

The Native Americans

1.1 Introduction

As a cold winter wind howls outside, the children huddle under thick fur blankets. They listen to their grandmother's soothing voice. "In the beginning there was the Great Spirit," Grandmother begins, "who ruled over a world of sky and water." Then the Great Spirit, says Grandmother, created land, plants, and animals. Finally, from living wood, the Great Spirit carved people for the new world.

These Abenaki children of New England are learning how their people began. Most groups have beliefs about where they came from. You may have heard stories about how your own relatives first arrived in America. But do you know where your ancestors were living 10,000 years ago?

Only if you are Native American did you have relatives in America that long ago. Europeans and other groups did not start arriving until a little more than 500 years ago. For thousands of years, these First People had the American continents to themselves. In this chapter, you will learn about these resourceful people and the creative ways they developed to live in tune with the natural world.

Even today, scientists are trying to find out more about the first Americans. These early people left few written records to tell us what their lives were like, so researchers study other items they left behind. What has survived? Not much. A few animal and human bones, some stone and metal tools, bits of pottery. Like detectives, scientists sift through these clues, trying to imagine how these people lived and how their lives changed over time. When scientists find a new object, they try to figure out whether it supports their current ideas or suggests new ones.

In your lifetime, scientists will probably learn much more about the first Americans and may revise many of their conclusions. This chapter tells these people's stories as we know them today.

1.2 Migration Routes of the First Americans

The first Americans probably **migrated** on foot from Siberia, in Asia, to present-day Alaska. Today, Alaska and Asia are separated by a strip of ocean called the Bering Strait. But there was a time when a land bridge connected them.

Across a Land Bridge About 30,000 years ago, the most recent Ice Age began. As temperatures fell, much of the earth was covered by glaciers, sheets of ice up to a mile thick. With water locked up in the glaciers, the level of the oceans dropped 200 feet. This exposed a wide bridge of land between Asia and North America that scientists call Beringia.

In the summer, Beringia's grasslands attracted large Asian mammals, such as mammoths, long-haired cousins of the elephant. Over thousands of years, the animals slowly spread eastward. Generations of Siberian hunter families followed. Armed with only stone-tipped spears, they killed these huge, powerful animals for food. Eventually, perhaps between 10,000 and 20,000 years ago, some of them reached America. Other migrants may have traveled along the coast of Beringia by boat to catch fish, seals, and other marine mammals.

Migrating East and South Once in America, hunters followed the animals south, where spring brought fresh grasses. Then, about 10,000 years ago, the earth warmed up again. As the glaciers melted and the oceans rose, the land bridge disappeared. Mammoths and other traditional prey began to die off, perhaps from disease, over hunting, or the change in the climate.

Native Americans now had to find new sources of food and new materials for clothing and shelter. So they became hunter-gatherers, catching smaller animals, fishing more, and collecting edible plants and seeds. Over thousands of years, they spread across the two American continents, from the Pacific to the Atlantic, and from Alaska all the way to the tip of South America.

1.3 Native Americans Adapt to the Environment

Native Americans lived in a variety of places, from snowy forests to dry deserts and vast grasslands. Each of these kinds of places is an **environment**. An environment includes everything that surrounds us—land, water, animals, and plants. Each environment also has a climate, or long-term weather pattern. Groups of Native Americans survived by adapting, or changing, their style of living to suit each environment, its climate, and its **natural resources**.

Using Natural Resources Native Americans learned to use the natural resources in their environments for food, clothing, and shelter. In the frigid regions of the far north, early Americans survived by hunting caribou in the summer and sea mammals in the winter. They fashioned warm, hooded clothing from animal skins. To avoid being blinded by the glare of the sun shining on snow, they made goggles out of bone with slits to see through.

The people of the north lived most of the year in houses made from driftwood and animal skins. In winter, hunters built temporary shelters called *iglus* out of blocks of snow.

In warmer climates, early Americans gathered wild plants. Then, about 7,000 years ago, they learned to raise crops such as squash, chili peppers, beans, and corn. Growing their own food enabled them to settle in one place instead of following animals or searching for edible plants in the wild. These early farmers built the first villages and towns in America.

Native American Cultural Regions Over generations, groups of Native Americans developed their own **cultures**, or ways of life. Many became part of larger groupings that were loosely organized under common leaders.

