

## Topic 1.2

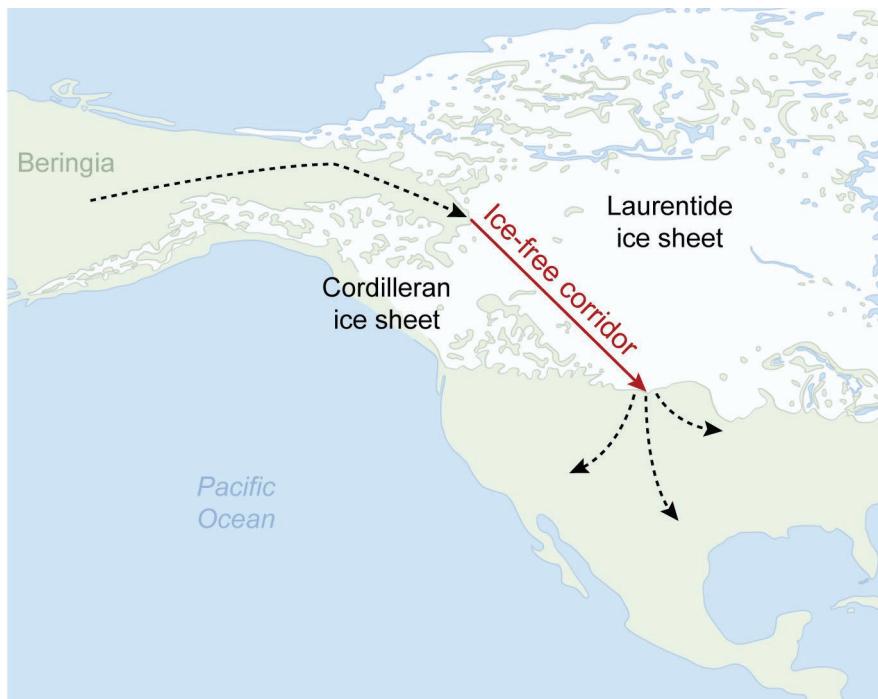
# Native American Societies Before European Contact

## You Will Learn To:

- Explain how and why various native populations in the period before European contact interacted with the natural environment in North America.

## First Peoples

In this Topic, we'll examine prehistoric cultures before European contact. American Indians are central players in the American story, and understanding their cultural diversity is important for success in AP US History.



People began migrating to the Americas as early as 25,000 years ago. Archaeological evidence indicates that numerous migrations occurred as glaciers melted and reformed, exposing new paths onto the continent that were followed by humans tracking migrating animals.

Once groups crossed, they moved into various geographic and environmental regions, where they adopted the best way to make a living from the landscape. Archaeologists have defined ten prehistoric culture areas based on geography, the known adaptations to the environment, and shared cultural traits.



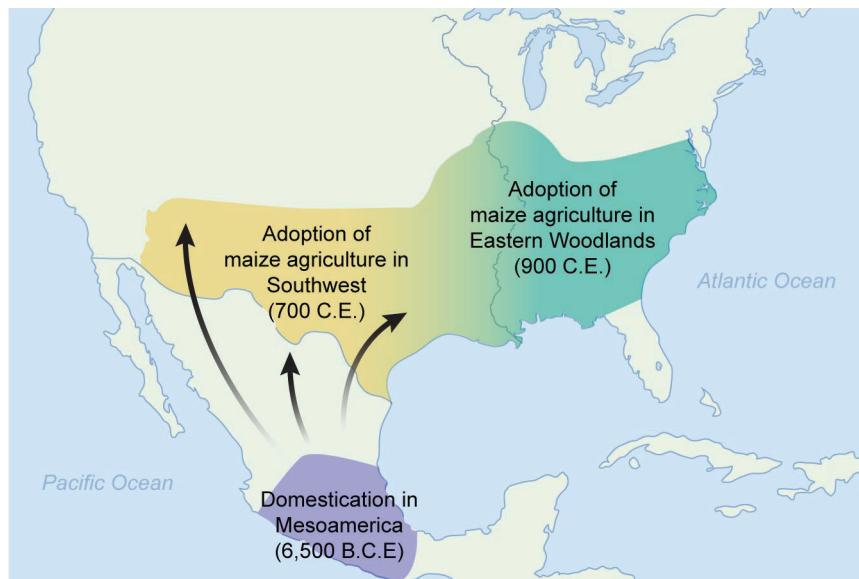
| Area            | Characteristics                                                                  |
|-----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Southeast       | Complex cultures, mixed agriculture, earthen mounds                              |
| Northeast       | Complex cultures, maize agriculture, long houses                                 |
| Plains          | Nomadic bison hunters, foragers, teepees                                         |
| Southwest       | Complex cultures, maize agriculture, kivas/pit houses                            |
| Great Basin     | Highly mobile small groups, seasonal rounds, large gatherings together in summer |
| California      | Hunted, foraged nuts, fished, and gathered marine resources, temporary camps     |
| Plateau         | Semi-permanent settlements, river fishing, reed top long houses                  |
| Northwest Coast | Semi-permanent settlements, river fishing, reed top long houses                  |
| Subarctic       | Caribou hunters, some limited agriculture                                        |
| Arctic          | Nomadic, sea mammal hunters                                                      |

