

A World Apart

First Americans

Since part of American identity is based on place, geography is an integral part of our studies. Six regions, chosen for the richness of their history as well as their ethnic, economic, and geographic diversity, have been selected to play a recurring role in the videos for this course. These locations help us connect with the diverse cultures and resources that continually shape American identity.

- Pacific Northwest: Portland, Oregon
- California Coast: San Francisco, California
- Southwest: Santa Fe, New Mexico
- Mississippi Valley: St. Louis, Missouri
- Southeast: Charleston, South Carolina
- Northeast: Albany, New York and New York City

In the videos for "First Americans," we visit these six regions as they existed before 1492, exploring the variety of natural environments supporting diverse native populations across the land. By describing Native American cultures in various regions of what eventually became the continental United States, we can examine how indigenous peoples shaped their societies and use what we learn to enhance our understanding of them.

Video: The Pacific Northwest

Salmon fishing, artwork, and clans played an important role in the Native American societies that developed in the Pacific Northwest before European contact.

Look for the answer to this question when watching the video:

- What roles did the salmon, totems, and kin groups play in the pre-Columbian Indian cultures of the Pacific Northwest?

Video script:

Music introduction

Ed Edmo, Shoshone-Bannock Tribe: Where the Cascade Mountains are, there was a big lake behind the river. Coyote made a stick and dug on top and sang a song and the river broke through. Indian people moved down to the river. Coyote went up to the river, saw that they didn't have much to eat. He went down to the ocean, saw salmon swimming in the ocean, used his power, told the salmon to swim upstream. That's how the Columbia River was made, and that's why the salmon swim upstream.

Narrator: Today, cities like Portland, Oregon, are bustling urban landscapes. But for centuries before the Pacific Northwest was settled by immigrants of European stock, it was inhabited by Native Americans. Tribes such as the Chinook, Tillamook, Cayuse and Walla Walla lived in what are today the states of Washington and Oregon.

Brian Fagan, University of California at Santa Barbara: The northwest part of North America supported an extraordinary diversity of both coastal and inland cultures before European contact. The densest populations were at the coast and inland by the sides of lakes or on riverbanks, like that of the Columbia, where there were seasonal salmon runs. There is this stereotype of North American Indians up in the northwest being salmon fishermen. They were actually a great deal more than that, but there was no question that the seasons of fish like salmon or smaller animals played a vital role in their economies.

Narrator: Indian peoples of the northwest developed distinctive artistic and social customs.

Brian Fagan: The art itself is never just art for the art's sake. It always has a profound meaning. If you look, for example, the totem poles – all of them have intense symbolic meaning as genealogies, as commemorations of clans and so on. We are talking about societies where kin groups were of enormous importance and the leaders of kin groups were very important ritual and political and trade leaders. And these people claimed ancestry from divine ancestors, this gave them their authority. And these clan affiliations were of enormous importance in determining status and so on.

Narrator: Today, many Native American tribes still live in the Pacific Northwest. And for some, salmon fishing is still their livelihood. But they are only a fraction of the number estimated to have lived there before Europeans came.

End of video.

Video: The California Coast

The California Coast was well populated by Native American tribes prior to European contact. Focusing on the largest of these tribes, the Chumash, this video highlights their unique culture known for planked canoes, astronomical knowledge, and a dependency on trade.

Look for the answer to this question when watching the video: What were the characteristics of the Chumash culture along the California coast?

Video script:

Music introduction

Frank Lemos, Chumash Interpretive Center: We believe that our point of creation is in the Channel Islands itself. That we were created there and lived and grew to the point where we needed to move. And that it was the goddess "Hutash" that sent us over from the islands to the mainland to populate.

Narrator: The California coastal region today holds one of the world's most thriving cultural and technological centers. But centuries before there was San Francisco or Silicon Valley, the area was well-populated with Native Americans. Tribes such as the Pomo, Miwok, Ohlone and Chumash lived in what is today Central California.

The Ohlone of the San Francisco Bay area were made up of some 40 loosely affiliated independent tribelets, and spoke as many as twelve different languages.

The Chumash, one of California's largest tribes, lived near present day Santa Barbara in villages sometimes containing a thousand or more inhabitants.