Groups living in the same type of environment often adapted in similar ways. Forest dwellers often lived in houses covered with tree bark, while many desert peoples made shelters out of branches covered with brush.

Using such artifacts (items made by people), historians have grouped Native American peoples into **cultural regions**. A cultural region is made up of people who share a similar language and way of life.

By the 1400s, between one and two million Native Americans lived in ten major cultural regions north of Mexico. Later in this chapter, you will take a close-up look at eight of these regions. They include the Northwest Coast, California, the Great Basin, the Plateau, the Southwest, the Great Plains, the Eastern Woodlands, and the Southeast.

1.4 First Americans' View of Their Environment

Wherever they lived, Native Americans had a strong connection to their surroundings. They viewed themselves as a part of the community of plants, animals, and other natural objects. As a Sioux said, “From Wakan Tanka, the Great Spirit, there came a great unifying life force that flowed in and through all things—the flowers of the plains, blowing winds, rocks, trees, birds, animals—and was the same force that had been breathed into the first man.”

Nature's Spirits Native Americans generally believed that each part of nature had its own spirit. Each person had to maintain a balance with these spirits.

These beliefs were expressed in various customs. Southwest farmers, for example, made corn a part of every ceremony. Hunters gave thanks to the animals they killed.

Using the Land Unlike Europeans, Native Americans did not believe that land could be owned as private property. But each group was deeply connected to its homeland—the area where its people lived most of the year. If necessary, Native Americans would fight to protect their right to this land.

Native Americans adapted the land to suit their needs. Woodlands people set fires to clear heavy forest growth, so deer could browse and berries could grow. Southwest farmers built ditches to carry water to dry fields.

These practices had seldom harmed the environment. As one Native American historian explains, “We dug our clams here, caught our salmon over there, got...seagull eggs on another island.... By the time we came back here, this place had replenished itself.”

Native Americans tried not to waste anything taken from nature. A California woman recalled, “When we...kill meat, we eat it all up. When we dig roots we make little holes.... We shake down acorns and pine nuts. We don't chop down the trees.”

1.5 Native Americans of the Northwest Coast

The Northwest Coast cultural region extends from southern Oregon into Canada. Winters along the ocean are cold but not icy, and summers are cool. To the east, thick forests of fir, spruce, and cedar cover rugged mountains. The mountains trap Pacific storms, so there is heavy rainfall much of the year.

Abundant Food Northwest people found food plentiful, particularly from the sea. They built their villages along the narrow beaches and bays of the coastline, and on nearby islands. They gathered clams, other shellfish, and seaweed from shallow waters. They ventured onto the sea in canoes to hunt seals, sea lions, and whales, as well as halibut and other fish. The forests provided deer, moose, bear, elk, beaver, and mountain goat.

For each kind of creature, hunters developed special weapons. To catch seals, for example, they made long wooden harpoons, or spears. The harpoon had a barbed tip made of bone that held firmly in the seal's hide once it was struck. At the other end, hunters fastened a long rope so that they would not lose either the weapon or their prey.

In early summer, masses of salmon swam from the ocean up the rivers to lay their eggs. Men built wooden fences across the rivers to block the fish, making them easier to net. Women dried salmon meat so that it could be eaten all year long.

Builders and Carvers The forests of the Northwest provided materials for houses and many useful objects. Using wedges and stone-headed sledgehammers, men cut long, thin boards from logs or living trees. They joined these planks to build large, sturdy houses. To keep out the rain, they made roof shingles out of large sheets of cedar bark.

Women cut strips from the soft inner bark and used them to make baskets, mats, rope, and blankets. They even wove the strips of bark into waterproof capes.

With abundant food nearby, the Northwest people had time to practice crafts. Women made decorative shell buttons and sewed them onto their clothing with ivory needles. Men used tools such as wooden wedges, bone drills, stone chisels, and stone knives to carve detailed animal masks and wooden bowls.

1.6 Native Americans of California

The California cultural region stretches from southern Oregon through Baja California. Ocean storms bring winter rains to this region. But summers are hot and dry, particularly inland.

The California region includes not only the coast, but also the coastal foothills, an inland valley, deserts, and the western side of the Sierra Nevada mountain range. Over 100 small groups made their homes in these diverse environments, more than in any other cultural region.