Groups within these cultural areas were often diverse with different beliefs and languages. However, groups within culture areas shared important characteristics. It is important to familiarize yourself with the similarities and differences between these groups.

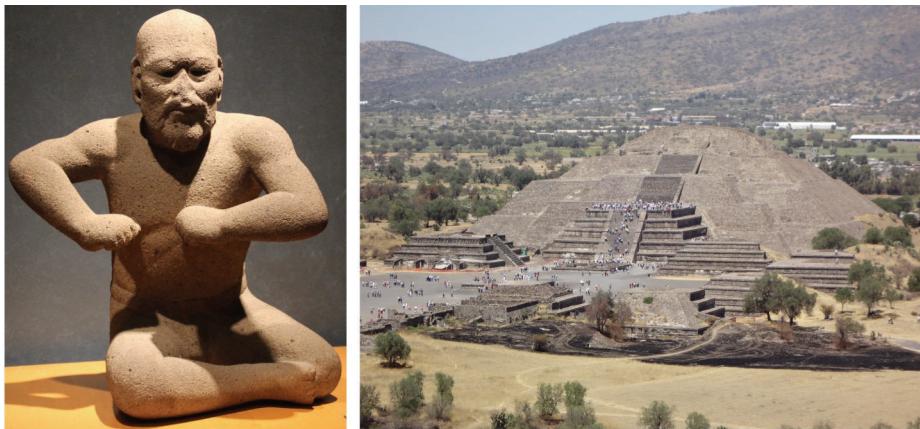
For instance, groups in the Southwest, Northeast, and Southeast were agriculturalists with complex cultures, and groups in the Great Basin and Plains were nomadic hunters and gatherers. Other groups in the Northwest Coast and the Plateau took advantage of abundant marine resources. With little need to follow game across the landscape, these groups were more sedentary. These less mobile groups constructed houses and settled in permanent villages.

## Maize Agriculture in the Southwest

Approximately 8500 years ago, maize (corn) was first domesticated in Central America (Mesoamerica), facilitating the rise of cities. Culturing maize led to culturally complex societies. An abundance of food traditionally leads to higher populations, diversified economies, social classes, and complex religions.



Maize agriculture didn't diffuse to North America until 1300 years ago—around 700 CE; then it spread to the foraging societies of the Southwest. Maize cultivation in the Southwest led to higher populations, large permanent settlements, and increased cultural complexity.



Source: Juan Carlos Fonseca Mata, CC BY-SA 4.0 (<https://tinyurl.com/yt43pd5t>)

Maize cultivation produced more food than was needed to feed the population and the excess could be stored. People spent less time producing food and more time into arts, religion, and governance.

These groups of Ancestral Pueblo constructed large population and civic centers, such as Chaco Canyon and Mesa Verde, which contain characteristic circular, semisubterranean buildings known as kivas.

## Nomadic Bison Hunting on the Great Plains

The prehistoric groups in the Plains were hunters, not farmers. Their primary economic activity was hunting bison (buffalo) that roamed the region's grasslands. Over thousands of years, Plains peoples perfected bison hunts, often using the natural landscape to help dispatch the animals.



Buffalo provided Plains peoples with food, shelter, clothing, and oils. Although bison kills produced a large amount of food, it spoiled quickly, so Plains peoples continually moved their camps to follow bison herds. Their lightweight teepees were made of bison skin and could be transported to the next campsite when needed.

## Seasonal Rounds of the Great Basin

Societies responded to the aridity (dryness) of the Great Basin by developing largely mobile lifestyles in which small groups moved with the seasons to forage and hunt small game. In the summer, these smaller bands joined together on the shores of large lakes, such as Lake Tahoe.