Brian Fagan: The Chumash are widely famous for their very elaborate and highly effective hunting and gathering which is based predominantly on the ocean, although not entirely. I mean they did harvest acorns. The illusion is that they lived this wonderful life, that this was a Garden of Eden. Actually, it's a high risk environment and in fact there is evidence of fighting and competition for resources. The critical thing about the Chumash was the fact that they were not self-sufficient. They kept constant relations with other societies. They even traded as far as the southwest. Why? Because in an unpredictable environment like this, you need and depend closely on other people.

Narrator: Like other Indian peoples, the Chumash had developed a unique and complex culture.

Brian Fagan: What the Chumash are most famous for is their “tomol”, the planked canoe. And in these boats they ventured right off to the islands, 20 miles out, and would fish and trade over enormous areas. Another thing which the Chumash are famous for was their astronomical knowledge.

Frank Lemos: It’s said in my family that the stars are the footsteps of our ancestors. When we look up to them, we are looking at ourselves, a reflection of ourselves. In the ancient practices, children were named according to the stars. The constellations were very important for major ceremonies and also times of gathering. Even knowing when certain cycles of animals or fish were about could be judged by these things.

Narrator: Colonization by the Spanish and later by the American settlers decimated the Native Americans in California. But the population began to arise again during the 20th century. Today many Native Americans of California carry on the traditions of their past.

End of video.

Video: The Pueblo People

Native Americans living in the Southwest before European contact, known as "Anasazi," were farming people. Their complex society and mastery of village life is epitomized by Pueblo Bonito. Today, this impressive architectural accomplishment, along with other multi-storied structures can be seen in Chaco Canyon National Historical Park near the Four Corners area.

Look for answers to these questions when watching the video: How did the ancestral pueblo peoples of the Southwest adapt to their environment? What characterized their social organization and village life?

Video script:

Music introduction

Narrator: Today New Mexico and other parts of the Southwest strongly reflect the presence and influence of Native American cultures. While large cities like Santa Fe have grown up around

them, many Native American tribes have continued to live in the southwest, some of them on their original pueblos.

Mike Adler, Southern Methodist University: The people living in the greater southwest, the Santa Fe area specifically, prior to European contact, are peoples that we lump together under the term “Anasazi”, which really means “ancestral peoples”. The people living in that area were farming peoples living in large villages, and doing the things that we’re familiar with—trade, communication, warfare, survival. They had to deal with weather that was quite capricious, and so the people living there had to utilize certain strategies to get by. They farmed multiple areas at once. People created fields on the mesas and in the river bottoms and in the arroyos, so that any one year you would have a crop in any of those places, even if some of those places had failed.

Narrator: The ancestral pueblo peoples had an unusual system of power-sharing.

Mike Adler: In terms of their social organization, the villages probably had clans that were organized into larger groupings we call “moieties”, which is an anthropological term meaning “half”. During the summer, the summer moiety group would have a leader that would basically call the shots. And then the reins of power then would be handed during the winter over to the winter moiety leader.

Narrator: Pueblo Bonito in Chaco Canyon was the largest and most elaborate pueblo the Anasazis ever constructed. Built sometime during the tenth century, it was abandoned by the thirteenth century for reasons that are still not entirely certain.

Mike Adler: It’s a huge condo complex of rooms stacked one on top of another – big plazas that we imagine were used for ceremonies, kivas set into those plazas used for rituals, and meetings of clans and other groups. And so it was a seething mass of humanity.

The major cultural achievement for the ancestral pueblo peoples is the “perfection”, if you will, of village life – the long experimentation they had with living together in large groups, sharing resources, in many cases sharing the same walls, how ritual reconfigures and recreates a village on an annual basis, how a community really does survive together as a community.

Narrator: Unlike most other Pre-Columbian Indian structures, some of the ancestral pueblos have survived and are still inhabited. And descendants of the ancestral pueblos still perform many of the traditional rituals.

End of video.

Video: The Mississippi Valley

Cahokia was the largest urban community in the United States prior to the nineteenth century and was characterized by large man-made mounds. This fascinating and complex Native American society had disappeared by the time Europeans arrived.

Look for answers to these questions when watching the video: What characterized the culture that developed at Cahokia? How is this culture similar to that found at Adena and Hopewell? What purposes did mounds serve?

