CHAPTER ONE: A CONTINENT OF VILLAGES, TO 1500

SETTLING THE CONTINENT
   Who Are the Indian People?
   Migration from Asia
   Clovis: The First American Technology

NEW WAYS OF LIVING ON THE LAND
   Hunting Traditions
   Desert Culture
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THE DEVELOPMENT OF FARMING
   Mexico
   The Resisted Revolution
   Increasing Social Complexity
   The Religion of Foragers and Farmers
   Farmers of the Southwest
   The Anasazis
   Farmers of the Eastern Woodlands
   Mississippian Society
   The Politics of Warfare and Violence

CULTURAL REGIONS OF NORTH AMERICA ON THE EVE OF COLONIZATION
   The Population of Indian America
   The Southwest
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CONCLUSION

KEY TOPICS
* The peopling of the Americas by migrants from Asia
* The adaptation of native cultures to the regions of North America
* The increase in complexity of many native societies following the development of farming
* The nature of Indian cultures in the three major regions of European invasion and settlement

AMERICAN COMMUNITIES: CAHOKIA: THIRTEENTH-CENTURY LIFE ON THE MISSISSIPPI
   In the mid-1200s, an urban center called Cahokia existed just across the Mississippi River from present-day St. Louis. About 30,000 people lived there, supported by a network of farms in the surrounding area. A wide variety of objects were buried in a series of mounds there, indicating that the inhabitants were sophisticated farmers, rather than nomadic hunters, skilled in crafts, participated in long distance trade, and had a strong religious tradition. The opening vignette on this community shows that rich, vibrant cultures were developed by Indian peoples before the arrival of Europeans.

SETTLING THE CONTINENT
   Indians represented a wide variety of cultural traditions and physical types. New genetic research has linked American Indians and northwest Asians. A land bridge between Siberia and Alaska emerged when glaciers locked up enough water to lower sea levels. This enabled Indian ancestors to travel from Asia to North America. Evidence suggests
This migration began about 30,000 years ago. Migrants spread out across the North and South American continents. About 12,000 years ago Indians developed new techniques of tool-making (Clovis), enabling them to hunt more efficiently.

NEW WAYS OF LIVING ON THE LAND About 15,000 years ago, a global warming trend ended the North American Ice Age contributing to the extinction of large mammals and leaving the continent with a variety of regions that are distinct in climate and geography. Indians produced many different cultures as they adapted to these ecologies. The earliest cultures grew up around hunting. Archaeologists have found the evidence of more efficient hunting techniques that resulted in mass kills. This indicates a complex division of labor, the cooperation of several communities, and knowledge of food preservation.

During the Archaic period, new hunting, gathering, foraging, and fishing techniques were developed. Desert dwellers developed a culture based on sophisticated foraging methods and the hunting of small animals. They lived in caves and rock shelters where a strong sense of community developed. Desert foraging techniques spread to western areas. In the Pacific Northwest, densely populated, permanent settlements emerged. In the forest areas in the East, what archaeologists call “forest efficiency” that mixed hunting, fishing, and farming, led to larger populations and permanent settlements. Indians hunted small game and gathered plant food. They also burned the woodlands to stimulate the growth of wild food crops.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF FARMING About 5,000 years ago inhabitants in what is today central Mexico began cultivating maize. Agriculture stimulated the development of sedentary, increasingly complex urban communities with large populations, including Teotihuacan, which had 200,000 residents. Agriculture eventually spread throughout the Americas. Not all Indians adapted to agriculture. In some regions, climate combined with abundant resources and cultural values led some peoples to reject farming. Complex agricultural societies with systems of governance and sexual division of labor emerged. Adapting to agriculture led to changes in religious life. Festivals marking seasonal changes emerged as did the observance in some places of a war-sacrifice-cannibalism religion. Indian religious beliefs were pantheistic, emphasizing the kinship of humans with nature.

Different farming cultures emerged in different regions. In the Southwest, a succession of cultures of which the Anasazi was the most famous developed complex, urban societies based on irrigated agriculture. The Woodland Culture of eastern North America combined hunting and gathering with settled agriculture. The most significant cultures were the Adena and Hopewell of the Ohio and Mississippi-Ohio river valleys, respectively. Spreading along the Mississippi River and into the Southeast, the Mississippian was agricultural, urban, and highly sophisticated. This culture constructed large earthworks. A combination of climatic changes and migration created political tension in this area that often led to war.

