

NATIVE AMERICAS

In the fourteenth century AD, a thriving ritual and ceremonial center existed at Spiro, in what is now eastern Oklahoma. Its people were well used to burying treasures with their dead, but on one occasion, something very special happened, as one grave mound became the focus for art works of breathtaking quality. These included sculptures, carvings, axes, and rare minerals, as well as many perishable items such as wood, textiles, basketry, furs, shells, and feather objects. They had been collected from a wide variety of Native cultures, some from several hundred miles away. Items came from as far afield as Lake Superior, from Florida and California, from the Gulf of Mexico, and from the Valley of Mexico itself. The exact reason for this assemblage will never be known, but it might have been a response to a sudden downturn in climatic conditions, which provoked a sense of crisis. Perhaps each tribe and nation sent its finest masterwork to help restore the natural order. Whatever the explanation, the Spiro treasure constitutes the finest collection of Native art from anywhere north of the more famous culture regions of central Mexico. The finds suggest a dazzling level of accomplishment and craftsmanship, and an enviable degree of aesthetic sophistication.

Tragically, the Spiro hoard also demonstrates the contempt with which later White arrivals viewed that achievement. In fact, we only have a small portion of the objects that were once present at Spiro, and virtually nothing of what had been created in the delicate perishable materials. When the Spiro burial chamber was discovered in the 1930s, the media raved about an American counterpart of “King Tut’s Tomb,” which had recently been found in Egypt. Treasure hunters ransacked the site, grabbing whatever solid objects they could sell to collectors, while ignoring or destroying anything not of immediate financial value. The story constitutes one of the great cultural crimes in modern American history.

<H1>ORIGINS</H1>

Centers such as Spiro indicate the extraordinarily diverse and vigorous cultures that existed before European contact, and which had maintained their connections over a large part of North America. They also make nonsense of later charges that European arrivals were entering a wilderness, and one populated by savages.

The existence of native peoples on the American continent can be traced back to Paleolithic times. For many years the peopling of North America was dated by means of the stone tools that appeared so widely some 12 or 15,000 years ago, the so-called Clovis points, which were associated with the hunting of now-extinct mammals. Presumably, it was long claimed, these objects were introduced by hunters who had crossed the land bridge that once joined Alaska to Siberia. More recently it has been argued that although a human presence in the landscape is not easy to detect before we find those stone artefacts, people might have been living in America for many years before the Clovis epoch. A growing body of evidence suggests much earlier human activity, probably from about 20,000 years ago, and some controversial claims give still earlier dates.¹

Nor need the first settlers have been confined to entering via the land bridge, as they may have navigated their way along the coasts in small vessels. Probably the oldest human remains in North America come from the Channel Islands off the coast of California, which suggest that early settlers

¹ David J. Meltzer, *First Peoples in a New World* 2nd edition (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

must have used watercraft some 13,000 years ago. Some of the oldest confirmed occupation sites in the New World are to be found in South America, suggesting that the families migrating from Siberia must have expanded rapidly over their huge new domain, presumably by both sea and land. By the time that civilizations were beginning to emerge in the Old World, Native American communities were already living in settled groups, and there were far-flung trading routes.

That very long time frame is essential to understanding Native American history, and how its peoples would have identified themselves at different points in the story. It is tempting to assume that the societies and cultures that European settlers first recorded in North America must have been in place since the earliest times, even with the same tribal identities. Tribes often have lengthy oral traditions dating back many centuries, and sometimes, those records offer very plausible accounts of events. Even so, we should not always accept the literal truth of traditions claiming that a people has been in a particular region from time immemorial, or even from the Creation. In fact, all those long millennia gave enormous opportunities for people to move to new areas and ecological systems, to form new cultures and religious systems, and for political orders to rise and fall. We know of several occasions when Native societies were radically transformed by climate-related disasters, or outbreaks of pandemic disease, most notoriously with the many diseases introduced by Europeans, but there would certainly have been many other episodes of plague, catastrophe, and social implosion. When things became quite impossible, people simply moved away.

Other peoples took advantage of new lands, and continued to settle and migrate long after the original dispersal in Paleolithic times. Today, American Indian peoples are well represented in the southwest, in New Mexico and Arizona, but their origins are quite diverse. Peoples ancestral to the modern Pueblo, for example, had deep roots in those parts, and as we will see, they developed a great civilization. In much later times, probably around 1400 AD, the Pueblo acquired new neighbors as migrants arrived from northwest Canada, and they spoke the languages of the Athabaskan family. Those new arrivals, who called themselves the *Diné*, “the People,” would later be identified as the Navajo and Apache peoples, both of whom would be very well known to later White observers. Although such new arrivals developed mythological systems closely associated with the landscapes in which they came to dwell, often telling ancient stories of creation and origin, the people themselves were in fact quite recent arrivals in those particular places.

