**Northeast (Eastern Woodlands) Culture Area**

This area covers the territory from the Atlantic seaboard across the Appalachians to the Mississippi Valley, and north to south, from the Great Lakes to the Tidewater region of present-day Virginia and North Carolina, and beyond the Cumberland River in Tennessee.

The tribes of this region at the time of Contact, when the explorers came, can be organized into five subgroups, based on variations in lifeways, and their regions: 1) the Nova Scotia, New England, Long Island, Hudson Valley and Delaware Valley Algonquian-speaking tribes, 2) the New York and Ontario Iroquoian-speaking tribes, 3) the Great Lakes Algonquians, 4) the Prairie Algonquians, 5) and the southern fringe tribes, both Algonquians and Iroquoians.

Both the Iroquois and Algonquians had strong tribal identities above and beyond the basic nuclear families. For the Indians of the Northeast area, the trees of the forest were the primary material for shelter, tools and fuel, and the animals of the forest were the primary food source. But the Northeast Woodland Native Americans were not solely hunters and gatherers, but also fishermen and farmers.

**Southeast Culture Area**

The Southeast culture area stretches from the Atlantic Ocean westward to the arid lands beyond the Trinity River in present-day Texas, and from the Gulf of Mexico northward to varying latitudes in the present-day states of Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Missouri, Kentucky, West Virginia, Maryland, Virginia and North Carolina.

The majority of Native Americans in the Southeast made their homes along river valleys in villages which served as the dominant form of social organization. In general, it can be said that the people of the Southeast were farmers first and hunters, gatherers, and fishermen second.

The larger tribes of the area include the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek and Seminole (an offshoot of Creek), referred to by whites as the Five Civilized Tribes.

**Southwest Culture Area**

The Southwest culture area extends from the southern fringes of present-day Utah and Colorado southward through Arizona and New Mexico (including parts of Texas, California and Oklahoma) into Mexico. The constant in this vast region is aridity.

Two essential Indian life-styles developed in the region: agrarian and nomadic. Agriculture north of Mesoamerica reached its highest level of development in the Southwest. The people of this culture area can further be organized as follows: 1) the agrarian Pueblo peoples, including the western Pueblos (Hopi and Zuni), and the Rio Grande Pueblos (Keres, Tewa, Tiwa, and Towa); 2) the agrarian Desert peoples (Hualapai, Havasupai, Yavapai, Mojave, Yuma, Cocopa, Maricopa, Pima and Papago); 3) the Athapascans, late arrivals in the region from the north (A.D. 800 to 1000), including the Apaches, nomads and raiders, as well as the Navajos, who eventually adopted a pastoral life-style; and 4) the southwestern Texas and northern Mexico tribes, mostly nomadic hunters, with some farmers among them.

**Great Basin Culture Area**

The Great Basin culture area, as its name implies, comprises a huge natural desert basin comprising practically all of Utah and Nevada, parts of Colorado, Wyoming, Idaho, Oregon and California, as well as the northern fringes of Arizona and New Mexico. Death Valley, situated below sea level and reaching summer temperatures as high as 140º F, represents the Basin’s geographic extreme. Because of that harsh environment, Great Basin Native Americans at the time of Contact were primarily gatherers who foraged and dug for anything edible - seeds, nuts, berries, roots, snakes, lizards, insects and rodents - and thus have been referred to as "diggers". They were also hunters, as well as, to a lesser extent, fishermen.

Because of the meager food supplies, people traveled for the most part in small family groups, with minimal tribal identity and few community rites. The major groupings of peoples are Paiute, Ute and Shoshoni, with various subdivisions and offshoots. By the 18th and 19th centuries, some bands had become horse-mounted hunters on the Great Plains to the east.

**Plateau Culture Area**

The Columbia Plateau and its rivers define the Plateau culture area of eastern Washington, northern Idaho, western Montana, northeast and central Oregon, southeast British Columbia and a tiny portion of northern California. For the Native Americans of the area at the time of Contact, the fast-flowing rivers offered sustenance - salmon, the dietary staple, as well as trout and sturgeon. They also provided avenues of travel and trade.

The Plateau culture area was not as densely populated as the Pacific coastal areas to the west. Nevertheless, more than two dozen distinct tribal groups inhabited the Columbia Plateau. Villages, usually located along riverbanks, became the main political units, with headmen as leaders. Some of the most well-known tribes of the area are: Chinook, Nez Perce, Flathead, and Spokane. The earliest ancestors settled the area before 6000 B.C. In later years, people from the Great Plains influenced Plateau inhabitants. The Nez Perces, for example, became excellent horse trainers and breeders in Postcontact times.

**Northwest Coast Culture Area**

The Northwest Coast culture area extends more than 2,000 miles from the northern limits of California to the panhandle of Alaska, including western Oregon, Washington and British Columbia. The widest part in this long coastal strip is only about 150 miles across. For the native inhabitants of the Northwest Coast at the time of Contact, the oceans, rivers, and forests offered up plentiful fish and game. Even without agriculture other than some cultivation of tobacco, the Northwest Coast Native Americans had more than enough food to support a dense population. Because of the readily available sustenance and building materials for roomy houses and seaworthy boats, the Native Americans had time to achieve an affluent and highly complex society, much of it revolving around the custom of the potlatch, in which an individual’s prestige and rank were determined by the quantities of material possessions he could give away.  Some of the most well-known tribes of the area are: Haida, Chinook, Tillamook, Chimakum.

