

The Native Americans

1.1 Introduction

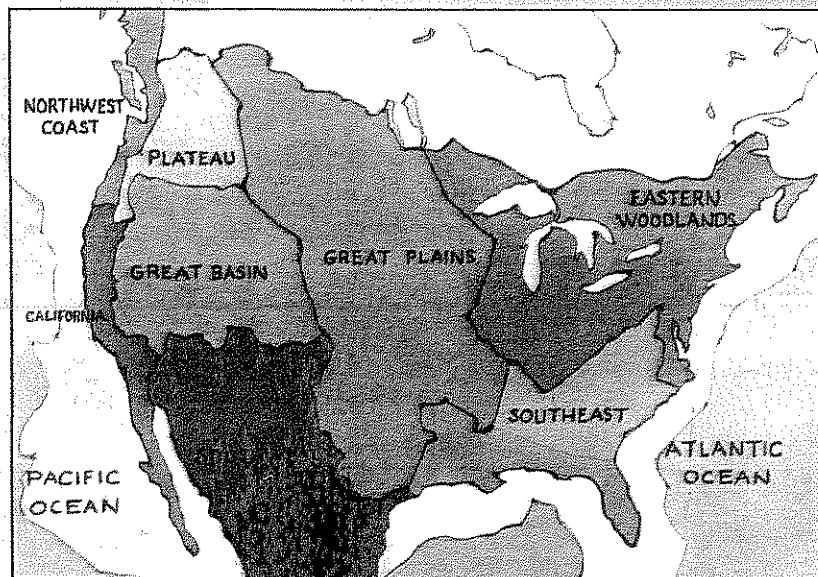
As a cold winter wind howls outside, the children huddle under thick fur blankets. They listen to their grandmother's soothing voice. "In the beginning there was the Great Spirit," Grandmother begins, "who ruled over a world of sky and water." Then the Great Spirit, says Grandmother, created land, plants,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



Graphic Organizer: Map of Cultural Regions

You will use this map to learn about the adaptations made by Native Americans living in eight cultural regions.

migrate To move from one place and establish a home in a new place. A move of a large number of people is called a *migration*, and the people who move are called *migrants*. Some animals also migrate, usually with the seasons.

Scientists believe that the first Americans migrated from Siberia to Alaska across a land bridge called Beringia. These people were following mammoths and other prey that moved east in search of grazing land.

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.

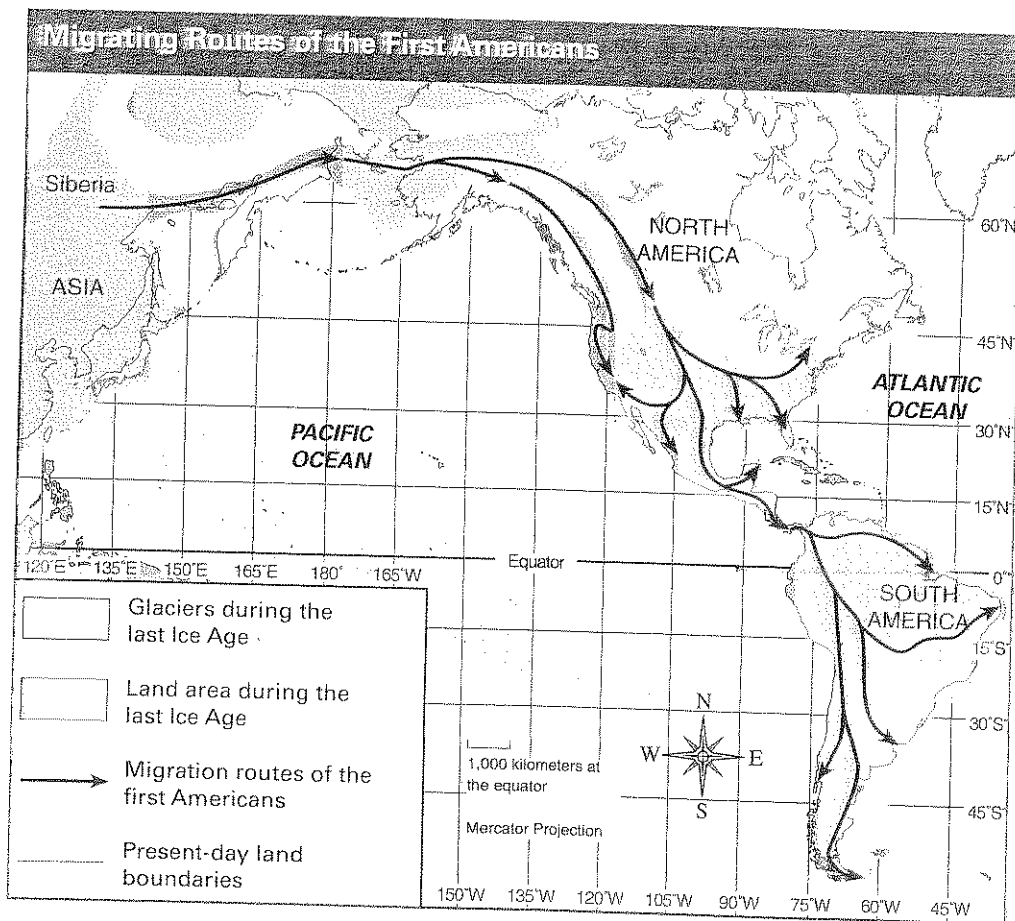
Across a Land Bridge About 30,000 years ago, the most recent Ice Age began. As temperatures fell, much of the earth was covered by glaciers, sheets of ice up to a mile thick. With water locked up in the glaciers, the level of the oceans dropped 200 feet. This exposed a wide bridge of land between Asia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

The tents in this Inuit camp in Northern Alaska were made from seal and caribou skins. The Inuit used the inflated seal skins, hanging from the poles, as floats.

environment all of the physical surroundings in a place, including land, water, animals, plants, and climate

natural resources useful materials found in nature, including water, vegetation, animals, and minerals

culture a people's way of life, including beliefs, customs, food, dwellings, and clothing

cultural region an area in which a group of people share a similar culture and language



Native Americans believed humans, animals, plants, and even inanimate objects had their own spirits. Because of this belief, Native Americans felt related to all parts of nature.

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.

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.