CULTURAL REGIONS OF NORTH AMERICA ON THE EVE OF COLONIZATION The diversity of cultures in North America has led anthropologists to divide the continent into distinctive Indian cultural areas. Historians estimate the population north of Mexico in the early sixteenth century to have been at 7 to 10 million and an estimated 25 million in the Mexican highlands. The population of the Western Hemisphere was 60-70 million, comparable to Europe.
The Southwest, South, and Northeast had the largest populations and were also the first areas conquered by Europeans. In the Southwest, desert farmers lived in dispersed oasis communities where they cultivated corn, beans, and other crops. East of the Grand Canyon were the Pueblo peoples who practiced a communal, village way of life and practiced dry-farming. Surrounding them were bands of nomadic hunters.

In the South, a variety of small villages and larger towns emerged following the Mississippian cultural pattern. The Natchez dominated the lower Mississippi delta along with confederacies like the Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek, and Cherokee. The Southern Indians subsisted on a combination of settled agriculture supplemented by hunting. In the Northeast, the Iroquois were one of the first to adopt farming. They built longhouses for their extended matrilineal families. The longhouse served as a metaphor for the Iroquois Confederacy, established in 1451. The other northeastern Indians spoke Algonquian and were grouped into over fifty different, patrilineal cultures.

CONCLUSION Indians adapted to their varied environments and created a rich multitude of cultures. As J.H. Perry writes, “Columbus did not discover a new world. He established contact between two worlds, both already old.”

Lecture Suggestions

1. Start the lecture by saying “Fill in the blank. In fourteen-hundred and ninety-two . . .” The students invariably respond “Columbus sailed the ocean blue.” Respond “So what! Why do we care about this fact of history? Invariably some student says “‘Cause he discovered America.” Ask “Did he discover America?” “No, it was the Vikings,” someone is likely to reply. “Did they discover America? Imagine you’re sitting in your house and I walk in and say ‘Nice house, believe I’ll discover it!’ how would you feel?” Discuss the whole notion of what it means to say Columbus discovered America.

2. The material in this chapter is likely to be very unfamiliar to the students. One way of covering it is to introduce the idea of “history” to North America. Most students assume that North Americans had no history before the coming of Europeans. They assume that Indians lived in a timeless, unchanging environment. Retrace the process of establishing various traditions in Indian cultures. Begin with the first arrival of humans to the North American continent. Follow the migrations over the next several centuries. Look at the impact of significant developments: Clovis (10,000 B.C.E.), the end of the ice ages (8,000 B.C.E.), agriculture (7,000 B.C.E.), etc.

3. Students often assume that a single group called “Indians” existed as a common cultural entity. Students could be introduced to the range of regional cultures and should be reminded that Indians were probably more diverse in key respects than Europeans. No one assumes that French and Germans were the same just because they were both from Europe. Lead students past the idea that all Indians were alike. Concentrate on showing how different Indians in different places developed unique cultures.
4. Students also often assume that Indians were “primitive.” Emphasize the complex nature of the Native Americans’ economic and social systems to dispel this assumption. The text is full of examples of the sophisticated ways Indians adapted to their environment. Ask why these beliefs about Indians being primitive developed and show how such notions helped to justify dispossessing them of their lands.

Discussion Questions

1. The text concludes with J. H. Perry’s observation: “Columbus did not discover a new world. He established contact between two worlds, both already old.” What did he mean by this?

2. Most Americans assume that Indians had no history before the coming of whites. What were the major historical events in the history of North America before 1500? How did these developments shape the lives of the people living there?

3. Most Americans assume that there was a single cultural group known as Indians. What were the major kinds of Indian cultures in North America before 1500? How did geography and the different environments affect Indian cultures?

4. Most Americans assume that Indians were “primitive.” Were they? What evidence do we have that this is an inappropriate label?

5. Why was it important for white Americans to assume that Indians were a single cultural mass of primitive people with no history before the coming of whites? How did this help justify expropriating their lands?

Out of Class Activity

Drawing on the additional readings section at the end of the chapter, students could research individual Indian tribes or cultural groups. Working individually or in groups, they could research tribes such as the Cherokee, Delaware, etc. or cultures such as Mississippian. The goal would be to enrich the discussion of differences among various Indian groups by demonstrating the diversity of Indian life before 1500.

If You’re Going to Read One Book on the Subject


Audio-Visual Aids

“Untouched Land: The Pre-Columbian America to 1492” Begins the story of people in America; how they came, what they found, where they lived. Goes up through the Norse explorers and Columbus’s discovery. (B&W, 23 minutes, 1968)
“The First Americans” Presents the available scientific evidence that supports the theory that the first Americans migrated across the Bering land bridge into Alaska. Traces migration throughout the American continents. (Color, 53 min, 1969)

“American Indians Before European Settlement” Explains where the Indians originally came from, how they lived, and unique aspects of the cultures in five basic regions of the U.S. (Color, 11 minutes, 1959)

“Who Discovered America?” Centers on the parallels between artifacts found in Central America and in far and Middle Eastern civilizations. (Color, 14 minutes, 1972)