**California Culture Area**

The California culture area corresponds roughly to the present-day state of California, in addition to Baja California in Mexico, except along the state’s eastern border; there the Native Americans at the time of Contact demonstrated life-styles more typical of the Great Basin, Southwest and the Columbia Plateau. Along the eastern edge of the California culture area, the Sierra Nevada and the Gulf of California provided natural barriers for differing life-styles. To the north, however, no such barrier blocked interaction among peoples, making the dividing line between the California and Northwest Coast areas especially arbitrary, with many shared cultural traits. The heart of the cultural area is the natural basin of San Joaquin and Sacramento rivers.

The California region supported the densest population north of Mesoamerica. The basic social unit was the family, and groups of related families formed villages. Some of the most well-known tribes of the area are: Shasta, Chumash, Costano. In Postcontact times, various California natives came to be jointly known to the Spanish as the Mission Indians. Different peoples also came to carry the names of particular missions, i.e. Diegueno, Serrano, etc.

**Great Plains Culture Area**

The Great Plains culture area stretches west from the Mississippi River Valley to the Rocky Mountains, and south from varying latitudes in present-day Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta to southern Texas. This vast region is predominantly treeless grassland. The Great Plains culture area is unique in the sense that the typical Indian subsistence pattern and related ways of life evolved long after Contact. It was the advent of horses, brought to North America by whites - the first horses since the post-Pleistocene extinction of the native species - that made the new life on the Plains possible. With increased mobility and prowess, former village and farming tribes of the river valleys became nomadic hunters, especially of the buffalo. Some other tribes migrated onto the Plains from elsewhere to partake of this life-style. With time, varying tribal customs blended into what is sometimes referred to as the Composite Plains Tribe, shaped by the horse and buffalo culture. At the time of the Contact, it is believed that most of the tribes were villagers and farmers, or at least semi-nomads, with settlements located especially along the Missouri River. Some of the most well-known tribes of the area: Sioux, Pawnee, Blackfoot, Crow, Cheyenne, Arapaho.

**Arctic Culture Area**

The Arctic culture area runs for more than 5,000 miles from eastern Siberia across the northern stretches of Alaska and Canada all the way to Greenland.

The peoples who settled the upper regions of North America out of Siberia came relatively late to the continent, circa 3000 B.C. They came in skin and wooden boats, or perhaps by riding the ice floes. They were of a different stock than other Native Americans, generally of a shorter and broader stature, rounder face, lighter skin, and with the epicanthic eye fold, the small fold of skin covering the inner corner of the eye and typical of Asian peoples. They are known historically as the Eskimos and the Aleuts.

The Inuits and Aleuts adapted remarkably well to the harsh Arctic environment, with hunting as the primary means of subsistence and supplemented by fishing. Those parts of their catch they didn’t eat, they used to make clothing, housing, boats, different tools, weapons, and even heating and cooking fuel. There were several Eskimo groups in the area. The Central Eskimos demonstrated what is considered typical "Eskimo" ways of life - igloos (houses made of ice), kayaks, sleds, and dog teams.

**Mesoamerica Culture Area**

The first major civilization of Mesoamerica (what stretched from Mexico’s central plateau south to Costa Rica) was that of the **Olmecs**, the enigmatic people who inhabited the jungles along Mexico’s Gulf Coast as long ago as 1200 B.C. Their rulers built impressive temples and spread their influence throughout Middle America, among them to the **Maya**, **Toltec**, **Aztec**, as well as other peoples far to north and south.

Agriculture, as part of the milestones of cultural improvements, was invented in Mesoamerica circa 7000 to 1500 B.C. and began to spread northward. To aid in the process of human geographic distribution, agriculture arrived to North America from Mesoamerica and possibly also the Caribbean between 1000 and 2000 years ago. Areas suitable for agriculture were suitable for humans. Mesoamerica, along with the Andes region of South America, where agriculture also developed, is therefore sometimes referred to as "Nuclear America".

**Circum-Caribbean Culture Area**

The Caribbean - predominantly tropical rain forest - resembles that of South America, and the native population was to a large extent under the sphere of influence of South American as well as Mesoamerican peoples. In fact, a primary route of migration onto the Caribbean islands was northward from South America along the Antilles chain.

The peoples of the Circum-Caribbean cultural area were agriculturists, as well as hunters, fishermen, and gatherers. The palm trees served as the primary building material. The dominant form of social organization was the chiefdom - a collection of autonomous bands united politically and religiously under supreme rulers and with social classes. Circum-Caribbean peoples, however, never attained the high levels of social organization or the advanced technologies of the Mesoamerican and Andes cultures.

People of pure Indian stock do remain, many of them living as poor peasant villagers in highland areas.