In historic times too, other tribes quite voluntarily moved to new regional homes. One was the Tuscarora people who emerged around the Great Lakes region before moving to the eastern Carolinas, possibly in the fifteenth century. In the eighteenth century, they returned to the north, to Pennsylvania and New York, where they joined the Iroquois confederacy. The Cherokee also speak an Iroquoian language, and many scholars believe that they too had come from the Great Lakes country, before migrating to their historically-known homes in southern Appalachia. Other observers disagree, and suggest much deeper roots in that region. Whatever the specifics of that case, we know that Native peoples were adept at seeking out new opportunities, new ecological niches, and also at escaping from difficult circumstances, even if that meant traveling substantial distances.

Native cultures were always dynamic rather than static, and they showed themselves stunningly resilient and adaptable.

<H1>REGIONS</H1>

So diverse were the cultures that flourished across North America that it is difficult to bring them together under any one ethnic label, any more than we can speak simply of “Europeans.”

For most of the human presence in North America, people survived by different forms of hunting and gathering, supplemented where possible by exploiting the resources of the sea, through fishing and the collection of shellfish. The cultivation of maize or corn began in Mexico, probably around nine thousand years ago, and would gradually have spread to what is now the American southwest some millennia later. Only in the first millennium AD, however, did it become very popular and widespread across much of the eastern and Midwestern US.

Within what is now the United States, geography conditioned several main environmental and cultural regions, with Alaska falling into the distinct Arctic/sub-Arctic zone. The eastern half of the country can be termed the woodlands, an area of dazzling dietary wealth in game and fish, supplemented by cultivated squash, beans and, above all, corn, which together constituted the “three sisters.” Coastal populations made heavy use of the resources of the sea – fish and shellfish.

Further west were still more varied ecologies, including the Great Basin, centred on Utah and Nevada and inhabited by tribes such as the Utes and Paiutes; and the plateau region of modern Idaho. In much of what later became southern California, the harsh desert conditions prevented the existence of all but small groups dependent on foraging. In the Pacific north-west, in contrast, large village settlements flourished, based on the rich fishing and the harvesting of sea mammals, and population densities were high. Social structures were complex, and awareness of social distinctions was finely tuned.

<H1>LARGER SETTLEMENTS</H1>

When White settlers expanded into the Ohio river country in the early nineteenth century, they brought back countless reports suggesting the existence of great civilizations and even lost cities. Travelers reported visiting colossal geometric earthworks, road systems and giant carved figures, many of which were recorded, but are now lost. Together, these constituted an unimaginably vast sacred landscape. One astonishing complex, at Newark, Ohio, became a white settlement in 1802. The following year, when Ohio gained statehood, the first capital was at Chillicothe, the setting for other abundant mound remains. The giant Ohio earthwork carving known as the Serpent Mound was first mapped in 1815. Steamboats sailing from St. Louis allowed travelers easy access to such treasures as the extensive mound complex of Cahokia in Illinois. White observers attributed such remains to lost cultures far too sophisticated to be associated with the ignorant Indian ‘savages’ they saw around them. For centuries those observers concocted countless explanations, usually with the goal of fitting them into a recognizable historical scheme. Were they perhaps the descendants of a lost wave of earlier settlers, perhaps Egyptian, Hebrew, Viking, even Welsh?²

These mound cultures were of course wholly Native, and they reflected what had been the very extensive system of interlocking societies of the kind that we have encountered at Spiro. The idea of

² Jason Colavito *The Mound Builder Myth: Fake History and the Hunt for a "Lost White Race"* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2020); Charles H. McNutt and Ryan M. Parish, eds., *Cahokia In Context: Hegemony And Diaspora* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2020).

such earthwork systems was quite ancient. As early as 3500 BC, a complex of eleven mounds was built at Watson Brake in northern Louisiana. Also in Louisiana, at the awe-inspiring site of Poverty Point, we find a very large system of earth-built ridges and mounds surrounding a central plaza, which might have been intended for social gatherings, ceremonial events, or sporting contests, or some blend of the three. That dates to 1600 BC.

From 1000 BC, we enter what archaeologists call the Woodland period, with its characteristic ceremonial and burial sites. The practice of building great earthwork complexes and geometric enclosures spread across much of what is now the eastern United States, closely following the great rivers, and these reflected what were obviously very active routes for trade and gift exchange. In the first few centuries of the Christian era, the Hopewell culture was concentrated in southern Ohio, but related traditions could be found widely. Some of the most spectacular sites are found at Chillicothe and Newark. The nearby Serpent Mound was one of many effigy mounds that would once have adorned the landscape, but most have been destroyed. Native people reshaped huge areas of the landscape to reflect their social and cultural needs, to illustrate their mythological systems, and almost certainly, their astronomical observations. They projected their cosmologies, their views of the universe, on the ground on which they lived and walked.

Such physical remains remind us of the extravagantly rich cultures that would have been associated with them in terms of legend and story-telling, not to mention ritual and ceremonial: all Native cultures have used dance and movement to unite communities, and to pass on their values. In some cases, evidence from later historic cultures allows us to speculate at what those ancient remains might have represented, but we can never be wholly sure.

