

## Native American Cultures

PRIOR TO EUROPEAN CONTACT in the late 15th century, indigenous peoples had inhabited the North American continent for thousands of years. Their population in 1492 is usually estimated at around 1 million, but some scholars put the figure at 10–12 million. These peoples (labeled “Indians” by Christopher Columbus) lived in self-contained units once called tribes and now called nations. At contact there may have been 1,000–2,000 such units, which sometimes shared similar languages and cultural traits but more often maintained ways of life unique to their nations. Historians have grouped them into culture areas based on their geographic locations—usually, the Northeast and Southeast (sometimes grouped

together as the Eastern Woodlands), California, Great Basin, Great Plains, Northeast, Northwest Coast, Plateau, and Southwest culture areas—which also shaped their ways of life, from clothing to customs. Depending on location, some groups hunted, others farmed; some settled in one area, others were nomads; some were peaceful, others warlike. Dwellings varied from the longhouses of certain Northeast cultures to the tipis of the Plains to the adobe houses of the Southwest. Likewise, political organization, gender roles, social attitudes, religion, and other factors all contributed to the individual character of each nation, making Native Americans one of the world’s most diverse ethnic populations.

Culture Area	Location and Topography	Sample Nations	Language Families	Clothing and Dwellings	Way of Life
California	Most of modern California and Baja California. Coastal mountains, forests, rivers.	Chumash, Maidu, Pomo, Wailaki, Yahi, Yurok	Algonquian, Athapascan, Chumashan, Maidu, Pomo, Uto-Aztecan, Wintun; more than 100 dialects	Simple skin loincloths (or no clothes) for men; skin skirts and cloaks for women. Moccasins and leggings in cooler weather. Cone-shaped houses, pit-houses, plank houses.	Dense populations of individual nations. Most subsisted on plants, nuts, small game, shellfish. Families were important social units; formed permanent settlements. Ostentation and ceremonial rites in many nations.
Great Basin	Parts of Utah, Nevada, Colorado, Idaho, Oregon, California, Arizona, New Mexico, Wyoming. Largely desert.	Bannock, Paiute, Shoshone, Ute	Uto-Aztecan, with several dialects	Occasionally skins, but usually no clothing worn. Wickiups (pole frames usually covered with reeds).	Small-game hunter-gatherers; no agriculture. Reliance on roots, berries and nuts. Small, separate family units with some communal activities.
Great Plains	Mississippi River valley to Rocky Mountains and parts of Canada down to southern Texas. Mostly treeless grasslands, prairies; some plateaus, mountains.	Arapaho, Blackfeet, Cheyenne, Comanche, Crow, Pawnee, Mandan, Sioux	Algonquian, Athapascan, Caddoan, Siouian, Uto-Aztecan	Elaborate skin fashions, often trimmed with feathers. Largely portable tipis; some earth lodges, grass houses.	Before contact, mostly farmers. After introduction of horses, increasingly nomadic, with buffalo main source of food, clothing, shelter, trade. Women farmed while men hunted.
Northeast	Atlantic seaboard to the Mississippi Valley, Great Lakes to Tidewater region of Virginia-North Carolina. Dense forests, lakes, rivers.	Abenaki, Algonkin, Delaware, Huron, Iroquois, Mohegan, Powhatan, Shawnee,	Algonquian, Iroquoian, Siouian	Men: skin breechcloths, shirts, leggings, moccasins; women: skin skirts, jackets, robes. Longhouses, wigwams.	Hunters-gatherers, farmers, fishers. Deer a primary source of food and clothing. Nations usually composed of family clans. Many formed alliances—i.e., the Iroquois, Abenaki, and Powhatan confederacies.
Northwest Coast	Pacific Coast from Alaskan panhandle to northern California. Mountains, forests, rivers, coastline with inlets, islands.	Chinook, Clatsop, Haida, Squamish, Tillamook, Tlingit, Umpqua	Athapascan, Chinookian, Kalapuyan, Salishian, Wakashan, Yakonan	Men: Usually naked. Women: skirts of plant fibers. Breechcloths, furs, and hides in cooler weather. Plank houses.	Fishers, game hunters, traders. Villages and family groups formed social cores. Rank determined by material possessions (given away in a custom called potlatch).
Plateau	Sections of Washington, Oregon, British Columbia, Idaho, Montana, and northern California. Columbia Plateau and rivers surrounded by mountains, forests, desert.	Cayuse, Flathead, Modoc, Nez Perce, Palouse, Walla Walla, Yakima	Athapascan, Chinookian, Sahaptian, Salishian	Minimal clothing. Earth-covered pithouses; pole dwellings in warm weather.	Primarily fishers, some hunters. Salmon primary food source; sustenance also drawn from wild roots, berries, and vegetation. Villages were main social unit, politically separate from other villages.
Southeast	Atlantic Ocean to eastern Texas and Gulf of Mexico northward. Rich farmland, milder climates.	Cherokee, Chicasaw, Creek, Natchez, Seminole	Caddoan, Iroquoian, Muskogean, Siouian, Timucuan, Tunican	Hides, furs, feathers; often nudity in hot weather. Wattle and daub houses; chickees (stilt houses).	Farmers; diet supplemented by hunting and fishing. Some nations thought to descend from ancient Mississippian mound builders.
Southwest	Southern Utah and Colorado southwards into Mexico. Arid; mountains, canyons, mesas, plateaus, and desert.	Akimel O’odham (Pima), Apache, Hopi, Mojave, Navajo, Pueblo, Zuni.	Athapascan, Kiowa-Tanoan, Uto-Aztecan, Yuman, Zunian	Pueblo cultures: cotton clothing; other nations wore skins. Pueblo: adobe houses. Others: hogans, brush huts, wickiups.	Skilled farmers (despite arid conditions) and nomadic hunter-gatherers. Reliance on native roots, seeds, nuts, berries. Autonomous settlements. Sophisticated art.