors in colonial ventures. But the sketches and memoirs of early European observers still provide valuable eyewitness evidence about the culture of the eastern Indian peoples, when used critically.



Figure 3 Indian hunter, by John White. From *Collectiones peregrinationum in Indiam orientalem et Indiam occidentalem* (Francof., 1590). The Bodleian Library, Oxford.

found close at hand was wildfowl, abundant during spring and fall when migratory birds such as passenger pigeons, Canada geese, and other species passed by. John Smith, one of the leaders at Jamestown, noted in 1608 as winter approached, the “rivers became so covered with swans, geese, ducks, and cranes, that we daily feasted.”⁷ Another prolific wildfowl in most regions was turkey, which providentially did not migrate and was available in large numbers. The availability of fish varied from one region to another. Along the coast men fished in shallow waters using dugout tree logs or wood-framed birch bark canoes. On the rivers they could fish either in boats or from the bank, using nets made from vegetable fibers or weirs constructed with poles or rocks, which channeled the fish into a confined area where they were either speared or caught by hand. They also used lines tipped with bone hooks. Fish were abundant. The Chesapeake and Delaware bays offered shad, bass, sturgeon, and eels; the rivers of New England were equally stocked in spring with spawning runs of alewives, salmon, and eels; and the coastal waters proliferated with clams and other shellfish.

In general the Indian peoples of eastern North America enjoyed a relatively balanced and healthy diet; Europeans were continually struck by their well-proportioned limbs and physical agility. So prolific were their food sources that the production or accumulation of surpluses for resale was rarely considered. Only corn was stored year-round, though dried fish and meat were kept for a time. In general the Indians knew that they could survive each season until the next part of the food cycle arrived.

⁷ Smith may have been exaggerating here so far as he and his companions were concerned, since it was one thing to describe the game, but another to catch it (see Chapter 3, section 1).