<H1>MOUNDS AND PYRAMIDS</H1>

We might say that the Hopewell world corresponded to the great Classical societies that existed in Europe about this time, and as in Europe, there was a period of collapse around 500AD, probably resulting from a climate-driven crisis. After some centuries, we again see the emergence of a series of complex and prosperous societies, and mound building was revived on a large scale in the Mississippian Age (ca. 800–1500 AD). The parallels with Europe are not surprising, as both Old and New Worlds were subject to the same global climatic conditions, and we might even speak of North America in terms familiar from medieval Europe. While Europe had its booming towns and cathedrals, then some New World settlements grew into major fortified towns with imposing temples. These people left their mark on the landscape in the form of tombs with elaborate grave goods, and public ritual structures that would have been quite familiar to the ancient Europeans who built Stonehenge and megalithic monuments. Mississippian cultures ranged from the Great Lakes throughout what are now the south-eastern states. It was especially during this period, from the end of the first millennium, that maize agriculture became so vital to the food supply.

Like their Hopewell predecessors, Mississippian societies had a rich material culture. Their ceramics are of very high technical quality, richly colored and decorated, and they often feature effigies of real or mythological creatures, or of human heads. Some of these would have been intended for trade, and they suggest a society of real connoisseurs.

The most impressive remains of “medieval America” are the extensive mound sites, with their platform mounds which can be seen as parallel to the stone pyramid temples of Central America. North America’s ritual structures too would have been topped by temples, by the residences of kings

and warrior leaders, and some incorporated burial sites. Some mounds would also have featured lesser subsidiary mounds, creating a temple complex. Although the mounds today seem like minor hills or small rises in the landscape, in their day they were marked by high stockades and wooden buildings, and those structures would have been elaborately carved and decorated, probably with textiles. As in Hopewell times, the mounds surrounded great plazas and open areas. Different mounds would have been associated with distinct clans or political units, and their distribution would indicate their relative status within the hierarchy of the larger society. In some areas, different clans would occupy the highest chieftaincy in a kind of rotation, and that would have meant taking possession of the most exalted central structure.

Some of these complexes were enormous. The largest center, at Cahokia in Illinois, flourished between the eleventh and the fourteenth centuries. At its height, around 1100, it included 120 earthworks, spread over some six square miles. The most imposing site here, Monk's Mound, stands a hundred feet high, and covers thirteen acres, making it the largest pyramid structure north of Mexico. Cahokia must have been the center of a powerful chieftaincy that spread its influence over much of eastern Missouri and southern Illinois, and many river-oriented communities further afield. Other capitals of the sprawling Mississippian world are preserved at Etowah, Georgia, with its great Temple Mound; Moundville, Alabama; or Kincaid, in southern Illinois. The Emerald Mound, near Natchez in Mississippi, covered eight acres, and at its highest point, would have stood sixty feet high. Spiro was also significant, but nowhere close to the scale of such places. As in the case of European cathedrals, the construction of these sites must have involved an immense amount of labor, and that enterprise would in its own right have contributed to binding a society together in a common purpose. Mound settlements served as the capitals of extensive regions for trade and cultural exchange, linked to villages a hundred miles or more away.

Scholars differ on exactly how these centers would have been used and occupied. If they were inhabited on a full-time basis, then the largest mound settlements probably had (at least) several thousand residents at any given time, quite comparable to the middling towns of contemporary Europe, and it would be quite legitimate to call them "cities." By various estimates, Cahokia might have had anywhere from six to forty thousand residents at its height. But it is also possible that, as often occurs with ritual centers or pilgrimage places around the world, such places would have been sparsely occupied throughout much of the year, before attracting huge crowds during times of special ceremony or celebration.

These settlements were remarkably long-lived. The Spiro site, typically, began around 900 and reached its apex between 1050 and 1250, but then entered a period of contraction. Commonly, centers reached their height in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and a few persisted much longer. Created around 1050, Kincaid survived until 1400. Some complexes were still operating when the first Spanish explorers arrived in the sixteenth century, and Emerald Mound lasted from around 1200 into the 1730s. But that was unusual. Across the continent, we can trace a general decline and contraction from the mid-thirteenth century, which reached disastrous proportions at the end of the century.

This closely reflected trends in contemporary Europe and Asia, which were likewise subject to some climatic hammer blows in this era. These resulted from at least three very large volcanic eruptions, respectively in 1229, 1257, and 1280: the second of these was what scholars of these events term a "super-colossal" event. These explosions successively blackened the skies, affecting rainfall patterns and reducing growing seasons over a period of several years, and often having a severe impact on

the El Niño system. Taken together with sharply reduced levels of solar energy, these changes marked the beginning of a much colder and harsher environment, which after 1300 evolved into what we term the Little Ice Age. As often occurs in such times of sudden transition, famine and drought opened the way to new patterns of pandemic disease, and to acute social crises. Such conditions are well recorded in the Old World, and may well have explained the decline of the Mississippian world. Cahokia was largely abandoned by 1300, as the mounds began to decline, and similar trends are seen elsewhere.