Many Sources of Food Groups living along the coast of Northern California depended on salmon for much of their food. Farther south, coastal people relied more on shellfish. Away from the coast, groups hunted deer with bows and arrows. They set snares to trap rabbits and used nets to capture ducks. California people also gathered roots, berries, and pine nuts.

Most people in the region relied on acorns from oak trees as a basic food. In the fall, women harvested the acorns, shelled them, and pounded the nuts into meal. Water was rinsed through the meal to remove its bitterness. Women cooked the meal by mixing it with water in tightly woven baskets and then dropping hot cooking stones into the mixture.

Clothing, Houses, and Baskets As they worked, the women wore simple aprons or skirts made from grasses or other plants, or sometimes from leather strips. In colder months, they wrapped themselves in animal hides.

Because the climate was mild, California people built simple homes. In forested areas, men used tools made from the antlers of deer and elk to strip large slabs of bark from redwood trees. They draped these into a cone shape to form a house. In marshy areas, people wove thick mats of reeds to drape over a cone-shaped framework of poles.

California people wove plant materials into many useful items. They made cooking baskets, storage baskets, sifters, and fish traps. Women used fine weaving and elegant patterns to make beautiful baskets, decorating their work with clamshells and bird feathers.

1.7 Native Americans of the Great Basin

To the east of California lies the Great Basin, a low area between the Sierra Nevada and the Rocky Mountains. The mountains on either side of this region block the rain, making this land mostly desert.

The plants that grow in this area are those that need little water, such as low grasses, sagebrush, and craggy piñon trees. Only small animals, such as rabbits and lizards, live in this harsh region.

With limited food and water, only a few families could live in a place at one time. For this reason, people of the Great Basin traveled in small groups and spent much of their time looking for food.

Extreme Heat and Cold Wherever people camped, they made temporary shelters of willow poles shaped into a cone and covered with brush or reeds. Almost all year, they carried water in baskets coated with sap from pine trees.

When winter came, temperatures dropped below freezing. To keep warm, people made robes out of rabbit hides. First they twisted long strips of hide so that only the fur showed. Then they wove these strips on a willow loom. Each adult robe required about 100 rabbit skins.

Searching for Food In this arid (dry) environment, people followed food sources from season to season. In spring, they camped by valley lakes and streams swollen with melted snow. Men attracted migrating ducks with floating decoys made from reeds. When birds landed, the men chased them into nets. Meanwhile, women gathered duck eggs and the tender shoots of cattail plants.

When the streams dried up in summer, Great Basin people enjoyed snakes and grasshoppers as treats. But mostly they ate plants, almost 100 kinds. Women used sharp sticks to dig up roots. To knock seeds loose from plants, they wove flat baskets called *seed beaters*. From the mountain slopes they gathered ripe berries.

In autumn, bands harvested pine nuts and hunted fat jackrabbits. As winter arrived, the Great Basin people bundled into their rabbit robes in the warmer hills. In huts and caves, they lived off food they had dried earlier, waiting for the ducks to return in spring.

1.8 Native Americans of the Plateau

North of the Great Basin lies the Plateau cultural region. This region is bounded by the Cascade Range to the west, the Rockies to the east, and the Fraser River, in present-day Canada, to the north.

The mountains in this area have dense forests. The flatter, central part is drier and covered with grass and sagebrush. Winters are long and cold, while summers remain gentle.

The Plateau people hunted and gathered with the seasons. The cool, wet climate made it fairly easy to find enough to eat. So, too, did the Plateau's two mighty river systems, the Columbia and the Fraser.

Sturdy Houses and Clothing Plateau people built their villages along major rivers. The rivers provided drinking water, fish, and driftwood to use for houses and firewood.

Food was so plentiful that some groups were able to live in their villages year-round. To stay cool in summer and warm in winter, they built their homes partly underground. They dug a pit, lined it with a frame of logs, and covered everything with saplings, reeds, and mud.

Plateau people used their weaving skills to create many kinds of baskets, as well as elaborate hats. As the cold months approached, they spent more time making clothes. In the fall, men hunted antelope and deer. Then women scraped and softened the hides for dresses, leggings, and shirts. They decorated their work with designs of seeds and shells.

Camas and Salmon Although hunting usually provided plenty of meat in the fall, most of the time Plateau people relied on fish and plants for food. In spring, they gathered sprouts of wild onions and carrots from the low grasslands. Their particular favorite was camas, a starchy root related to lilies. Women uprooted it with willow digging sticks for eating raw, for roasting, and for grinding into flour.