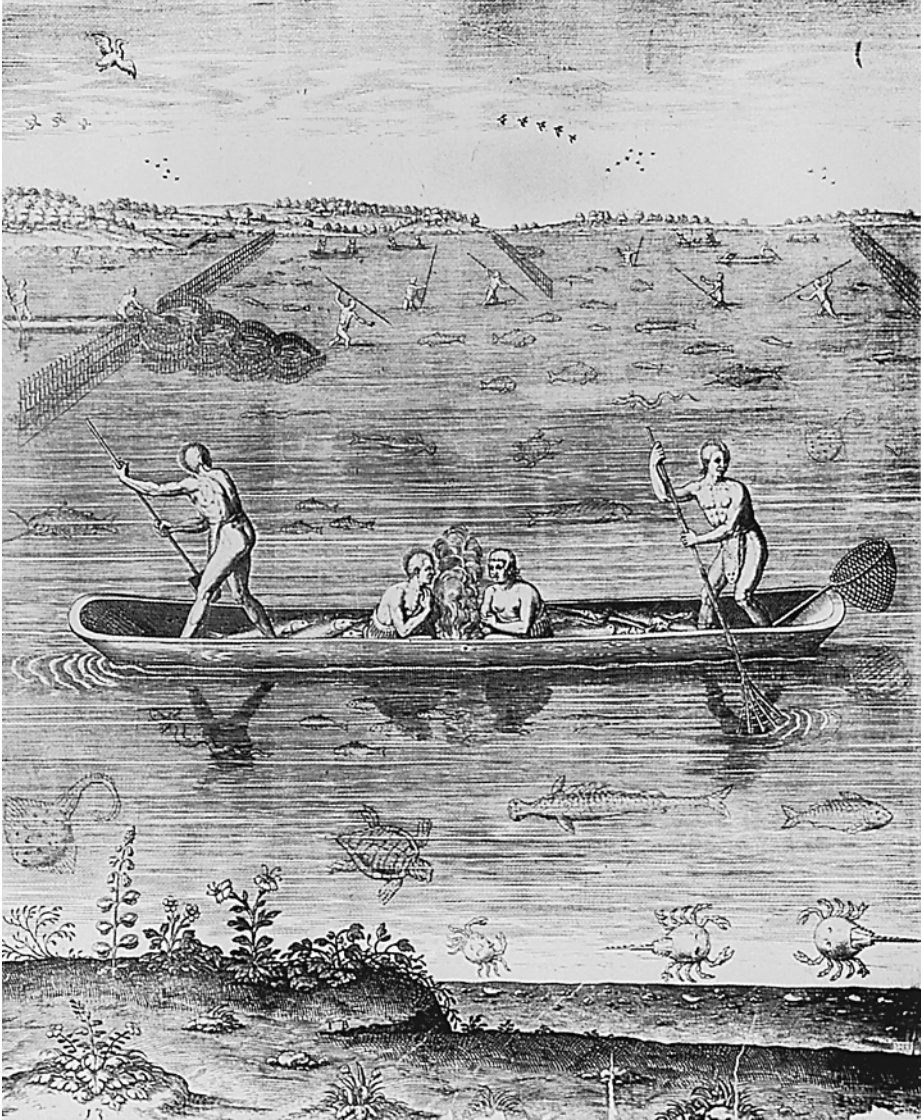


Figure 4 Indians fishing, by John White. From *Collectiones peregrinationum in Indiam orientalem et Indiam occidentalem* (Francof., 1590). The Bodleian Library, Oxford.

This philosophy led many Europeans to condemn them for their want of foresight and lack of work ethic. The Indians seemingly ignored the biblical command to have “dominion” over the earth and every living creature in it. But in reality the Indians had developed a different system than the Europeans for supporting their societies, taking advantage of an abundant variety of food sources to feed their populations, in addition to what they could support through farming. Their system allowed their societies to thrive.

Relationships between men and women were considerably more egalitarian among the Eastern Woodlands peoples than in Europe, where patriarchy was the norm.

DOCUMENT 1

The upbringing of children, Father Gabriel Sagard, 1632, reprinted in James Axtell, ed., *The Indian Peoples of Eastern America: A Documentary History of the Sexes* (New York, 1995)

The following is a description by a French Franciscan monk of the parenting styles of Hurons he encountered in present-day Canada. Father Sagard's description reflects his European upbringing, and shows a failure to appreciate that the Huron used other mechanisms, including example, encouragement, public shaming and social ostracism, to teach their children to become self-disciplined. Questions to consider: What kinds of assumptions does Father Sagard make about children? What kinds of assumptions do you think the Huron made about children?

Nevertheless they love their children dearly, in spite of . . . the fact that they are very naughty children, paying them little respect, and hardly more obedience; for unhappily in these lands the young have no respect for the old, nor are children obedient to their parents, and moreover there is no [corporal] punishment for any fault. For this reason everybody lives in complete freedom and does what he thinks fit; and parents, for failure to punish their children, are often compelled to suffer wrongdoing at their hands, sometimes being beaten and flouted to their face. This is conduct too shocking and smacks of nothing less than the brute beast. Bad example, and bad bringing up, without punishment or correction, are the causes of all this lack of decency.

As farmers, women typically produced at least half of the food, a contribution that probably enhanced their importance within their societies. Most Native American groups were matrilineal and often matrilocal (meaning the couple lived with the wife's kin, and the house belonged to the wife). Thus children took their mother's name and looked to her relatives for protection and support. Women had considerable sexual freedom, at least before marriage. And in most societies, divorce was easily available, merely requiring an agreement by the two parties. A woman who was dissatisfied with her husband could leave him and marry a different partner instead. Since the house belonged to her, of course it was the man who left the household once a marriage ended. The absence of patriarchy was also apparent in the Indians' lenient attitude towards children, who were rarely punished and often indulged. Children were teased as a way of getting them to accept society's norms, but were not struck or physically threatened.⁸

⁸ These practices caused considerable confusion for Europeans who were accustomed to children taking the name of their father and receiving their inheritance from him. To Europeans, a matrilineal society implied a society without male control or proper order. Ann Plane, *Colonial Intimacies: Indian Marriage in Early New England* (Ithaca, 2000), provides a comparison between Native American and English marriage practices, and shows how English colonizers in early New England forced the Indians to change their practices.