<H1>STONE HOUSES</H1>

While the Mississippian cultures were flourishing in their homeland territories, so centralized settlements and even urban development were to be found in the arid lands of the south-west. This was a very difficult environment, critically dependent on climatic cycles and rainfall, and placing a high premium on the collection and saving of water. This allowed the emergence of settled agricultural communities. From about 1000 AD, large village communities made resourceful use of natural features to create well-defended settlements or pueblos, at the centre of which were *kivas*, round, partly underground chambers used for religious rituals.

Concentrated in the Four Corners region, where the present states of Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, and Colorado meet, some of these settlements grew to amazing proportions, and they demonstrated sophisticated methods of stone construction and masonry. When White American observers finally encountered these centers in the nineteenth century, they found stone buildings of a kind they associated with great Classic civilizations such as Greece or Egypt, and among North America's own Native peoples. The most impressive settlement is that of Chaco Canyon in New Mexico, which includes some fifteen related sites, and which stands at the heart of a network of roads stretching far across the territory. The largest building here, Pueblo Bonito, covers three acres and contains eight hundred rooms, making it by far the largest building constructed in North America before the nineteenth century. Some at least of the structures here show a profound awareness of astronomical alignments, suggesting considerable observational skills, and an interest in calendar and annual cycles that would have been very valuable to such a society. Presumably, such knowledge indicates the existence of a skilled and educated class of priests or other specialists, as in Central America. The Chaco world also produced *kivas* very different from their modern counterparts, tall public buildings that were clearly intended for major public ceremonials.³

Other great settlements included the Aztec Ruins Pueblo, which would have contained some four hundred rooms. The name is misleading, as the place had nothing to do with that people, but it indicates the White American assumption that such archaeological treasures could not have been the work of the country's own Native peoples: they must have been the work of outsiders. We find complexes of great houses cut into a cliffside, as at Mesa Verde. Native peoples made full use of canyons and other areas that offered a chance of defense against wandering raiders or rival tribes. Houses and villages abound in places like Canyon de Chelly (Arizona) and Cedar Mesa (Utah). Other settlements are marked by walls and towers that would not have looked out of place in the Europe of the same period: Wupatki in Arizona looks much like a medieval European castle. Hovenweep, on the border of Colorado and Utah, includes the remains of six villages mainly built in the thirteenth century: in the Ute language, the name means "deserted valley." Among its many

³ David E. Stuart *Anasazi America: Seventeen Centuries on the Road from Center Place*, second edition (University of New Mexico Press, 2014)

other pueblo buildings, the site includes imposing stone towers, and a building that is unavoidably known today as Hovenweep Castle. As with the Mississippians, some of these settlements were very enduring. The occupation of Mesa Verde extended from probably 650 to 1285.

Apart from their dwellings, Native peoples left very extensive remains in the form of their rock art, which would have served many ritual and social functions. Just as eastern peoples used earthworks to transform their landscapes for their own ends, so their counterparts in the southwest made full use of the rocks around them. Probably these precise sites were chosen for their sonic effects, as the best places to amplify ritual sounds.

Traditionally, Euro-American scholars described this mighty culture to the Anasazi, but that is a loaded term, taken from a Navajo word that characterized their “ancient enemies.” Today, the culture is known as Ancestral Puebloan, reflecting the strong connections with the Pueblo cultures of historical times. The pueblo communities, which often lasted for several centuries, maintained links with the more celebrated cultures of Mexico, but they were certainly independent entities.

Lacking written records, scholars differ over many aspects of this “Anasazi” history, and as in other parts of North America, they disagree as to whether places like Chaco would have been permanently occupied cities. Nor is it clear whether great “cities” like Chaco dominated a subject territory, ruling by armed force and even terror. From the mid-twelfth century, the culture entered a period of crisis and decline that certainly reflected new climate conditions, and a severe drought affected the region between 1130 and 1150. Growing crises drove political conflict and mass migration, and there is far more evidence than previously of acts of violence and massacre, often on an extreme scale. Scholars even suggest that cannibalism was used as a symbolic weapon to terrorize enemies and rebels. Newer settlements were fortified against external attackers, or against local insurgencies, a need that produced those towers and defensive fortifications. Meanwhile, older settlements crumbled under the rising challenges. The drought that struck from the 1280s onward supplied a final death blow for the older world, as the familiar settlements became depopulated. We see a fundamental shift from the old political order, which was based on prestigious chieftains and priests, to a new and more egalitarian order, such as we find in the later Pueblo communities. The Pueblo societies that emerged from that crash developed a revolutionary new religious movement, the kachina cult, with its core emphases on water supply and rainfall.

<H1>CONTACT</H1>

By the late fifteenth century, America’s Native societies were no longer producing such extraordinary achievements as the worlds of Cahokia and Chaco Canyon, but they were still flourishing communities. This was the world that was about to be changed utterly by contact with Europeans.

