

# First Nations Histories

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### **Abenaki**

Native Americans have occupied northern New England for at least 10,000 years. There is no proof these ancient residents were ancestors of the Abenaki, but there is no reason to think they were not.

### **Acolapissa**

The mild climate of the lower Mississippi required little clothing. Acolapissa men limited themselves pretty much to a breechcloth, women a short skirt, and children ran nude until puberty. With so little clothing with which to adorn themselves, the Acolapissa were fond of decorating their entire bodies with tattoos. In cold weather a buffalo robe or feathered cloak was added for warmth.

### **Algonkin**

If for no other reason, the Algonkin would be famous because their name has been used for the largest native language group in North America. The downside is the confusion generated, and many people do not realize there actually was an Algonkin tribe, or that all Algonquins do not belong to the same tribe. Although Algonquin is a common language group, it has many many dialects, not all of

which are mutually intelligible.

### **Bayougoula**

Dogs were the only animal domesticated by Native Americans before the horse, but the Bayougoula in 1699 kept small flocks of turkeys. The tribes of the lower Mississippi were also unique in that tribal territories were well defined. Decorated with fish heads and bear bones, a large red post near the mouth of the Red River marked the boundary between the Bayougoula and the Houma just to the north. Translated into French, the location of this "Red Post" became known as Baton Rouge, the present-day capital of Louisiana.



### **Beothuk**

One thing that is known about the Beothuk was their love of the color red. While the use of red ocre was common among Native Americans, no other tribe used it as extensively as the Beothuk. They literally covered everything - their bodies, faces, hair, clothing, personal possessions, and tools - with a red paint made from powdered ochre mixed with either fish oil or animal grease. It was also employed in burials. The reasons are unknown, but speculation has ranged from their religion (about which we know very little) to protection from insects. The practice was so excessive, even the Micmac referred to them as the Red Indians, and it is believed the term "redskin" used for Native Americans probably originated from early contacts between European fishermen and Beothuk.

### **Catawba**

Catawba warriors had a fearsome reputation and an appearance to match: ponytail hairstyle with a distinctive war paint pattern of one eye in a black circle, the other in a white circle and remainder of the face painted black. Coupled with their flattened foreheads, some of their enemies must have died from sheer fright.



### **Chickasaw**

Although generally the least known of the Five Civilized Tribes (Chickasaw, Cherokee, Choctaw, Creek, Seminole), no other tribe played a more significant role in Britain's victory over France for control of North America. Various described as the Unconquered and Unconquerable or the Spartans of the lower Mississippi Valley, the Chickasaw were the most formidable warriors of the American Southeast, and anyone who messed with them came to regret it, if they survived!

British traders from the Carolinas were quick to recognize their prowess in this regard and armed the Chickasaw to the teeth, after which, no combination of the French and their native allies was able to dislodge the Chickasaw from the stranglehold they imposed upon French commerce on the lower Mississippi. The Chickasaw could cut New France in two, which seriously crippled the French in any war with the British. From the high ground overlooking the Mississippi River at Memphis, the Chickasaw took on all comers, including tribes four to five times their size and never lost until they picked the wrong side in the American Civil War. Even then, the Chickasaw Nation was the last Confederate government to surrender to Union forces.

### Chitimacha

To enhance their appearance, the Chitimacha flattened the foreheads of their male children. Most men wore their hair long, but there were occasional reports of some of their warriors having a scalplock. With the mild climate, male clothing was limited to a breechcloth which allowed a display of their extensive tattooing of the face, body, arms and legs. Women limited themselves to a short skirt. Their hair was also worn long but usually braided. Socially, the Chitimacha were divided into matrilineal (descent traced through the mother) totemic (named for an animal) clans. The most distinctive characteristic of Chitimacha society was their strict caste system of two ranked groups: nobles and commoners. The separation between them included the use of two distinct dialects with commoners required to address nobles in the proper language. The Chitimacha were unique among Native Americans with their practice of strict endogamy (a person can only marry someone from their own group). A noble man or woman who married a commoner forfeited their higher status.



### Comanche

Stealing horses was common among the plains tribes, but like everything else concerning the horse, Comanches did it on a grand scale. As the number of Spanish horses in New Mexico became inadequate, Comanche raids reached south into Texas and Mexico. By 1775 the Spanish governor of New Mexico was complaining that, despite constant re-supply from Mexico, Comanche raiders had stolen so many horses he did not have enough to pursue them.