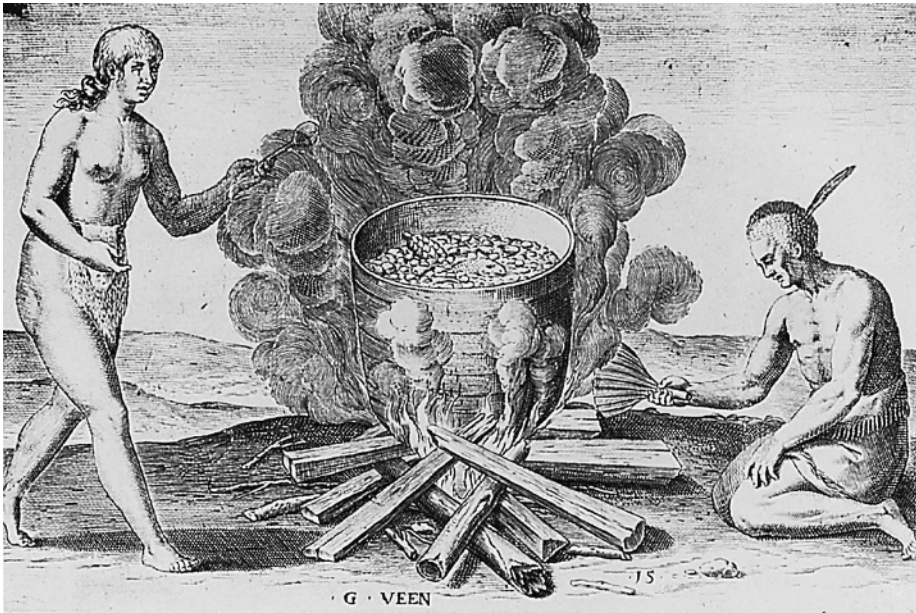


Figure 5 Indian man and woman preparing a meal, by John White. From *Collectiones peregrinationum in Indiam orientalem et Indiam occidentalem* (Francof., 1590). The Bodleian Library, Oxford.

The basic social unit in most Indian nations was the clan, a kinship group which was usually organized around matrilineal lines. A man belonged to the clan of his mother, and his primary obligations were to that clan. Although a man did apparently have a kinship relationship with his father, members of his father's clan were generally not considered to be kin. Kinship obligations within the clan were the most important bonds a person had. As one recent historian has commented, "Kin taught children the ways of the world, from the secrets of making pots or arrows to the enemies of their people, from proper behavior toward one's fellow villagers to the mysterious forces controlling the universe . . . Kin met to celebrate a young hunter's first kill or decide on the propriety of a marriage offer. Kin avenged one when one was harmed, took care of one in sickness, and mourned one after death."⁹ Clans also offered a means of minimizing conflict and increasing the political and economic effectiveness of families. In due course they facilitated a number of complementary objectives. Hospitality could be sought from someone of the same clan, no matter how distant, which was especially useful in a society where men spent so much time away from home hunting or making war.

While clans served as a force for social cohesion, they could also provide the impetus for their members to go to war. The purpose of warfare in Eastern Woodlands societies was not to conquer territory, as in European societies, but to restore harmony and balance to a clan whose members had somehow been injured or aggrieved. Its underlying logic was related to concepts of law and crime. If a clan member was killed, the most important legal

⁹ James H. Merrell, *The Indians' New World: Catawbas and Their Neighbors from European Contact through the Era of Removal* (Chapel Hill, 1989), 20.

consequence was not really punishment of the guilty party (the emphasis in English law) but providing compensation for the grieving relatives. The clan had a collective obligation to avenge the death of their kinsman by taking a life for the life that had been lost. In theory the taking of the second life evened the score and ended further killing.