The exact size of the pre-Columbian population is difficult to determine, and the question is politically contentious. Through much of American history, those who took an essentially benevolent view of the European settlement minimized the Indian presence. North America was portrayed as *terra nullius*, a legal term for land that belonged to nobody, which meant it was open to claim and use by new owners who would own its lands productively. Linked to this was the idea that Natives could not have sustained high population densities – a view that ignores the concentration of settlement in places such as Cahokia. Recently the opposite view has become fashionable, with very high estimates of the extent of the native population, the suggestion being that white invaders

were responsible for the genocide of flourishing, pre-existing communities. Complicating any attempt at finding realistic figures is that populations would have fluctuated over time, probably reaching a height in the late twelfth century, and then declining over the subsequent centuries in times of drought and the abandonment of major centers. The most plausible suggestion is that around 1500 AD some three million people lived north of what is now the Mexican border, but some estimates range much higher, to ten million or more.⁴

This was the world that was shortly to be devastated by contact with Europeans and, more particularly, with the diseases that they carried, and which spread so easily along the well-established routes of trade and communication. Long before any White society formulated a deliberate policy of Indian Removal, those diseases were severely reducing Indian populations. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, smallpox epidemics ravaged Central America, and almost certainly would have extended further north: one still unexplained disease that was known in Mexico as Cocoliztli had cataclysmic effects in the 1570s.⁵ Thereafter, disease outbreaks can be traced in North America through the reports of English and French observers. Smallpox repeatedly ravaged the Iroquois tribes in the seventeenth century, but multiple diseases were at work. Death rates commonly amounted to fifty percent or more. Even when the worst plague and pandemics had passed in the east, Native peoples continued to suffer regular biological assaults, which severely reduced populations. The numerous wars and raids of the era proved extremely effective in spreading disease into new territories, and the tumultuous years between 1755 and 1782 were especially bad in this regard. Sometimes destruction by biological means was deliberate: in the 1760s, the British ransacked smallpox hospitals for contaminated bedding to offer as gifts to the Ottawa peoples.

As White Americans expanded West in the nineteenth century, their diseases traveled with them: it is almost possible to map that diffusion through the outbreaks of sickness associated with it. In what is now North Dakota, the Mandan people were a powerful and widely connected group with far reaching trading enterprises. In the late eighteenth century, they were struck by a variety of diseases, including smallpox and measles, and they lost some ninety percent of their numbers. Other Plains Indians suffered gravely in the mid-nineteenth century, and smallpox assailed the peoples of the Pacific North West in the 1860s. For all the savagery of the centuries-long wars, North American Natives suffered far less from bullets or cannon shells than what has been termed the ‘biological unification of mankind’.⁶

Aggravating an increasingly desperate situation were famines resulting from the destruction of familiar environments and (from the eighteenth century) the spread of liquor. The combined effects of disease, war and environmental collapse were harrowing. Indian communities also suffered from the ravages of a thriving slave trade. Many tribes had practiced slavery, and on quite a large scale in the Pacific northwest, where slaves were treated as commodities or chattels. Europeans provided a new market greedy for labor, and just as was occurring in contemporary Africa, that supplied a major boost to slave raiding and intertribal wars. The slave trade was crucial to the development of English rule in the South in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, as the Carolinas

⁴ Charles C. Mann, *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus* (New York: Knopf, 2005); and also his *1493: Uncovering the New World Columbus Created* (Knopf Doubleday, 2011)

⁵ Jennifer Scheper Hughes, *The Church of the Dead: The Epidemic of 1576 and the Birth of Christianity in the Americas* (New York University Press 2021)

⁶ Elizabeth Fenn, *Encounters at the Heart of the World: A History of the Mandan People* (Hill and Wang 2014).

exported tens of thousands of Natives to the Caribbean plantations. Thousands of others served as unfree labor on Carolina plantations.⁷

The combined effects of these onslaughts were appalling. The pandemics left significant areas of the eastern United States virtually uninhabited for generations. They also wrecked old-established social and political orders, fragmenting tribes and chieftaincies. This makes it very difficult to associate bygone cultures and monuments with historical tribes, so that for instance the great Mississippian centers need not necessarily have had any close connection with the Native groups who occupied those regions a few centuries later. Among eastern peoples, the Iroquois were one of the few major groups to survive the pandemics sufficiently to maintain their continuity and identity in a particular historical territory. At the same time, it is all but certain that whole tribal groups have vanished, leaving at best vague memories in the tales and traditions of their former neighbors. By the early eighteenth century, the older Native populations of Florida had all but disappeared, leaving a wasteland outside the Spanish-controlled cities. This land was then resettled by newcomers and refugees from the Creeks and other south-eastern tribes, who gradually coalesced to form a whole new nation, which history knows as the Seminoles, or “runaways.” Other once populous areas were hit hard, and whole peoples were annihilated in nineteenth century California. Here, especially, even cautious historians are write in terms of systematic genocide.⁸