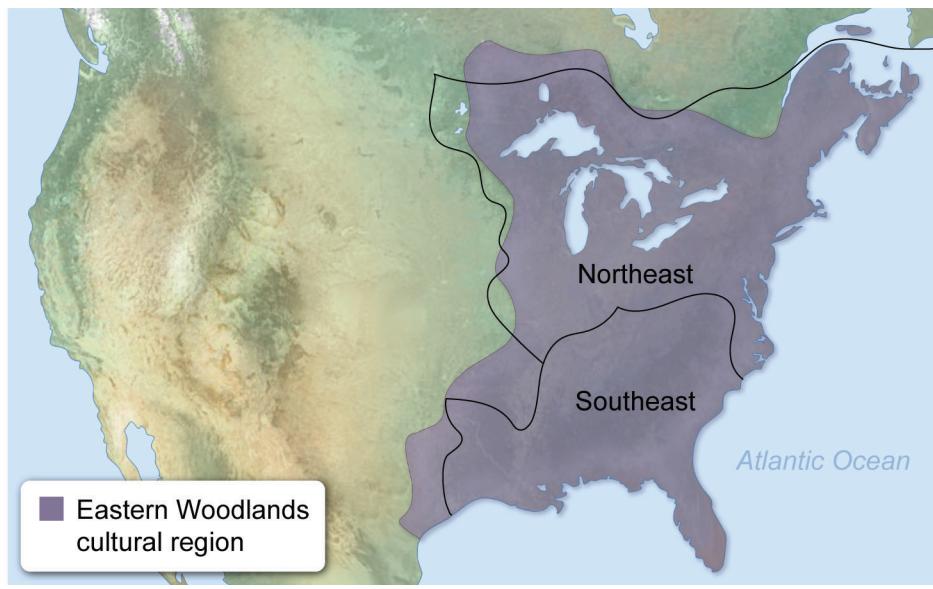
Source: Dicklyon, CC BY 4.0 (<https://tinyurl.com/s6p45f8x>)

Lake Tahoe, located on the western edge of the Great Basin

These larger group would socialize, fish, and dry foods for the winter. In the fall, small groups of a few families would begin their seasonal rounds again.

## Mixed Agriculture in the Eastern Woodlands

The Northeast and Southeast prehistoric culture areas were distinct, but they shared geographic and economic similarities. Both the Northeast and Southeast culture areas are often referred to as the Eastern Woodlands.



Prehistoric peoples of the Eastern Woodlands used bows and arrows to hunt game, primarily deer, squirrel, turkey, rabbit, and bear. Most raised gardens of beans, sunflowers, and squash. Mixed agriculture combined with hunting and foraging allowed more food options, reducing starvation risks.

As agriculturists, Eastern Woodland peoples did not move around much. Instead, they established semipermanent villages. In the Northeast, the ancestral Iroquois built wooden long houses that became the centers of political and cultural life.

Around 900 CE, maize agriculture diffused from the Southwest to the Eastern Woodlands. In the East, maize was well suited for the warm, wet climates and produced high yields. The integration of maize agriculture into the economic systems of Eastern Woodlands altered cultures, especially in the Southeast.

### Mississippian societies

In the Eastern Woodlands, the adoption of maize agriculture facilitated the rise of cultures known as the Mississippian societies. These societies established towns and villages on or near the banks of rivers. The rivers acted as a transportation network, and the periodic flooding irrigated crops.

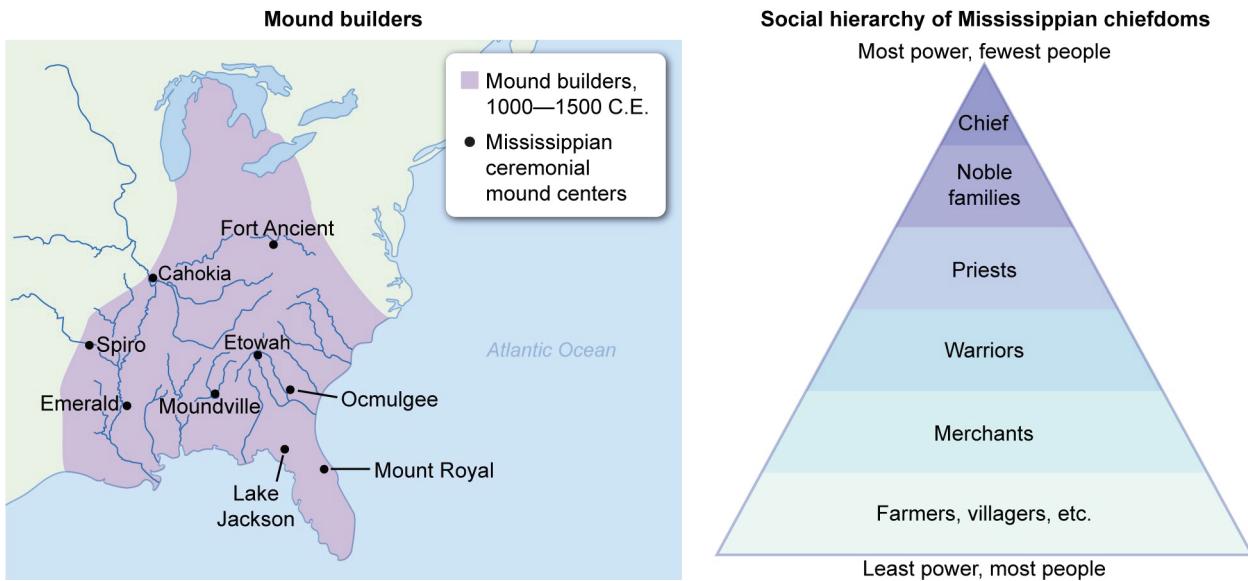
Similar to its effect in Mesoamerica and the American Southwest, the adoption of maize agriculture in the Eastern Woodlands grew populations, diversified economies, increased social inequality, and led to an elaborate religious and ceremonial culture.