War was typically, at least in part, an extension of this principle of retaliation. Native American cultures in North America usually incorporated the belief that the spirits of those who had been killed in battle could not rest until they had been avenged. Unlike soldiers in wars fought in European state-based societies, whose object was to kill as many enemies as possible and take control of territory, the task of an Indian warrior was to capture a member of an enemy tribe and bring the captive back to his clan. Particularly among Iroquoian-speaking peoples, clan members would then decide whether to adopt or enslave the captives to serve as symbolic substitutes for their lost family members (usually the fate of women and children), or to exact revenge through a ritualized execution. Executions were carried out by the entire clan, with the victim often being maimed (scalps removed, fingers cut off) before being slowly burned alive. All the while the victim was expected to prove his courage and his manhood by singing bravely and showing no fear of death. The process, as anthropologists and ethnohistorians have suggested, relieved feelings of anger and grief and restored the clan to an emotional balance so that they could return to normalcy. Wars conducted in this manner have been called "mourning wars."

The logic of mourning wars inhibited the scope of war making, since the point was to bring back captives to restore the dead, rather than to kill as many of the enemy as possible. War parties were usually small, while arrows and tomahawks tipped with flint or horn were only moderately lethal. Battle tactics often involved stealth and surprise attacks instead of frontal attacks or mass charges. On the other hand, war making served other functions for Indian societies besides the taking of captives, so they could result in killing for other purposes. Performing courageously in battle was an important way for young men to prove their manhood and to earn prestige and status within their clans. Taking scalps as trophies of one's success in battle was a practice in some Indian cultures (much as taking the heads or ears of defeated enemies was a practice in parts of Europe), long before Europeans began offering bounties for scalps. Moreover, war could also be a means of controlling territory to ensure game and food supplies, although Native Americans did not need to control territory in the European manner; simply depopulating an area was enough to assert their claim. Warfare to occupy territory would have resulted in needless killing on a larger scale.¹⁰

¹⁰ Although such practices may seem barbarous or cruel, they were no more so than European practices like drawing and quartering people found guilty of crimes, pillaging the villages of enemies, and enslaving prisoners of war, practices which in European state-based societies took place on a much larger scale. Ethnohistorians who have considered the differences between European and Indian warfare include Francis Jennings, *The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest* (New York, 1975), ch. 9; James Axtell, *The European and the Indian: Essays in the Ethnohistory of Colonial America* (New York, 1981); Daniel K. Richter, "War and Culture: The Iroquois Experience," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 40 (1983), 529–37; Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers*; and Colin G. Calloway, *New Worlds for All: Indians, Europeans, and the Remaking of Early America* (Baltimore, 1997), ch. 5. An analysis of the importance of war for Iroquoian, Algonquian, English, and Anglo-American manhood may be found in Ann M. Little, *Abraham in Arms: War and Gender in Colonial New England* (Philadelphia, 2007).

DOCUMENT 2

The Indian method of warfare, Thomas Harriot, 1588, reprinted in Karen Ordahl Kupperman, ed., *Major Problems in American Colonial History: Documents and Essays* (Lexington, Mass., 1993), 13

This document by a sixteenth-century English naturalist is based on his observations of coastal Algonquian Indians around Roanoke, Virginia. Questions to consider: What methods of fighting does he describe? What assumptions does he make about the Indians' fighting methods and their effectiveness?

Their manner of wars amongst themselves is either by sudden surprising one another, most commonly about the dawning of the day, or moonlight, or else by ambushes or some subtle devices. Set battles are very rare, except it fall where there are many trees, where either part may have some hope of defence, after the delivery of every arrow, in leaping behind some or other.

If there fall out any wars between us and them, what their fight is likely to be, we having advantages against them so many manner of ways, as by our discipline, our strange weapons and devices else, especially by ordinance great and small, it may easily be imagined; by the experience we have had in some places, the turning up of their heels against us in running away was their best defence.