<H1>NOT FADE AWAY</H1>

So dreadful were the effects of early European contact that it is tempting to write as if Native peoples swiftly fell into ruin and irrelevance. That is far from the truth. Although many communities were severely reduced, Indian peoples remained a strong and obvious presence confronting White settlement for several centuries. Later White Americans made much of the “Vanishing Indian,” who supposedly was doomed to extinction at the hands of higher races, but in fact, that “vanishing” took place at a very leisurely rate, and was still far from accomplished half a millennium later.⁹

Examples of survival abounded. We have already encountered the Iroquois league based in in what became New York State. More properly, these were the Haudenosaunee, the “people building the longhouse,” a federation of the Five Nations – the Seneca, Cayuga, Oneida, Onondaga, and Mohawk, and later expanded to six by the adherence of the Tuscarora. Formed (probably) in the fifteenth century, this union remained a formidable military presence until the early years of the United States. In the south-east we find complex tribes such as the Creeks and the Cherokees. There continued to be very widely connected centers of trade, ceremonial life, and cosmology, much like Spiro and the older Mississippian world. One such was Etzanao in southern Kansas, which flourished between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, and which had some 1,200 houses in the

⁷ Alan Galloway, *The Indian Slave Trade: The Rise of the English Empire in the American South, 1670-1717* (Yale University Press, 2002)

⁸ Benjamin Madley, *An American Genocide: The United States and the California Indian Catastrophe, 1846–1873* (Yale University Press, 2016).

⁹ Ned Blackhawk, *The Rediscovery of America: Native Peoples and the Unmaking of U.S. History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023).

late sixteenth century. In Northern Michigan, Michilimackinac was the political, ritual, and trading center of the far-flung Anishinaabe peoples, who long retained their independence.¹⁰

Native communities proved surprisingly well equipped to deal with those Euro-American arrivals. A long-popular American view suggested that European settlers had an immense technological advantage over the primitive Indians: how could bows and arrows fight against firearms? In reality, those Native technologies were very well suited to the environments in which they were used, and in early times, were at least equal to those of the colonists. Indian longbows offered a high rate of fire utterly beyond the capabilities of slow-loading muskets, and they were very accurate. Indian birch-bark canoes were an excellent means of transportation along rivers and coastal waters, and some boats were more substantial, and seaworthy. Indians and colonists warred on water, as well as land. The Natives also had real advantages in the logistics that allowed societies to compete with rivals, especially in food production. With several millennia of experience in identifying crops that would grow best in particular areas, their use of maize agriculture was highly productive. So well suited were the Natives to the landscapes in which they lived that it would have been almost impossible to displace them, had it not been for the disease pandemics.

For much of the long period of contact between Europeans and Native Americans, the new white arrivals operated as one additional element to social and political realities, but assuredly not as predestined rulers or overlords. As we will see, through much of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Native populations were indeed conquered in various parts of the continent, where they were alternatively enslaved or subjected to the efforts of Christian missionaries. But over large areas of North America, Natives remained strong and politically independent, as their societies absorbed and reconstructed the remnants of other less fortunate groups. In the Great Lakes country, Native states exploited the opportunities presented by European contact, often with real ingenuity, and they won some striking successes. They played off rival imperial presences against each other, especially the British and French. In terms of politics and economics, as well as literally, Native peoples learned to speak multiple languages with great fluency – to operate in very different worlds. Describing such societies, scholars often borrow the title of Richard White’s study *The Middle Ground*, in which the concept of “middle” is not just geographical but also social, cultural, and linguistic.¹¹

To put this in chronological perspective, the early United States won several critical victories against Native peoples along its lengthy borders in the generation after 1790, which decisively projected

¹⁰ Michael A. McDonnell, *Masters of Empire: Great Lakes Indians and the Making of America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2015).

¹¹ Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, And Republics In The Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (Cambridge University Press, 1991);

Michael Witgen, *An Infinity Of Nations: How The Native New World Shaped Early North America* (Philadelphia : University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

Anglo and White rule into the Midwest; but that was a full three centuries after the first European contact. Throughout that time, this had unequivocally been “Indian Country.”¹²

<H1>NEW WORLDS, NEW CULTURES</H1>

As so often in the past, Native peoples proved very adaptable. Whenever we think of the stereotypical images of American Indians, as reflected in so many popular films and novels, these usually reflect the acquisition of European innovations, which Native peoples made wholly their own. In their way, these societies were quite as new and pathbreaking as the settler worlds of the early American colonies.