The Comanche epitomized the mounted plains warrior. Until the 1750s, they often employed leather armor and large body shields to protect both horse and rider. This changed with increased use of firearms and quickly changed into the stereotypical light cavalry tactics associated with plains warfare. This development first forced the Spanish, and later Texans and Americans, to cope with a new style of mounted

warfare. They did not do very well at first. European cavalry had evolved into heavy-armed dragoons designed to break massed-infantry formations. There was no way these soldiers could stay with mounted Comanches who usually left them eating dust ..if they could find them in the first place. The Texas Rangers were organized during the 1840s primarily to fight Comanches. A decade later, when the American army began to assume much of the Rangers' responsibility, it had much to learn.

## Delaware

Finding the Moravians at Gnadenhuetten, Williamson placed them under arrest. In the democratic style of frontier militia, a vote was taken whether to take the prisoners back to Fort Pitt or kill them. The decision was to execute them. The Moravians were given the night to prepare. In the morning, two slaughter houses were selected, and 90 Christian Delaware - 29 men, 27 women, and 34 children - were taken inside in small groups and beaten to death with wooden mallets. Among the victims was old Abraham, a Mahican and the first Moravian convert in Pennsylvania. Afterwards, the troops burned Gnadenhuetten and the other Moravian missions. Then loaded down with plunder from their victims, they went home to their wives and children in Pennsylvania.

## Erie

With French contact limited to one brief meeting, very little is known for certain about the Erie except they were important, and they were there. The Dutch and Swedes also heard about them through their trade with the Susquehannock, but never actually met the Erie. All information about their social and political organization has come from early Jesuit accounts of what they had been told by the Huron.

## Houma

...as darkness fell the interior was illuminated by enormous (15' high, two feet thick) cane torches. The Houma men were fairly tall, averaging about 5' 10" with breechcloths extending to the knee with a mantle of turkey feathers added for warmth or decoration. Women were bare to the waist with a short skirt. Both sexes wore their hair long and braided, and there was extensive use of body and face tattooing. The French also noticed that the older Houma men, including the chief, had flattened foreheads, but the practice seemed to be ending, since none of the younger men had their appearance altered in this manner. Agriculture provided most of the Houma diet, and the village was surrounded by fields in which they grew corn, beans, squash, melons and sunflowers. Hunting and fishing, using

dugout rather than birchbark canoes, provided the remainder.

## **Huron**

Americans often do not realize that Huron and Wyandot are the same people. Originally, more than a dozen Iroquoian-speaking tribes of southern Ontario referred to themselves as Wendat meaning "island people" or "dwellers on a peninsula." Rendered variously as: Guyandot, Guyandotte, Ouendat, Wyandot, and Wyandotte. The French, however, called members of a four-tribe confederacy Huron, a derogatory name derived from their word "hure" meaning rough or ruffian. This has persisted as their usual name in Canada.

## **Illinois**

The destruction of the Illini after contact is one of the great tragedies in North American history. By the time American settlement reached them during the early 1800s, the Illini were nearly extinct and replaced by other tribes. For the most part, the blame for this could not be placed on a war with the Europeans or the Illini refusal to adapt themselves to a changing situation. Actually, few tribes had adapted as much or attached themselves more closely to the French. This made it easy to place responsibility for the fate of the Illini on their native enemies, or perhaps even nature itself, and for this reason, their sad story became a favorite romanticized explanation of the Native American's "ride into the sunset" to prepare the way for the advance of "civilization." However, stripped of this embellishment, the story of the Illini's decline is a chilling indication of how the European presence, regardless of purpose or intention, unleashed destructive forces upon North America's native peoples which reached far beyond the immediate areas of their colonization.

## **Iroquois**

"Simply put, the Iroquois were the most important native group in North American history....Other than clearing fields and building villages, the primary occupation of the men was warfare. Warriors wore their hair in a distinctive scalplock (Mohawk of course), although other styles became common later. While the men carefully removed all facial and body hair, women wore theirs long. Tattoos were common for both sexes. Torture and ritual cannibalism were some of the ugly traits of the Iroquois..."

## **Kickapoo**

By common tradition, the Kickapoo and Shawnee believe they were once a single tribe but separated after an argument over a bear's paw.

[The Kickapoo's] most distinctive characteristic has been a stubborn resistance to acculturation with the white man, and it is difficult to think of another group of Native Americans which has gone to such lengths to avoid this. The tendency of the Kickapoo to avoid direct contact has made it easy to dismiss them as unimportant. Although they never played a lead role, the Kickapoo, like a good character actor, were involved in so many things that their overall contribution was enormous. While reading their history, they seem to disappear at times into a story of another people, only to suddenly resurface in another place and time. Years after the leading tribes with the famous names were gone, the Kickapoo were still in the midst of the struggle to preserve native America.