Another key aspect of Eastern Woodlands societies that had began to develop by 1300 was a highly participatory and egalitarian type of political organization, quite unlike the hierarchical political organizations of European monarchies. Decisions about war, peace, and diplomatic alliances provided the main subject of political deliberation among Eastern Woodlands people, whose decisions were mostly made at a local level within each individual village or town. A village was usually led by a chief or head man, who had generally inherited the position, though leadership ability was also essential. Succession among the Algonquian peoples was largely through the female line, passing from a woman's eldest son through the younger brothers to the sisters and then the heirs of the eldest sister. Other peoples allowed women an expanded role in the selection process. For example, among the Iroquois it was village women who chose the chief (though he was always a male.) While chiefs periodically deliberated together in a tribal council with other village chiefs, it was understood that each clan or village made its own decisions and was not bound by the will of the others. Indeed, a chief's authority within his own village was quite limited. Decision making was highly democratic and chiefs led by persuasion rather than by command. Essentially the only way to make a binding political decision (such as a treaty) was to ensure that the men involved had all agreed to it. Although women did not generally participate in deliberations about war and peace, among many peoples the older women in a clan could call upon the young male warriors to avenge a death and thus could exercise considerable influence in war-making councils.

4 EASTERN WOODLANDS SOCIETIES IN TRANSITION, 1300–1500

These patterns of social life had become fairly well established in Eastern Woodlands societies when they were disrupted by the same phenomenon that was transforming the societies of the Mississippi Valley: climate change. The Little Ice Age, beginning around 1300 CE, was a period of global cooling that would last through the eighteenth century. Temperatures dropped: spring arrived later, and winter frosts came earlier, shortening the growing season and making harvests unpredictable. For people who had become dependent on agriculture, even a small change in the climate could be devastating. The consequences were especially severe in the north, where growing seasons became shorter than were needed to produce enough food to sustain a village.

To survive, people in the Eastern Woodlands began to migrate, usually to more fertile land at lower altitudes and lower latitudes where they could continue to support themselves through farming. As they moved, clans invariably crossed boundaries and encroached on the claims of other clans. People became more territorial; increased competition for the best land resulted in more frequent warfare between peoples. War, of course, caused death and grieving, and given the logic of the mourning war these new deaths produced pressure for still more warfare. Occasional skirmishes gave way to frequent raids, which then required retaliation, in a destructive cycle that had the potential to destroy entire societies. The increased frequency of warfare became a new challenge to which people would be forced to adapt.

One way in which Indian peoples coped was by developing more intricate trading relationships with other clans or tribes. Trade meant something different for Native Americans than it did for Europeans. The exchange of goods was part of a gift culture rather than the operation of a commercial market; it provided an important mechanism for building trust and friendship, in addition to acquiring goods. Among Native Americans status was measured by the ability to give rather than to possess. In this context, trade was actually a form of mutual gift-giving, which had the effect of raising the status of each of the givers and allowing each of them to feel magnanimous. Gift-giving ceremonies played an important role when an alliance was being formed or a treaty agreed to because they helped to bolster mutual feelings of goodwill. Gifts were also important when treaties were renewed or reconfirmed; good feelings made it likely that an amicable relationship would continue.¹¹

As trade and alliances became more important, people's work priorities may have changed somewhat, as they spent more of their time producing objects that were highly prized in trade, like ceramics or ornaments made from copper and shell beads. Some

¹¹ The argument that trade was an essential aspect of American Indian life before European contact is made by Helen C. Rountree, ed., *Powhatan Foreign Relations, 1500–1722* (Charlottesville, 1993). Several others argue that it was less important before the arrival of Europeans. See Daniel K. Richter, *The Ordeal of the Longhouse: The Peoples of the Iroquois League in the Era of European Colonization* (Chapel Hill, 1992), 28, and Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers*, 104, 183. For the suggestion that increased migration, warfare, trade, and political consolidation all began well before the arrival of Europeans and resulted from climate change see Rice, *Nature and History in the Potomac Country*.



Figure 6 The Algonquian Indian village of Pomeiock, Gibbs Creek, North Carolina, with protective stockade. Sketch from observations made by English expedition under John White in 1585. Archaeologists have found that stockaded villages became more common in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, presumably in response to the increased likelihood of enemy raids. © World History Archive/Alamy.

people may have stepped up their production of food so as to have a valuable commodity to trade for other goods. For example, according to the Franciscan monk Pierre Sagard, who visited the Great Lakes in the 1630s, the Huron sowed enough corn for two or three years, “either for fear that some bad season may visit them or else in order to trade it to other nations for furs and other things.”