Conventional European stereotypes of ‘Indians’ usually concern the horse-riding and buffalo-hunting cultures of the Great Plains region, tribes such as the Lakota (Sioux) and Cheyenne. In fact, those societies could not have existed in anything like the form we know before the European encounter. The plains were sparsely populated until historically recent times, when eastern communities began to settle, armed with the newly discovered bow and arrow. And although horses had existed in North America in very ancient times, they had been extinct for millennia and were only reintroduced by Spanish settlers in the seventeenth century. Once horses had returned, their use spread rapidly, and provided the basis of the powerful and militarily dangerous culture encountered by nineteenth-century Americans. Horses drove a social and cultural revolution. Both here and elsewhere across the continent, Native peoples also became very familiar with the use of firearms. Plains society was based on the apparently inexhaustible herds of bison, or buffalo: there may have been 60–70 million buffalo in any given year before the 1840s. Processing those buffalo was however a very laborious enterprise, which was best left to slave labor. The new Native economy encouraged major slave-raiding against weaker neighboring communities¹³

One of the greatest Native success stories involved the Comanche people, whose fierce opposition to White settlement is commemorated in many Western films by such great directors as John Ford. The Comanche originated in the arid Great Basin country of Nevada and Idaho, where they belonged to the larger culture and language group of the Shoshone. With other Shoshonean peoples they migrated into the Great Plains, where during the mid-eighteenth century they acquired horses, hunted buffalo, and developed a very wide-ranging nomadic life style. They acquired a homeland in a region that became known as the Comancheria, in northwest Texas, eastern New Mexico, and neighboring regions of Kansas and Oklahoma. From this long-secure bastion, they traded extensively with Europeans, initially with Spanish settlers and later with Mexicans and Americans, dealing in horses, as well as slaves, in very large numbers. Acquiring firearms, they became famous as highly effective mobile warriors. They raided extensively, demanding tribute as the price of peace, and for most of the nineteenth century they acted as a full-fledged empire, which closely resembled the nomadic empires of ancient and medieval Eurasia. At their height, the Comanche dominated perhaps a quarter million square miles of US and Mexican territory, an area larger than modern France. When Texas acquired its independence in 1836, much of its early history focused on the desperate need to confront and repel Comanche assaults. Not until 1874 did the settlers achieve a

¹² Pekka Hämäläinen, *Indigenous Continent: The Epic Contest for North America* (New York: Liveright, 2022).

¹³ Robert Michael Morrissey, *People of the Ecotone: Environment and Indigenous Power at the Center of Early America* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2022).

decisive victory, achieved through use of accurate repeating rifles. Only then could the Comanche finally be persuaded to accept life on government-organized reservations.¹⁴

Some of the best known and most cherished symbols of Native culture come from the peoples of the Pacific North West, whose magnificent visual arts are evident in the awe-inspiring totem poles so avidly collected by nineteenth-century Europeans. If the cultures were ancient, the prosperity that allowed this cultural outpouring reflected the impact of European trade, and local elites were skilled at extracting the best commercial deals from their various visitors, Russian, British and others.

One of the main forces driving White American interest in the West was the fur trade. Native peoples had always taken and traded furs, and Europeans supplied a major new market. Control of this immensely profitable trade ignited political rivalries, as French, British and Americans competed for the fur routes much more than they did for mere titles to land. The saga reached its height in the first half of the nineteenth century, as furs enjoyed an enormous vogue in Europe. In 1811, the company owned by John Jacob Astor established a key West Coast trading post at Fort Astoria (Oregon), and the resulting activities made his family one of the nation's very wealthiest, comparable to modern multi-billionaires. Throughout the story, Native peoples were central to the fur trade as they controlled the key lands and waterways, and they granted or denied access to White newcomers.

The traffic generated unprecedented material wealth for some Native peoples, but also provoked savage conflicts that proved very destabilizing. Fur, like horses, served as the basis for a real social revolution. In the mid-seventeenth century, the Iroquois launched the very destructive "Beaver Wars" as part of a campaign to monopolize the fur trade in their own interests, and in the process they destroyed or eliminated several rival nations. Their booming enterprises made them a thriving commercial empire, which the French desperately tried to contain or suppress. Over the next two centuries, Native societies across the Midwest were transformed by new wealth, but also by new tastes that the tribes acquired, with the desire for European material goods. The social revolution had a special impact on the role of Native women, who were often used to cement relationships with commercial and political allies, which in turn led to intensified ethnic mixing, and the creation of mixed cultures.¹⁵

In some areas, it was the Native communities themselves that represented a new presence. In the southwest, we have already seen how the Navajo and Apache peoples had migrated to their new homelands not too long before the Spanish invaders first arrived in the New World. In those new lands, the Navajo developed an innovative and successful culture and economy. Previously hunters and gatherers, the Navajo learned farming from the Pueblo, including the cultivation of the "three sister" crops. They also relied on raising sheep and goats, a practice learned from the Spanish: before Columbus, the New World had no domesticated sheep, or related species. Despite bitter wars with Spanish and American forces, the Navajo survived and flourished. Today, the Navajo nation claims some 400,000 enrolled members, and the Navajo reservation has almost 180,000 residents, more than the next 20 biggest reservations combined. The Apache, meanwhile, offered some of the most stubborn resistance that White Americans would face anywhere in their western lands, producing such legendary warriors as Cochise and Geronimo. But in their ways of living as well as fighting,

¹⁴ Pekka Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire* (New Haven, CT; Yale University Press. 2008).