Video script:

Music introduction

Narrator: The city of St. Louis on the Mississippi River was once a frontier town, and made its name as the “gateway to the west.” But a thousand years earlier near the same spot, there existed a city that was the largest urban community in the United States before the 19th century.

Bill Iseminger, Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site: Cahokia Mounds is situated in what we refer to as the “great American bottom”. It’s a large expansive flood plain that’s been carved out over hundreds of thousands of years by the meandering of the Mississippi River. There are numerous lakes, marshes and slues and backwater areas that provided all kinds of fish and waterfowl. So it was a very productive source of food. Plus, it provided a very fertile soil for agriculture and these people were agriculturalists.

Narrator: For 900 years, from approximately 700 A.D. to 1600 A.D., the mound builders dominated the Mississippi Valley. Cahokia was the largest and most enduring of the Mississippian cultures.

Bill Iseminger: By far the largest mound, not only at Cahokia Mounds but in this country, is Monk’s Mound, which dominates the center of the site. It’s also the largest prehistoric earthwork in the Americas. We had as many as 120 mounds during the Mississippian period in what we call “Cahokia Proper”. The majority of those mounds are what we call Platform Mounds, they’re rectangular and flat-topped. These were mounds that were used not for burials, but for buildings, to elevate their important buildings, important people higher than

everybody else. It's a way of separating the sacred from the common, so to speak. It was a stratified social system with what we refer to as the "Paramount Chief" at the top. And he probably lived on top of Monk's Mound, or at least ruled from there.

Narrator: Cahokia was at the center of a trade network that spanned most of the continent from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico, the Appalachians to the Rockies.

Bill Iseminger: The rivers themselves were transportation routes. They were the superhighways of their day, and they did traveling in their dugout canoes. Along these river highways, we find a lot of exotic items coming here from different parts of the country.

Narrator: By the time Europeans arrived in North America, the people of Cahokia had disappeared. But contemporary tribes such as the Choctaws, Chickasaws and Natchez, are descended from the mound builders of the Mississippian culture.

End of video.

Video: The Southeast

The varying landscapes in the Southeast meant that the Native American tribes who lived there were very diverse. The result was a region of unique lifestyles and overall political complexity.

Look for answers to these questions when watching the video: How did the environment affect pre-Columbian Indian cultures in the Southeast? What characterized these groups?

Video script:

Music introduction

Chad Smith, Cherokee Nation: The Cherokees had an island in the ocean, and the island sank and they left. And they came, from the south, north. And they came in certain groups, which were 13 clans at the time, and a number of them got lost about the way. And they came north until the rain turned white, and then they turned east until the sky met the earth, and so we can say that's the Appalachian Mountains.

Narrator: The British established the city of Charleston in 1670, but the southeastern region of the continent had been inhabited for thousands of years before that.

Alex Barker, Dallas Museum of Natural History: Different groups in the southeast had very different kinds of adaptation. Some groups lived in very large towns. Some groups live in very small bands foraging, others farmed. The largest societies in the southeast tended to be in large communities and some of these can be quite large, tens of thousands of people.

Narrator: In the southeast Atlantic states of South Carolina, North Carolina and Virginia there were three flexible but distinct environments to which the Native Americans adapted.

Alex Barker: On the south Atlantic slope, there are certain kinds of environments that make it easy to make a living foraging. And while there are farming societies and foraging societies throughout that region, there are particular kinds of resources that are densest on the south Atlantic slope. In the same way, when you get beyond the fall line and into the piedmont, there are certain kinds of resources that are most common there, and a certain scale of society that can be supported. As you keep moving up into higher and higher elevations, you end up with groups like the Cherokee who are living in relatively small valleys, relatively narrow flood plains. They're farming but they're also using a very broad range of resources which are simply unavailable on the south Atlantic slope and vice versa.

Narrator: As in other parts of the country, tribal distinctions in the southeast were fluid and not always clearly delineated.

Alex Barker: We tend to think of tribes as discreet units, as having boundaries and staying the same over time. They didn't. And groups like the Catawba represent groups that are named at a time of contact. Over time, that group is changing, becoming an ally of some groups, an enemy of other groups. Those alliances are shifting over time and the actual group that constitutes the Catawba is changing over time, just as all the other groups are changing. The Native Americans of the southeast are probably the most politically complex group in ancient North America. They accomplished an enormous amount that we've lost today.