Another adaptation for many clans in the Eastern Woodlands was to develop more consolidated forms of political authority. The best example – and quite probably the first – was the Iroquois Great League of Peace, or the Iroquois Five Nations. After having made war upon one another for many years, village and tribal leaders in five separate Iroquoian-speaking tribes (also called nations) reached an agreement in approximately 1450 to stop the bloodshed. After reaching this accord the warriors of the Mohawk, Onondaga, Cayuga, Oneida, and Seneca nations regarded one another as members of the same people, and stopped waging war against each other. Members of the Iroquois League now held annual meetings to renew their bonds of friendship,

and killing between members effectively ceased. However, the League did not end Iroquois war-making against other groups. The culture of warfare had become too entrenched, and young men continued to feel pressure to go to war in order to prove their manhood. Having agreed to avoid war with one another, the members of the League instead turned their aggressions against neighboring peoples. In time the confederacy became a powerful alliance that allowed its members to call upon other members to help them against their enemies.

Facing increased aggression from the Iroquois Five Nations, other tribes were now forced to adapt. The Iroquoian-speaking Susquehannocks, for example, migrated south from the upper Susquehannock River in modern Pennsylvania and into southern Pennsylvania or Maryland in order to escape Iroquois raiders. Meanwhile, the Hurons, another group of Iroquoian speakers, formed their own confederacy so as to be able to defend themselves more effectively against the Five Nations. Many Eastern Woodlands villages came together to form chiefdoms led by a single ruler who could coordinate diplomatic policy for the entire group. The effect of these kinds of changes was in many cases to create more hierarchical political structures, with chiefs being able to demand tribute from subordinate group members. The most prominent such chief along the eastern seaboard was Wahunsonacock, chief of the Powhatan Confederacy, who at some time during the late sixteenth century extended his authority over 31 tribes in the Chesapeake region. A similar consolidation was taking place among the Piscataway and Patuxent peoples higher up the coast. These confederacies in turn often dominated smaller tribes in their respective regions, causing new tensions. The specific rivalries varied from place to place, but they existed in each region, as part of the continual competition for resources in a changing environment.

The peoples who lived north of the Rio Grande would have no contact at all with Europeans until the sixteenth century, and sustained contact would begin only in the 1560s. Already, though, they had undergone profound historical changes. The largest civilization centers, in the Southwest and the Midwest, had collapsed. New patterns of collective life had developed. New rivalries had formed. Trade ties and alliances had been forged, governed by long-established, commonly understood norms. It was these rivalries and alliances into which Europeans would be swept when they first began to arrive on North American shores.

5 EARLIEST CONTACTS WITH EUROPEANS

During the sixteenth century, Native Americans in North America would begin to have sporadic contacts with small groups of Europeans, as we shall see in Chapter 2. Their reactions to Europeans would be shaped by the cultural practices they had developed over the previous centuries. Native American people were generally receptive to trade if it was offered, since trade goods could be used to consolidate friendships and build alliances. An alliance with a group of Europeans could consolidate a chief's leadership position within a newly organized confederacy, or provide a much needed shield for a smaller tribe that was struggling to retain its autonomy in the face of threats from a larger group. As individuals faced the choice of trading with a group of strangers or

trying to drive them away, they would make decisions to promote the interests of their clans and tribes in a competitive political environment. The sum of their choices could well determine the fate of a party of European explorers or a group of colonists.