A central characteristic of Mississippian societies was the construction of ceremonial and civic centers with earthen, platform-shaped mounds arranged around a central plaza, typically surrounded by residences.



Mississippian societies were advanced chiefdoms with a single ruler. The seat of power of Mississippian chiefdoms were large civic centers that served as cultural and political capitals, such as Cahokia or Moundville.



Although culturally distinct, archaeological studies have shown that these chiefdoms were united by a shared cultural ideology unique to the Mississippian societies, as evidenced by the similar gods and rituals adopted throughout the Southeast.

## Fishers and Foragers of the Pacific Northwest and present-day California

### The Northwest Coast

Along the Northwest Coast, an abundance of marine resources led to higher populations and reduced the need to continually move. People hunted whales and lived in permanent coastal villages, constructing the wooden plank houses characteristic of the region.



Chief Anotklosh of the Taku Tribe of the Tlingit people

Northwest Coast people had a relatively large population, a social hierarchy, and complex traditions. Like many of their contemporary descendants, these groups were likely "big man" societies in which men emerged as political leaders (chiefs) by amassing great wealth—blankets, boats, baskets, and so forth—and ritually giving it away. If this show of generosity was acceptable, a new leader emerged.

## Northern California

The lack of rainfall and steep terrain made farming too difficult in the Northern California culture area. Therefore, the first peoples of California were nomadic foragers, living in temporary encampments and moving frequently throughout the year to harvest wild nuts and berries. Their houses were typically temporary structures—small huts with grasses covering interlocking poles.



Northern California foragers

Evidence suggests groups in the region were typically at peace, largely due to geographic barriers, such as mountains, dividing the territory. Likewise, because people had equal access, groups could resist pressure from aspiring leaders. Therefore, these groups tended to have less social stratification and fewer leaders.

Good weather and a variety of available food meant the populations were healthy and of considerable size—roughly 13 percent of native people in North America lived in this culture area during the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

## Things to Remember

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- The spread of maize cultivation supported economic development, settlement, advanced irrigation, and social diversification among societies in the present-day American Southwest.
- Prehistoric societies responded to the aridity of the Great Basin and the grasslands of the western Great Plains by developing largely mobile lifestyles.
- In the Northeast, the Mississippi River Valley, and along the Atlantic seaboard, some societies developed mixed agricultural and hunter-gatherer economies that favored the development of permanent villages.
- Societies in the Northwest and present-day California supported themselves by hunting and gathering, using the vast resources of the ocean.

## Topic 1.2 Key Terms and Developments

Cahokia

Hunters and gatherers

Maize agriculture

Mississippian societies

Pueblo people

Prehistoric culture area

Seasonal rounds

## 1.2 Check for Understanding

- 1. Agriculture was mostly practiced in these prehistoric culture areas:**
  - A. Southwest, Great Basin, Northeast
  - B. Southwest, Southeast, Northeast
  - C. Great Basin, California, Northeast
  - D. Plains, Great Basin, Southwest
- 2. The prehistoric peoples of the Northwest Coast were mostly sedentary.**
  - A. True
  - B. False
- 3. The cultivation of \_\_\_\_\_ is associated with cultural complexity and pre-state societies in prehistoric North America.**
  - A. Tobacco
  - B. Rice
  - C. Wheat
  - D. Maize