The food most important to Plateau people was salmon. When the salmon migrated upstream, men stood on wooden platforms built over the water. From there, they could spear or net fish easily.

1.9 Native Americans of the Southwest

The Southwest cultural region includes present-day Arizona, New Mexico, southern Utah and Colorado, and portions of Texas, Oklahoma, and California. This region has many environments—canyons, mountains, deserts, and flat-topped mesas. It even has two major rivers, the Colorado and the Rio Grande. But rain seldom falls anywhere.

The heat and lack of water made living in the Southwest a challenge. Yet some Native Americans learned to love this arid land. “The whole Southwest was a House Made of Dawn,” goes an old Indian song. “There were many colors on the hills and on the plain, and there was a dark wilderness on the mountains beyond.”

Mesa People Different groups found different ways of surviving in the Southwest. Some lived as nomadic (wandering) desert hunters. Along the Colorado River, small groups hunted, gathered, and farmed. Others planted fields of corn, beans, and squash on the tops of high, flat areas called *mesas*.

The mesa people lacked trees for building homes. Instead, they made homes from the earth itself. Using bricks of *adobe* (sun-baked clay), they built thick-walled houses that protected them from summer heat and winter cold. Their villages looked like apartment houses that reached up to four stories high and had hundreds of rooms. A single village, called a *pueblo*, might house 1,000 people.

To protect their bodies from the sun, mesa people wore clothes made of cotton that they grew, spun, and wove into cloth. Using plants and minerals, they dyed fabrics with bright colors.

Corn Culture Despite living in a desert, the early mesa people learned to grow corn, beans, and squash. Corn was by far their most important crop.

To make the most of infrequent rain, farmers planted near naturally flooded areas like the mouths of large streambeds or the bases of mesas, where rain runoff flowed. Men dug irrigation ditches from the streams to the fields, and built small dams to hold summer rain.

Girls spent many hours a day grinding corn kernels into cornmeal. The women cooked the cornmeal into bread in clay ovens. In clay pots, they cooked stews of corn, rabbit meat, and chili peppers.

1.10 Native Americans of the Great Plains

The Great Plains cultural region is a vast area of treeless grasslands. The Great Plains stretch for 2,000 miles from the Rockies to the Mississippi Valley, and from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico. The eastern part of this region has more water and softer soil than the western part. In the drier west, short, dense grasses provided perfect grazing for millions of buffalo.

Buffalo Hunters On the Eastern Plains, various groups took up farming, going on buffalo-hunting trips only a few months each year. On the Western Plains, Native Americans followed buffalo herds much of the year.

In the spring and early summer, small groups lay in ambush where buffalo came to drink. The hunters gripped hardwood bows reinforced with strips of buffalo tendon. Taking aim, each man let loose a wooden arrow tipped with a sharp stone and arrayed with feathers to help it fly straight.

In the fall, huge buffalo herds gathered, and Plains people traveled in larger bands. The men sometimes made a trap for the buffalo by heaping stones into two short walls to form a V-shaped passage. The walls forced the buffalo closer together as they approached a cliff. Behind the herd, people set a grass fire or made loud noises to panic the buffalo. The animals stampeded between the walls and over the cliff edge. Below, waiting hunters finished them off with spears or bows and arrows.

Using the Buffalo Buffalo provided the main food for Plains people. Women and children cut up the buffalo with bone knives. Extra meat was dried and kept for winter.

Plains people used every part of the buffalo. Buffalo hides were turned into shields, waterproof containers, warm robes, and bedding. For clothing and bags, women softened the hides with bone scrapers and rubbed in buffalo brains and fat.

Buffalo hair and sinew were twined into bowstrings and ropes. Horns and hooves became spoons and bowls, or were boiled down to make glue. Dried buffalo dung provided fuel for fires.

Buffalo provided materials for housing as well. Using tendons as thread, women sewed 8 to 20 buffalo skins together. The skins were then fastened around a tall cone of poles to make a *tipi*, a Plains word for “dwelling.”

Plains people became even more successful when Spanish explorers introduced horses to the region. With horses, hunters could bring down more buffalo and move faster and more comfortably to new hunting grounds.