When Europeans began to arrive in North America during the sixteenth century, they would in turn shape the societies of the Native Americans they encountered, although often without understanding what they were doing. Probably the Europeans' most significant impact on Native Americans during the early years was to expose them to new diseases. Native Americans had their share of diseases before contact with Europeans, including syphilis, hepatitis, encephalitis, polio, and dental caries. However, various contagious diseases including smallpox, whooping cough, chicken pox, diphtheria, influenza, scarlet fever, typhus, dysentery, cholera, measles, and yellow fever were unknown in the Western Hemisphere before 1492. For thousands of years the peoples of Africa, Asia, and Europe had exchanged pathogens – sometimes with devastating results, such as the outbreak of bubonic plague in fourteenth-century England. The long-term effect of these exchanges was constant reimmunization of the inhabitants of the Old World against a huge array of diseases. People with a natural immunity to a disease survived, reproduced, and passed on their immunity to at least some of their children. No matter how devastating the epidemic, the population always recovered. But this microbiological exchange did not take place among the Native American peoples, who had been cut off from the rest of the world since 11,000 BCE.¹² As a result Native American populations had no immunities to Old World pathogens.

When Old World diseases reached the Americas, they caused what are known as “virgin soil epidemics” and devastated huge proportions of the population. The problem for the Indian peoples was that, as soon as one epidemic passed, the survivors were often afflicted by another. Even a single pathogen could devastate a community, leaving crops unattended, the game not hunted, and survivors so emotionally devastated that they sometimes even lost their will to fight against the next outbreak. After an illness, communities sometimes lost the skills and resources to remain economically viable, let alone defend themselves from external attack.

Calculating the effects of these diseases on the peoples living north of the Rio Grande before the arrival of permanent European colonists is difficult given the paucity of the evidence. When early European explorers traveled through the Southeast they found deserted towns, devastated by what the inhabitants called a “pest.” Had they been killed by European diseases, or something else? Nobody knows. More than a century later,

¹² The concept of virgin soil epidemics is explained in Alfred W. Crosby, “Virgin Soil Epidemics as a Factor in the Aboriginal Depopulation in America,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 33 (1976), 289–99. Some scholars have argued that the Americas were not totally isolated after the submerging of the land bridge. For a discussion of possible transoceanic contacts before 1492 with Australasia, China, Japan, India, Africa, and the ancient Mediterranean world, see Jesse D. Jennings, ed., *Ancient North Americans* (San Francisco, 1978), 557–613. Recently epidemiologist David S. Jones has criticized historians for oversimplifying the idea of virgin soil epidemics in “Virgin Soils Revisited,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 60 (2003), 703–42, observing that resistance to disease is a complex phenomenon not reducible to simple genetic immunity. Very large numbers of Indians eventually died from Old World diseases carried to North America by Europeans. However, the process was more complex than historians once believed.

when English colonizers reached the Southeast, the great towns and temples once observed by the earliest Spanish explorers were gone. Had these civilizations been devastated by European diseases after the Spanish left? Again, nobody knows. Among the Eastern Woodlands peoples, historians are sure that some Indians were exposed to new diseases by the traders and occasional slavers who came sporadically to their shores before the arrival of European colonizers. For example, a devastating epidemic struck the Plymouth Bay region in the early 1600s, a few years before the arrival of the Pilgrims, which killed as much as 75 percent of the population. But historians now believe that diseases spread intermittently, affecting local populations at different times. Thus people further inland may not have been touched.

Where epidemics did occur, they increased the intensity of other processes that were already underway. Depopulation caused by disease heightened existing rivalries and increased warfare between tribes, as some peoples went to war with their neighbors in order to gain captives and restore their numbers. Population movements probably also increased. For example, historians know that the Huron people responded to population losses by migrating north and west into what is now Ontario in order to join together with kin. Was this population loss spurred by Old World epidemics or by climate change? Historians remain divided, but both forces were probably influential.¹³

When European ships began to arrive on North American shores during the sixteenth century they also brought trade goods, which they typically traded for fish or furs. As we have seen, gift-giving and trade had long played an important part in Native American cultures, and the Indians themselves understood their establishment of trade ties with Europeans in traditional terms as a mechanism for building friendships with strangers. However the Indians' cultures were not static; they would continue to adapt after Europeans arrived just as they had adapted to other changes in the past. Those Indians who lived along the Canadian coast and took part most frequently in exchanges with Europeans were already, by the end of the sixteenth century, changing their views of trade. While gifts had traditionally been valued for their beauty, some Canadian peoples had come to value certain European goods for their utility instead. Steel could be used to fashion knives and arrowheads that were sharper than similar implements made of flint or bone; brass cooking pots were lighter and often more durable than cooking pots made of clay. Demand for useful goods like these was rising, although gifts of beautiful objects like colorful glass beads were still welcomed.