End of video.

Video: The Northeast

The Native American tribes in the Northeast were well-known for both their long houses and the formation of the Iroquois League, an early form of democracy that would make a deep impression on European settlers.

Look for answers to these questions when watching the video:

- Why did indigenous peoples of the Northeast often inhabit villages that were seasonal sites? What else characterized these people?

Video script:

Music introduction

Narrator: New York City is one of the dazzling achievements of western civilization, but it was once only a small island sparsely inhabited by Native Americans known as the Lenape.

Further north in upstate New York, was the home of the Hadenosaunee, or the people of the long house. These were the ancestors of the Iroquois tribes: the Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas, and Senecas.

Colin Calloway, Dartmouth College: If you think of the geography of northeastern and North America, it's a region of forests, rivers, lakes. It's a region that is conducive to farming and hunting and fishing and most of the Indian peoples in the northeast did all three. So they would often inhabit villages that were occupied a certain portion of the year. And the groups would come together as a band or as a tribe for planting in the spring, harvesting in the late summer, and then would disperse into the hinterlands for hunting, for instance, in the fall.

Narrator: The various Indian peoples of the northeast encountered and interacted with one another, sometimes in warfare, sometimes in peace.

Colin Calloway: There are alliances and common causes between Iroquois and Algonquian peoples. There are wars in which Iroquois and Algonquian people take sides on the same side. And of course, there are intermarriages between Iroquois and Algonquian people. So I think that many of our notions of tribes as sort of static ethnic units need to be questioned and we need to take more account of the tremendous flexibility and fluidity that existed between groups as well as the barriers that sometimes developed between them.

Narrator: Hodenosaunee tribes are famous for the longhouses they lived in—communal housing structures where they ate, slept, and stored food and other items. They are also well known for a more egalitarian treatment of women than many other tribes.

Colin Calloway: I think in the northeast the power and the influence of women centered on the village, on the homes, on the field. The role of the women was primarily one of cultivation – cultivating crops and cultivating children – and in that sense they are giving life and they are promoting life. The role of men, more often, takes them outside of the village. They're away from the village at war or hunting, which, of course, are both activities that involve the taking of life.

Narrator: In ancient times, the Hodenosaunee tribes fought amongst each other, enduring an endless cycle of raiding and retaliation. But some time before the coming of Europeans, the Hodenosaunee found a way to live in peace with each other. They formed a confederation which would later be known as the Iroquois League, an early form of democracy that would make a deep impression on European settlers who arrived later.

End of video.

Activity: Check Your Understanding

Focuses on specific traits of First Americans in the Pacific Northwest, Mississippi Valley, and the Northeast – indigenous tribes of Native Americans. In the Pacific Northwest, indigenous tribes used sophisticated woodworking skills to record family histories in totem poles. Analyzing totem poles reveals much about the wealth and status of respective clans in this region. In the Mississippi valley, Native Americans built large dirt mounds to serve as burial sites. And in the Northeast, the role of women in pre-Columbian indigenous cultures was more prominent than in other regions of the country. For example, women had property rights and political rights, and were responsible for cultivating crops.

Interactive Activity: Explore Cultures

Location has always played a key role in shaping the identity of local communities. Evidence of this can be seen in the way that prehistoric peoples lived. The abundance of natural resources and unique geographical features of an area determined what materials people used to build houses, what foods they ate, how they dressed, what arts and crafts they developed, and how

they organized themselves into larger communities. As you review cultural differences among indigenous peoples in North America, think about influences that have shaped these same things in your community.

Examines how location played a key role in the shaping of local communities of indigenous peoples in North America. Highlights important and identifiable traits of cultures in six regions. In the Pacific Northwest, salmon fishing and totems were key elements; along the California Coast, plankton canoes and astronomical knowledge were important; in the Southwest, turquoise and pueblos were specific to the cultures; in the Mississippi Valley, burial mounds and dugout canoes were distinctive; in the Southeast, complex political alliances and homes in small valleys distinguished the tribes; and in the Northeast, longhouses and matriarchal societies were prominent.