1.11 Native Americans of the Eastern Woodlands

The Eastern Woodlands cultural region reaches from the Mississippi River eastward to the Atlantic Ocean, and from Canada to North Carolina. Here, winter snows and summer rains produce endless forests, lakes, and streams.

Two language groups emerged in this region. In most of the territory, people spoke Algonquian languages. In New York and around the southern Great Lakes lived the Iroquois-speaking groups described in this section.

Plentiful Woods The forests provided most of what Iroquois people needed to live. For food, hunters prowled through the forests to track deer. Men also hunted bears, trapped beavers, caught birds in nets, and speared fish. Women gathered fresh greens, nuts, and berries. They made syrup by boiling down sap from maple trees.

Instead of walking through the thick forests, Iroquois often paddled log and bark canoes along lakes and rivers. Because waterways also provided fish and drinking water, the Iroquois built their villages nearby.

Each village had dozens of sturdy log-frame houses covered with elm bark. Such longhouses were usually about 20 feet wide and over 100 feet long. Several related families lived in sections of the longhouse.

Women Farmers To clear a space for farming, Iroquois men burned away trees and underbrush. Women did the rest. After hoeing the soil, they planted corn, sometimes several varieties. Around the cornstalks, they let beans twine. Squash stayed near the ground, keeping down weeds and holding moisture in the soil.

When the planting was done, women tanned deerskin to make skirts, capes, and moccasins (soft shoes). They ground corn with wooden sticks in hollowed-out tree trunks or between two stones. In the fall, they stored the harvest, often in large bark bins in the longhouses. Iroquois crops included sunflowers, tobacco, and many vegetables that are still planted in American gardens today.

1.12 Native Americans of the Southeast

The Southeast cultural region stretches from the southern part of the Ohio Valley to the Gulf of Mexico, and from Texas to the Atlantic Ocean. This region’s fertile coastal plains, river valleys, mountains, and swamps all have long, warm, humid summers and mild winters. In this green countryside, the people of the Southeast found growing crops fairly easy.

Towns Built Around Mounds Some Southeastern peoples built towns dominated by large earthen mounds. The first mounds were burial sites. Centuries later, people made mounds several stories high as platforms for temples.

Building these mounds took months, even years, because people had to move the dirt one basketful at a time. Workers building mounds had no time to help grow or find food. But Southeastern groups had developed a type of corn that grew so fast, they could harvest two crops a year. Farmers raised enough food to feed the people building the mounds.

A single Southeastern town might have had 2 to 12 mounds arrayed around a central town plaza. Around these mounds, people clustered their houses. They built their homes from strips of young trees woven into a rectangular frame and plastered with clay. Roofs were pointed and made of leaves.

A Fertile Region Beyond their homes, fields lay in all directions. With the region's long growing season, Southeastern people relied on corn, beans, squash, pumpkins, and sunflowers for most of their food.

Women worked the fields with hoes made of stone, shell, or animal shoulder blades fastened to wooden handles. Men sometimes hunted, using blowguns for squirrels, rabbits, and turkeys, and bows and arrows for large animals like deer. They even brought home alligators and turtles.

To complete their varied diet, women gathered edible plants like sweet potatoes, wild rice, and persimmons. Because they wore simple, short deerskin skirts, they didn't spend much time making clothing. Instead, they used stones, shells, feathers, pearls, bones, and clay to fashion rings, earrings, arm rings, and hairpins.

1.13 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you read about the first people to settle in North America. You used a map to study the adaptations made by Native Americans living in eight cultural regions.

The ancestors of Native Americans migrated to America from Asia across a land bridge during the last Ice Age. As their descendants traveled east and south, they had to adapt to the challenges of living in many different environments.

Wherever they settled, Native Americans had a special relationship with the world around them. They believed they were part of nature, and they treated the environment with respect.

Native Americans were a diverse group who spoke many languages. People living in different cultural regions developed distinctive ways of life that were suited to their environment's climate and natural resources. Scientists study these ways of life by examining the artifacts America's first people left behind.

Depending on where they lived, Native Americans ate different food, built different kinds of houses, and clothed themselves in different ways. They also practiced many kinds of crafts, making such things as jewelry, fine baskets, and animal masks. Native Americans built the first towns and villages in North America, and they were the continent's first farmers.

For thousands of years, these First People had the Americas to themselves. That would change when Europeans learned of the existence of the American continents. In the next chapter, you will read about the first explorers and settlers to arrive in America from European countries.