¹⁵ Eric Jay Dolan, *Fur, Fortune, and Empire: The Epic History of the Fur Trade in America* (New York: W. W. Norton 2010)

they represented a new synthesis with the Euro-American world.

The other great importations, of course, were spiritual. The European introduction of Christianity has been seen as a very mixed blessing, especially as the well-intentioned new populations that brought the new faith also brought so many harmful diseases. Also, the new religion was often imposed on a reluctant, as in the inflexible Catholic mission systems of California and the southwest. But as in other matters, Native peoples adapted what was presented to them, and chose what seemed valuable.¹⁶

As so often occurs when societies face existential crises, prophetic and messianic figures arose and won wide support. As the situation of Native peoples deteriorated sharply at the end of the eighteenth century, two great figures appeared, each preaching a message of renewal that owed much to Christian visions, including a cry for Temperance and rejection of the evils of liquor. Among the Seneca, the prophet was Handsome Lake, whose Good Word integrated Iroquois values with Quaker teachings. In what is now Ohio, there appeared the Shawnee Prophet Tenskwatawa, who preached the urgent need for unity and common action amongst Native peoples. Adding to his impact, he was the brother of Tecumseh, one of the deadliest Indian foes that the United States faced in its history. As we will see, the Shawnee Prophet supplied the spiritual dimension required to power a major Native crusade.

<H1>THE NEW AMERICANS</H1>

Europeans influenced Native peoples, who in turn had their impact on the new rivals. European explorers and settlers found much in North America that was priceless, even though it would be centuries before they discovered the precious metals they originally sought. They found crops such as maize or Indian corn, tobacco, and sweet potatoes, all of which they integrated into their own agricultural systems.

Often, contacts between older and newer populations were turbulent and violent, and White American leaders made much of their achievements in defeating Native rivals. In the nineteenth century, Andrew Jackson made his reputation through his military victory over the British, but also his suppression of several Indian tribes. But the realities of the frontier involved far more than simple racial warfare. From an early stage of contact, settlers and conquerors were interacting with older populations, and racial intermixing was common. That was very familiar in French-dominated areas, but was also well-known in English regions. The children of those unions often became key intermediaries between societies, and some enjoyed a significant political role. White people often lived in Native communities, whether voluntarily or not: some were taken as captives or slaves, others simply enjoyed the very different lifestyle. In the nineteenth century, a vital figure in Texas politics was Sam Houston, who at times lived a whole alternative existence as a resident of the Cherokee reservation. From the 1870s onward, the dominant Comanche leader was Quanah Parker, whose Texan mother Cynthia Ann had been abducted in a raid, and who wholly adopted the Native lifestyle. Parker often served as intermediary between his two peoples.¹⁷

More generally, White Americans borrowed Native words and placenames, sometimes accurately,

¹⁶ Allan Greer, *Mohawk Saint: Catherine Tekakwitha and the Jesuits* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

¹⁷ S.C. Gwynne, *Empire of the Summer Moon: Quanah Parker and the Rise and Fall of the Comanche Tribe* (New York: Simon and Schister, 2010).

and often through the distorted lens of popular culture. “Playing Indian” is an age-old custom in White America. It extends from the costumes affected by the protesters who threw British-owned tea into Boston harbor in 1775 to the Indian mascots that have been such a feature of modern American sporting life. In modern times, White Americans have drawn extensively on what they assume to be authentic Native spiritual practices, often to the horror of Native peoples themselves.¹⁸

<H1>ALL THE WORLD WAS AMERICA</H1>

When Europeans encountered America, their reactions were paradoxical. Some accurately reported the large and complex communities they saw there, while at the same time, others were stressing that the land was effectively empty, and just awaiting settlement and development. In order to make this case, those observers had to ignore a lot of contrary evidence, and often, to resort to varieties of pseudo-history.

In 1689, the English philosopher John Locke published his *Second Treatise on Civil Government*, which had a huge impact on later political thought, and on liberalism. Locke often used Native American examples to show how poor societies anywhere would be if they lacked the basic idea of private property in land, which gave the incentive to grow and develop, and to become a true civilization. In a famous phrase that deliberately echoed the Bible, he wrote that “Thus in the beginning all the World was America, and more so than that is now.” America – to be precise, Native America – was a primal wilderness, but not in the desirable sense of a perfect garden of Eden. Rather, it was poor, primitive, barren, and under-exploited. Together with racial prejudices, such attitudes help explain the long neglect of those Native societies, which in fact were so vibrant, and so enduring. Only in very recent times have more positive views become the norm.¹⁹

¹⁸ Philip Jenkins, *Dream Catchers* (Oxford University Press, 2004)

¹⁹ John Locke, *The Second Treatise Of Civil Government* edited by J.W. Gough (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1948), 26.