

Native Americans and Immigration

The European conquerors of the Americas called the peoples they first encountered in the Americas “Indians,” for they had set out to reach the East Indies and for a little while thought they had succeeded. Today the peoples they found and conquered are generally described as Native Americans, though some prefer First Americans or Earliest Americans. In a very real sense, Native Americans can also be described as Former Asians, for northeast Asia is the probable geographical and ethnic origin of the earliest known settlers of the Americas. (See “An Overview” on p. 2, for a discussion of early Native American history.)

At the beginning of the European conquest, more than 200 peoples or tribes in at least 60 major groups occupied what would later become the United States. Among them were 10 to 12 language groups. Today these peoples are quite diversely distributed, reflecting preconquest migrations and the many migrations that occurred as Native Americans were forced out of their territories by invading Europeans. Estimates vary widely, but of the 20 to 25 million Native Americans in the Americas at that time, approximately 1 to 3 million are believed to have lived in what is now the United States. By the beginning of the 20th century, that number would be down to an estimated 235,000 to 240,000.

Early Conflicts

There were several substantial European–Native American conflicts on the East Coast during the colonial period, as the colonizing Europeans penetrated and took Native American lands. However, both England and France cultivated Native American allies during their long war for North America. Most notably, the Iroquois and the British became allies. Several Native American peoples in what is now Canada even more easily allied themselves with the French, who had not aggressively attacked them, at least partly because French North American colonial populations were so much smaller than those of the British. Until after the Revolutionary

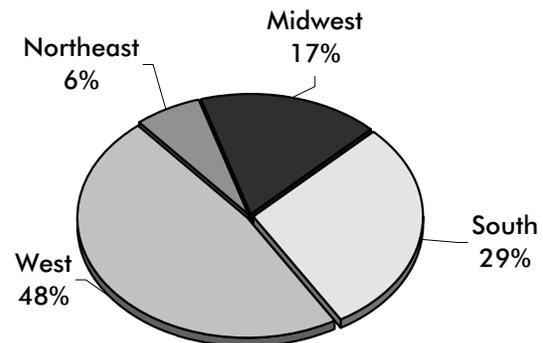
War, these alliances barred major attempts to invade lands west of the Appalachian Mountains.

In Spanish-held Texas, the Southwest, and California, on the other hand, Spain pursued very aggressive policies, as it did throughout its American colonies. These resulted in the effective enslavement of the Pueblo peoples, despite a major revolt during the 1680s. The Apaches and other southwestern peoples successfully resisted until the Native American defeat by U.S. forces late in the 19th century.

Ethnic Cleansing

In the early history of Native American–European conflict, by far the most significant event directly affecting the fortunes of masses of Native Americans was the American Revolution. It set in motion a series of developments that would, by 1860, bring more than 5 million immigrants to the United States, while at the same time generating an internal migration westward, which brought millions more into what had been Native American lands. A major effect of this huge westward movement was the “ethnic cleansing” of Native Americans all the way to the Mississippi. (See

Graph 1.22: Percentage Distribution of Americans of Native American Origin by Region in the United States, 1990





Authors' Archives

As Americans pushed the Native Americans farther west, they carried out many massacres, like this one of Cheyenne villagers on the Washita River in 1868.

“An Overview” on p. 2, for a wider discussion of the westward movement and immigration.)

With the end of the American Revolution and the flight of Britain’s Iroquois allies north into Canada, the new U.S. government took Iroquois lands, opening the Mohawk Valley to westward migration all the way to the Great Lakes and from there to the Mississippi. With the flat route north on the Hudson and west to the Great Lakes open, it became possible for internal and international migrants to travel easily into the heart of the continent on the most natural of all U.S. routes into North America. From 1825 on, with the Erie Canal in place, that route westward also became a water route all the way. All that, in turn, triggered a flood of millions of migrants west, with no natural obstacles in their path. Only the Native American peoples of the region barred the way.

To the south, a far less natural but entirely feasible route through the Appalachians also became available, once British colonial policy was set aside. The route opened by Daniel Boone through Cumberland Gap became the Wilderness Road, through which millions of internal migrants would move west into Kentucky

and Tennessee following the Revolution, with again only the Native American peoples in the way.

Farther south still, where the Appalachians ended, there was no natural barrier at all, and no longer any British colonial policy barring the westward movement. Only the Creeks, Cherokees, and other Native American peoples of that region blocked further westward settlement.

The result was at least “ethnic cleansing.” For some Native American peoples, it was also genocide. Beginning in the 1820s, Native American peoples in some parts of the South and the northern Midwest (then called the Old Northwest) were forced by several state governments to move to “Indian territories” farther west. In 1830, the policy became openly national, when the U.S. Congress passed the Indian Removal Act, which mandated “an exchange of lands with the Indians residing in any of the states or territories, and for their removal west of the river Mississippi.”