### **Mahican**

When James Fenimore Cooper wrote "Last of the Mohicans" in 1826 he made the Mahican famous. Unfortunately, he also made them extinct in many minds and confused their name and history with the Mohegan from eastern Connecticut. This error has persisted, and most Americans today would be surprised to learn that the Mahican are very much alive and living in Wisconsin under an assumed name, Stockbridge Indians.

### **Mascouten**

We have no idea what they called themselves. Mascouten apparently comes from a Fox word meaning "little prairie people." In its various forms: Mascoutin, Mathkoutench, Musketoan, Meadow Indians (George Rogers Clark's journal), and possibly Rasaouakoueton (Nicollet). Aside from Nicollet, the earliest mention of the Mascouten was by the French which used their Huron name, Assistaeronon (Assitaehronon, Assitageronon, Attistae) which translates as Fire Nation (Nation of Fire).



### **Massachusett**

Contact with Europeans probably occurred at an early date, perhaps as soon as John Cabot in 1497, but they were first mentioned specifically by Captain John Smith when he explored the coast of New England in 1614. Disaster struck immediately afterwards in the form of three separate epidemics that swept across New England between 1614 and 1617 destroying 3/4 of the original native population.

## Mattabesic

Mention is often made of the Wappinger and Mattabesic Confederations, but these organizations never really existed. In truth, the Mattabesic and Wappinger were not even tribes within the usual meaning of the word. What they really were was a collection of a dozen, or so, small tribes which spoke Algonquin, shared a common culture, and occupied a defined geographic area. The name of the Mattabesic comes from a single village that was on the Connecticut River near Middletown.



## Menominee

A most noteworthy characteristic of the Menominee was their amazing ability to survive as an independent tribe in the midst of large and powerful neighbors: Dakota, Ojibwe, and Winnebago. Their initial resistance to encroachment almost resulted in their destruction, but the Menominee adapted to the changed situation and maintained good relations with these tribes.

## Metoac

The Metoac had the misfortune to occupy Long Island which was regarded as the source of the best wampum in the Northeast. Each summer from the waters of Long Island Sound the Metoac harvested clam shells which, during the winter, were painstakingly fashioned into small beads they called "wampompeag" - shortened later by the English into the more familiar form "wampum." To the Dutch traders, it was siwan (sewan). The Metoac traded this to other tribes (most notably the Mahican) and prospered as a result.



## Miami

Among other tribes in the region, the Miami had the reputation of being slow-spoken and polite but had an inclination towards fancy dress, especially their chiefs. Tattooing was common to both sexes, and like the neighboring Illinois, there were harsh penalties for female adulterers who were either killed or had their noses cut off.

## Micmac

Together with the Beothuk on Newfoundland, the Micmac were probably the first Native Americans to have regular contact with Europeans. This may have occurred

as early as the 11th century with the early Viking settlements on the coast of North America, or perhaps with Basque fishermen who visited the Grand Banks before Columbus' voyage in 1492 but kept quiet about where they were catching all their fish. The first known contact was made in 1497 by John Cabot who took three Micmac with him when he returned to England. The Micmac may not have appreciated this, since Cabot disappeared in the same area during his second voyage a few years later.



### Mohegan

Mohegan means wolf. So does Mahican, but these are the names of two distinct Algonquin tribes with different locations and histories. It is all too common for the Mohegan of the Thames River in eastern Connecticut to be confused with the Mahican from the middle Hudson Valley in New York (a distance of about a hundred miles). Even James Fenimore Cooper got confused when he wrote "Last of the Mohicans" in 1826. Since Cooper lived in Cooperstown, New York and the location of his tale was the upper Hudson Valley, it can be presumed that he meant Mahican, but the spelling variation chosen (Mohican) and his use of Uncas' name really has muddled things.

### Montagnais

Diet relied heavily on the hunting of moose and seal but with a heavy reliance on fishing for salmon and eel. Montagnais considered porcupine a delicacy. So much so, they were sometimes referred to as the "Porcupine Indians."



### Narragansett

Mason's army eventually reached Mystic undiscovered. Trapping 700 Pequot inside the fort while their warriors were absent, Mason and his men set it afire killing all who tried to escape. The massacre broke the Pequot, but the Narragansett were aghast at the amount of unnecessary slaughter. Shortly afterwards, the Pequot abandoned their villages, separated into small groups, and fled for their lives. They were easy prey and few escaped. The English, Narragansett, and Mohegan tracked them down, capturing some and killing the rest. The English were determined to destroy the Pequot completely. They executed all of their male prisoners and sold the women and children as slaves to the West Indies. 1,500 Pequot and western Niantic managed to surrender and were placed under the control of Uncas and the Mohegan. They were not treated well.



