

# Before Columbus: Native American Cultures

By History.com, adapted by Newsela staff on 11.21.16

Word Count **930**

Level **1040L**



A Native American of the Hopi tribe performs traditional ceremonial dances at the south rim of the Grand Canyon in Grand Canyon National Park near Flagstaff, Arizona, June 9, 2009. Dave Etheridge-Barnes, Getty Images.

Many thousands of years before Christopher Columbus, a different group of people discovered America: the nomadic ancestors of modern Native Americans. They hiked from Asia to what is now Alaska more than 12,000 years ago.

By the time Europeans arrived in the 15th century, about 10 million lived in what would become the United States.

In order to keep track of these different groups, researchers have divided them into culture areas, or groups that shared similar habitats and characteristics.

Most scholars break North America — excluding present-day Mexico — into 10 separate culture areas: the Arctic, the Subarctic, the Northeast, the Southeast, the Plains, the Southwest, the Great Basin, California, the Northwest Coast and the Plateau.

## The Arctic

The Arctic culture is a frozen desert near the Arctic Circle in present-day Alaska, Canada and Greenland. This area was home to the Inuit and the Aleut.

The United States purchased Alaska in 1867 from Russia. At that time, the native population had dropped to just 2,500 as a result of suffering and diseases.



## The Subarctic

The Subarctic culture area is mostly composed of swampy, piney forests that stretched across much of inland Alaska and Canada. The area's population lived in easy-to-move tents and, when it grew too cold to hunt, they hunkered into underground dugouts.

The growth of the fur trade in the 17th and 18th centuries disrupted their way of life. Instead of hunting and gathering for food, the native people focused on supplying pelts to the European traders. This eventually led to the displacement and extermination of many of the region's native communities.

## **The Northeast**

The Northeast culture stretched from Canada's Atlantic coast to North Carolina and inland to the Mississippi River valley. Its inhabitants were members of two main groups: the Iroquois and Algonquian.

European settlers' wars forced the region's natives to take sides. Meanwhile, white settlement pressed westward and eventually displaced both groups from their lands.

## **The Southeast**

The Southeast culture area is north of the Gulf of Mexico and south of the Northeast. The most familiar groups are the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek and Seminole.

In 1830, the federal Indian Removal Act moved what remained of those five tribes so that white settlers could have their land. Between 1830 and 1838, federal officials forced nearly 100,000 Native Americans out of the southern states and into "Indian Territory," what is now Oklahoma. The Cherokee called this move the Trail of Tears.

## **The Plains**

The Plains culture area comprises the region between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains, from present-day Canada to the Gulf of Mexico. Tribes like the Crow, Blackfeet, Cheyenne, Comanche and Arapaho lived here. After European contact, they became much more nomadic. The most common dwelling for these hunters was the cone-shaped teepee. The Plains Native Americans were also known for their elaborately feathered war bonnets.

As white settlers moved across the region, they brought goods, like knives and kettles, as well as guns and diseases. In time, white sport hunters nearly exterminated the area's buffalo and the natives were forced onto government reservations.

## **The Southwest**

The Southwest culture area is a huge desert region in present-day Arizona and New Mexico along with parts of Colorado, Utah, Texas and Mexico. Many lived in permanent settlements, known as pueblos, built of stone and adobe. Hopi, the Zuni, the Yaqui and the Yuma lived here.

Some of the Southwestern people, such as the Navajo and the Apache, were nomadic. They survived by hunting, gathering and raiding their neighbors' food. The Navajo lived in round houses, known as hogans, made from mud and bark.

By the time the Southwestern territories became a part of the United States, many of the region's native people had died. Later, the federal government moved most of the remaining Native Americans onto reservations.

## **The Great Basin**

The Great Basin culture area is an expansive bowl formed by the Rocky Mountains, the Sierra Nevada, the Columbia Plateau and the Colorado Plateau. The native people foraged for roots, seeds and nuts, and hunted snakes, lizards and small animals while living in small, simple huts. The Bannock, Paiute and Ute tribes lived here.

After white prospectors discovered gold and silver in the region in the mid-19th century, most of the native people lost their land and their lives.

## **California**

Before European contact, the California culture area had more people than any other. It also had an estimated 100 different tribes.

The native people organized themselves into peaceful groups of hunter-gatherers.

Spanish explorers and missionaries infiltrated the California region in the middle of the 16th century. Eventually, forced labor and disease killed much of the area's native population.

## **The Northwest Coast**

The Northwest Coast culture area, along the Pacific coast from British Columbia to the top of Northern California, has a mild climate and an abundance of natural resources. The ocean and rivers provided almost everything its people needed.

The native people built permanent villages that housed hundreds of people apiece. Those villages operated by a social structure, more sophisticated than any outside of Mexico and Central America.

## **The Plateau**

The Plateau culture area sat in present-day Idaho, Montana and eastern Oregon and Washington. Most of its people lived in small, peaceful villages along streams and rivers and survived by fishing, hunting and gathering. The Yakima and Spokane were two of the tribes there.

In 1805, the explorers Lewis and Clark passed through the area, causing many disease-spreading white settlers to follow them. By the end of the 19th century, most of the remaining Plateau Native Americans had been cleared from their lands and resettled in government reservations.

## Quiz

- 1 Which section of the article highlights the idea that different tribes who shared the same area had different ways of life?
  - (A) "The Southeast"
  - (B) "The Plains"
  - (C) "The Southwest"
  - (D) "The Great Basin"
  
- 2 Which piece of evidence from the article MOST supports the idea that exposure to new diseases caused the deaths of many native people?
  - (A) At that time, the native population had dropped to just 2,500 as a result of suffering and diseases.
  - (B) As white settlers moved across the region, they brought goods, like knives and kettles, as well as guns and diseases.
  - (C) After white prospectors discovered gold and silver in the region in the mid-19th century, most of the native people lost their land and their lives.
  - (D) In 1805, the explorers Lewis and Clark passed through the area, causing many disease-spreading white settlers to follow them.
  
- 3 Which of the following MOST influenced the movement of many native tribes from their land?
  - (A) disease brought by white settlers
  - (B) hunters who killed off buffalo
  - (C) prospectors looking for gold
  - (D) government resettlement
  
- 4 Which of the following accurately characterizes the cultures of California and the Northwest Coast?
  - (A) They were divided into small groups of hunter-gatherers without a larger social structure.
  - (B) They had a populous and organized society that relied on the natural resources of the area.
  - (C) They survived by traveling up and down the coast in order to hunt and fish for their basic needs.
  - (D) They lived in small and simple huts that allowed them to travel and forage for natural resources.