It was done, and by force. Most Native American peoples were not able to resist. A few did; in the South, the Seminoles and some Creeks took up arms, while the Cherokees tried to resist by using the U.S. legal

system. The Creeks were defeated by far stronger and better armed U.S. forces, led by Andrew Jackson. The Cherokees were forcibly removed in the winter of 1838–39, at the cost of thousands of lives, their journey soon becoming known as the Trail of Tears. Only some of the Seminoles won, led by Osceola; they would never be defeated by U.S. forces.

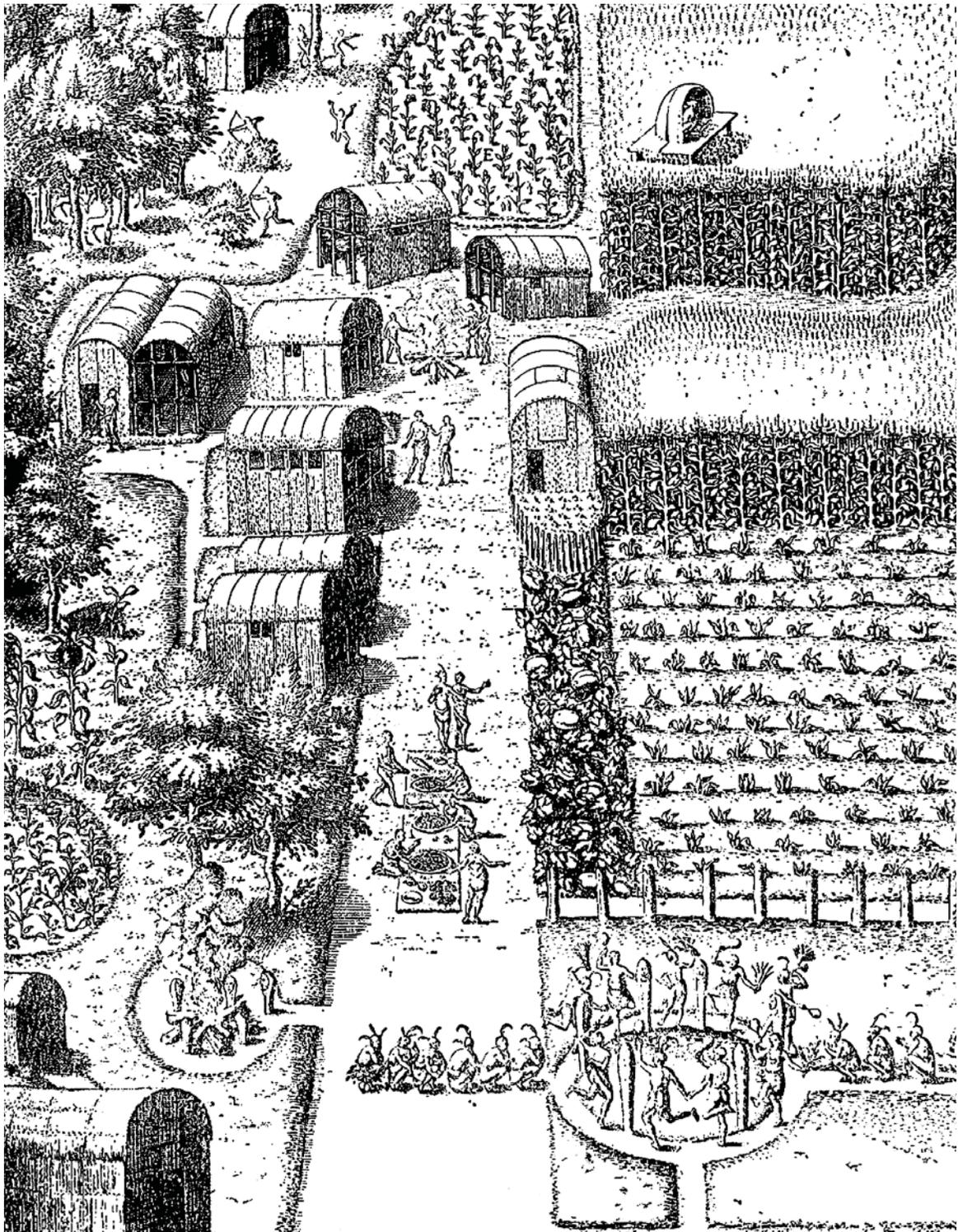
In the north, as in the south, most Native American peoples did not resist their forcible removal. A few peoples did unsuccessfully take up arms against U.S. forces, most notably the Sauk and Fox, led by Black Hawk. None were successful; by 1833, even the Sauk and Fox had vacated their lands.

Once established, the pattern was repeated west of the Mississippi. Reneging on all Native American–United States treaties, the U.S. government encouraged and protected the westward movement. By the 1840s, immigrant trains were moving west on the Oregon and California trails, and the long series of western Native American–United States wars had started.

These would ultimately constitute another “ethnic cleansing” in the American West, again often accompanied by genocide.