Thus the impact of contacts between Native Americans and Europeans was beginning to be apparent by the late sixteenth century among a few of the peoples of North America. Epidemics had occurred, leaving some villages weakened and others untouched. Some Native Americans had learned that the newcomers were dangerous and untrustworthy. Others had gained valuable trading partners, thereby elevating their own status within their regions. What is important for us to understand, as we look at the consequences of the increasingly frequent contacts between Native Americans and

¹³ On the contributions of disease as opposed to other factors to intertribal conflict before 1607, see James H. Merrell, *The Indians' New World: Catawbas and Their Neighbors from European Contact through the Era of Removal* (New York, 1989); Neal Salisbury, "The Indians' Old World: Native Americans and the Coming of Europeans," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 53 (1996), 435–58; and Daniel K. Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of Early America* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001).

DOCUMENT 3

A first meeting with Europeans, printed in Colin G. Calloway, ed., *The World Turned Upside Down: Indian Voices from Early America* (Boston 1994), 35–8

This account of Henry Hudson's arrival in 1609 was written down in the mid eighteenth century by a Protestant missionary, John Heckewelder, after talking to some Delaware Indians whose ancestors had inhabited the area of Manhattan. Questions to consider: How and why might the Delaware storytellers have reframed this story for the benefit of their European listener? According to the storytellers, what were the first reactions by the Indians to the arrival of this European ship? Would you characterize them as open or hostile to the Europeans? What might explain their responses?

A long time ago, when there was no such thing known to the Indians as people with a white skin [their expression], some Indians who had been out fishing, and where the sea widens, espied at a great distance something remarkably large swimming, or floating on the water, and such as they had never seen before. They immediately returning to the shore, apprised their countrymen of what they had seen, and pressed them to go out with them and discover what it might be. These together hurried out, and saw to their great surprise the phenomenon, but could not agree what it might be; some concluding it either to be an uncommon large fish, or other animal, while others were of the opinion it must be some very large house. It was at length agreed among those who were spectators, that as this phenomenon moved towards the land, whether or not it was an animal, or anything that had life in it, it would be well to inform all the Indians on the inhabited islands of what they had seen, and put them on their guard. Accordingly, they sent runners and watermen off to carry the news to their scattered chiefs, that these might send off in every direction for the warriors to come in. These arriving in numbers, and themselves viewing the strange appearance, and that it was actually moving towards them (the entrance of the river or bay), concluded it to be a large canoe or house, in which the great Mannitto (great or Supreme Being) himself was, and that he probably was coming to visit them. By this time the chiefs of the different tribes were assembled on York island, and were counselling (or deliberating) on the manner they should receive their Mannitto on his arrival. Every step had been taken to be well provided with plenty of meat for a sacrifice; the women were required to prepare the best victuals; idols or images were examined and put in order; and a grand dance was supposed not only to be an agreeable entertainment for the Mannitto, but it might, with the addition of a sacrifice, contribute towards appeasing him, in case he was angry with them. The conjurers were also set to work, to determine what the meaning of this phenomenon was, and what the result would be. Both to these, and to the chiefs and wise men of the nation, men, women and children were looking up for advice and protection. Between hope and fear, and in confusion, a dance commenced. While in this situation fresh runners arrive declaring it a house of

various colours, crowded with living creatures. It now appears to be certain that it is the great Mannitto bringing them some kind of game such as they had not before; but other runners soon after arriving, declare it a large house of various colours, full of people yet of quite a different colour than they [the Indians] are of; that they also dressed in a different manner from them, and one in particular appeared altogether red, which must be the Mannitto himself . . . Many are for running off into the woods, but are pressed to stay, in order not to give offense to their visitors.

Europeans during the seventeenth century, is that native peoples dealt with them in ways that made sense within the context of their own experiences and cultures. As we shall see, their decisions would shape the story of the North American colonies from beginning to end.