

OVERVIEW

Before European explorers arrived in North America, the continent was inhabited by hundreds of tribes of American Indians with a variety of languages, cultures, and lifestyles that varied with the regional environments.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

This course begins in **1491**, a symbolic date that represents the Americas prior to European contact. Since American Indian tribes in the present-day United States did not use written language, there is no way to construct a chronicle of North American history before 1492. Archaeological evidence offers us a glimpse of what life was like in North America before the Columbian Exchange.

KEY TERMS

Maize

Commonly known in American English as corn, maize was cultivated in Mesoamerica (Mexico and Central America) 10,000 years ago. As the cultivation of maize spread into North America, Native American tribes in the Southwest, Northeast, and Southeast adopted settled lifestyles.

Great Plains

The Great Plains encompass a region between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains, stretching from present-day Texas to North Dakota. This region is known for flat grasslands and prairies. At the time of European contact, tens of millions of bison grazed in the grasslands of the Great Plains.

Cahokia

Archaeologists have uncovered evidence of a large Native American city on the Mississippi River just outside of present-day St. Louis that supported a population of over 10,000 around 1100 A.D. The site of Cahokia is marked by large earth mounds commonly built by Mississippian cultures.

COMPARISON

What **differences** existed between native societies in North America?

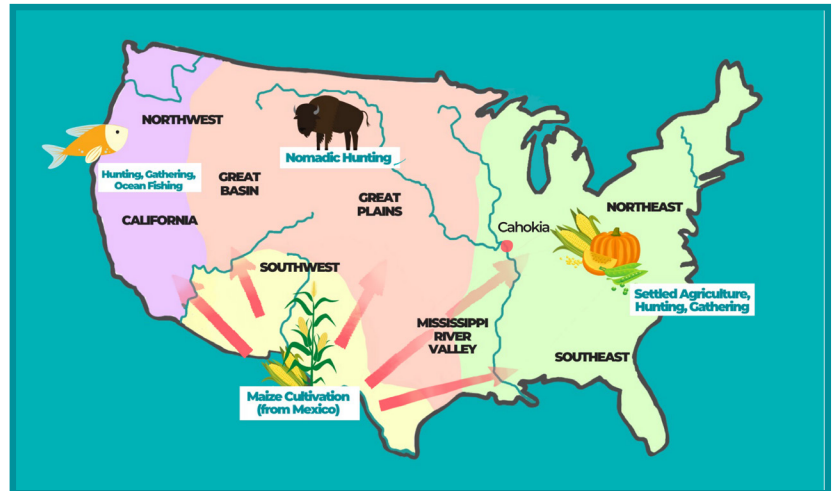
Natives on the Great Plains and the Great Basin tended to live nomadic lifestyles, while natives in other regions tended to live in settled communities supported by agriculture.

What **similarities** existed between native societies?

A consistency between native societies, regardless of region, was that their lifestyles were heavily-influenced by their natural environments. In all regions, tribes traded goods with one another and fought wars over access to water sources and hunting grounds.

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When European explorers found their way to the Americas, they did not find empty continents. At that time, there were over 50 distinct Native American language groups spread across North America, each with its own culture shaped by a unique regional climate and environment. Native tribes can be broadly categorized into a handful of regional groups, with tribes in each region sharing some essential characteristics.



This map shows the major cultural regions of North America as they existed at the time of European contact. Note the prevalence of settled agriculture in the Northeast, Southeast, and Southwest, the abundance of bison in the Great Plains, and the importance of ocean fishing for societies in California and the Northwest.

THE SPREAD OF MAIZE CULTIVATION

About 10,000 years ago, people in present-day Mexico began cultivating **maize**, a crop that Americans refer to as corn. Maize cultivation spread into the Southwestern United States, where some native societies developed irrigation methods to grow the crop in the dry climate. The increased reliance on agriculture led to the creation of permanent settlements in the Southwest that the Spanish referred to as **pueblos**. **Pueblo** is a term used to refer to a number of American Indian tribes in the **Southwest**, as well as to their permanent dwellings, which were made of stone and mud bricks.



The spread of maize cultivation across North America supported the development of settled communities.

Over time, maize spread to the Northeast and Southeast regions, as well as to the Eastern Great Plains, where it supported settled communities. The **Iroquois**, a confederation of tribes in the **Northeast**, built longhouses in their permanent villages that were supported by growing the “Three Sisters” (corn, squash, and beans) in addition to hunting and gathering. Agriculture supported large settlements along the Mississippi River, such as **Cahokia**, a large city near present-day St. Louis that thrived around 1100 A.D.

NOMADIC HUNTING ON THE GREAT PLAINS

At the time of European contact, over 30 million **bison** grazed on the grasslands of the **Great Plains**. The abundance of bison created a plentiful, protein-rich food source for the Plains Indians, but this came at the cost of permanent settlements, as the bison hunters had to follow the migrating herds. The introduction of horses by Europeans provided assistance to these hunters, allowing them greater mobility in pursuing their prey.

Native populations in the **Great Basin** (an area that includes present-day Nevada and Utah) continued to live nomadic lives as hunter-gatherers, as the region was too dry to support agriculture. In the regions bordering the Pacific Ocean, native hunter-gatherers supplemented their diets with fish.