Large numbers of new or recent immigrants were part of that migration, notably those who responded to the pull of free land. The U.S. Homestead Act of 1862 was enacted during the Civil War as part of a successful attempt to recruit Europeans who would enlist in the Union Army in return for land grants, or “homesteads.” It remained in force after the war, then becoming a major factor in drawing immigrants who would settle the western United States.

The number of Native Americans in the United States reached a probable low point of perhaps 215,000 to 220,000 in 1910. After that, the population began to rise again, as infant mortality rates began to drop and life expectancies lengthened. By the end of the 20th century, the estimated Native American population in the United States was approximately 1 million. As of 1990, almost half, or 47 percent, lived in the West and 29 percent in the South, with only 17 percent in the Midwest and 6 percent in the Northeast.



Authors' Archives

Native Americans in Virginia grew corn, melons, squash, sunflower, tobacco, and other crops shown in a drawing based on a 1585 sketch by Englishman John White.

Resources

Internet Resources

- Native American Genealogy
(hometown.aol.com/bbbenge/front.html) Web site containing many files on family and tribal genealogy, and links to many other Native American genealogy sites.
- Native American Indian Genealogy Webring Homepage
(members.tripod.com/~kjunkutie/naturng.htm) A “circle of knowledge” Web site for anyone seeking information about Native American genealogy, with links to many Web sites.
- Cyndi’s List—Native American
(www.cyndislist.com/native.htm) Part of the WorldGenWeb project, linking genealogical research sites around the world, by region.
- Genealogy (www.coax.net/people/lwf/genes.htm) Privately maintained Web site provides links to state, family, and other sites related to genealogy and history, primarily of African Americans but also Native Americans, including sources of records and other materials, newsletters, archives of discussion groups, and related organizations.
- Bill’s Aboriginal Links: Canada and U.S.
(www.bloorstreet.com/300block/aborcan.htm) Wide range of links, including historical resources such as texts of treaties.

Print Resources

General Works

- Axtell, James. *Beyond 1492: Encounters in Colonial North America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.
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- Cambridge History of the Native Peoples of the Americas*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996– .
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- Francis, Lee. *Native Time: A Historical Time Line of Native America*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996.
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- Georgakas, Dan. *The Broken Hoop: The History of Native Americans from 1600 to 1890, from the Atlantic Coast to the Plains*. Garden City, N.Y., Zenith, 1973.

Chronology of Immigration

15,000 B.C.

The first fully verifiable emigration from Asia across the Bering Land Bridge (now Bering Strait) brought hunter-gatherers into Alaska, probably in pursuit of large game (by ca. 15,000–12,000 B.C.). Many believe that immigration to the Americas began much earlier, but fully acceptable verification has not yet been found. Some believe that emigration began as early as 50,000–45,000 B.C.; however, modern humans are not known to have reached Central Asia before 32,000 B.C. or northeastern Asia before 20,000 B.C. From the Bering Land Bridge, they would gradually spread throughout the Americas, becoming the many and varied peoples today known as the Native Americans.

A.D. 450

Voyagers from Polynesia, probably from the Marquesan Islands, settled in Hawaii (ca. 450).

500

Chinese sources describe the voyage of a group of Chinese Buddhist priests across the Pacific to a place they called *Fusang*, which may have been the west coast of North America, and then south to the west coast of Mexico (before ca. 500).

870

Norse explorers reached Iceland, with settlers soon following (ca. 870).

980

Norse explorers and settlers reached Greenland, among them Erik the Red and his father, Thorvald (ca. 980).

1000

Norse explorers and settlers reached North America (by ca. 1000), settling on the northern Newfoundland coast, in at least one known site, L'Anse aux Meadows.

1189

The Norse made their last recorded visit to Greenland, although their Greenland colony may have survived until the 15th century or even later.

1200

A second wave of Polynesian voyagers arrived in Hawaii, probably from Tahiti (ca. 1200).

1441

Portuguese ships that had sailed south of Muslim-held territory in West Africa returned to Portugal with 10 black African slaves. This began the Atlantic slave trade, originally headquartered on Arguin Island, off the coast of Mauretania.

1453

Ottoman Turkish forces finally took Constantinople, after centuries of attacks on the Byzantine Empire. The Turks then blocked the major Asian-European trade routes, generating new European efforts to find alternate trade routes to Asia.

1480

Portuguese, Basque, British, and Breton ships were probably fishing on the Grand Banks, off Newfoundland. Some reportedly made landfall on what was probably Newfoundland (ca. 1480–1500).

1490

On the eve of the European invasion, an estimated 1 million to 3 million Native Americans lived in what would later become the United States, part of a total population of 20 million to 25 million for the Americas as a whole (ca. 1490).

1492

On his first voyage to the Americas (August 3, 1492–March 15, 1493), Christopher Columbus reached San Salvador (probably Watling Island) in the Bahamas (October 12, 1492) and also visited Cuba and Hispaniola, where he founded Navidad, beginning the European conquest of the Americas.