## Nauset

Shortly after Columbus' voyage to the New World in 1492, a steady stream of European explorers, fishermen, and adventurers began regular visits to the coast of New England. Located on a landmark as obvious as Cape Cod, the Nauset had contact with Europeans at an early date, but these first meetings were not always friendly.



## Neutrals

In 1641 2,000 warriors of the Neutrals attacked a large, fortified Asistagueronon village in central Michigan (presumed by location to have been Mascouten). After a ten-day siege, the village was overrun, and 800 prisoners taken. Women and children were taken back to the Neutrals' villages, but the men were blinded and then left to wander aimlessly in the woods until they starved to death.

## Niantic

It appears that the Niantic occupied the entire coastline of eastern Connecticut as a single tribe before they were physically separated by an invasion of the Pequot-Mohegan from the northwest shortly before the Pilgrims arrived at Plymouth in 1620. The warfare and conquest apparently coincided with the devastating wave of epidemics which swept New England (1614-17).



## Nipissing

Probably their most interesting feature was their reputation among other tribes for the spiritual power of their shamans. Unfortunately, some of their neighbors were also prone to accusing them of sorcery as a result.

## Nipmuc

The Nipmuc generally lived along rivers or on the shores of small lakes and seem to have occupied the area for as far back as can be told. Like other New England Algonquin, the Nipmuc were agricultural. They changed locations according to the seasons, but always remained within the bounds of their own territory. Part of their diet came from hunting, fishing, and gathering of wild food, but as a rule they did not live as well as the coastal tribes who had the luxury of seafood. Each group was ruled by its own sachem, but there was very little political organization beyond the village or band level.



## Ojibwe

To end any confusion, the Ojibwe and Chippewa are not only the same tribe, but the same word pronounced a little differently due to accent. If an "O" is placed in front of Chippewa (O'Chippewa), the relationship becomes apparent. Ojibwe is used in Canada, although Ojibwe west of Lake Winnipeg are sometime referred to as the Sauteaux. In United States, Chippewa was used in all treaties and is the official name.

## Ottawa

They remember a mysterious tin box given them by British traders shortly after the war, which they were told not to open until they got back to their villages. They did as instructed, but there was nothing inside other than a strange brown powder. Immediately afterwards, an especially deadly smallpox epidemic broke out which decimated their villages in northern Michigan.



## Pennacook

By 1726 they were a single village near Concord with only five men, and before they "rode off into the sunset," the "Last of the Pennacook" saved some of the colonists from starving that winter. All of which was probably true regarding this one group, but the Pennacook themselves had not disappeared. For that matter, neither had the Pocumtuc, the Nipmuc, the Abenaki, or the other tribes that New England history has found convenient to declare extinct. They continued as the St. Francois Indians, the Bancour Abenaki, and the Vermont Abenaki. Although often thought of as Canadian Indians and French allies, they were, in fact, the original residents of New England.

## Pequot

Most older histories of Native Americans begin with vague descriptions of where tribes came from before Europeans "discovered" them. This leaves the false impression that Native Americans were always on the move. Actually, migration was rare until settlement displaced the eastern tribes and began a chain reaction of movement to the west. New England Algonquin occupied their homelands for hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years before the Europeans arrived in North America. The Pequot-Mohegan, however, were an exception to this. From their own traditions (confirmed by linguistic links and other tribal histories), they

originally came from the upper Hudson Valley - probably the shores of Lake Champlain. When they lived there, they may well have been the mysterious Adirondack who dominated the separate tribes of the Iroquois for many years before the formation of the Iroquois League.



### Pocumtuc

Like other New England Algonquin, the Pocumtuc were an agriculture people who lived in one of the most fertile farming areas in New England. Their homeland also abounded with game, and during the spring they were able to take advantage of large fish runs up the Connecticut and its tributaries. Besides the obvious north-south transportation provided by the Connecticut River (Quinnitukqut "long river"), the Pocumtuc homeland sat astride several important east-west trade routes, including the Mohawk Trail, which linked Native Americans in the interior with those on the Atlantic coast.

### Potawatomi

The Potawatomi name is a translation of the Ojibwe "potawatomink" meaning "people of the place of fire." Similar renderings of this are: Fire Nation, Keepers of the Sacred Fire, and People of the Fireplace - all of which refer to the role of the Potawatomi as the keeper of the council fire in an earlier alliance with the Ojibwe and Ottawa.



### Sauk and Fox

In September Piankashaw and Wea warriors led by de Noyelle arrived from a Miami post with instructions from the Governor of Canada that no peace was to be made with Fox. Apparently some Sauk ignored this order and provided the Fox with food, but it was not enough. Surrounded by over 1,400 warriors, the Fox fought off everything, but their food and water gave out. They began throwing their children out of the fort, telling their enemies to eat them. Many apparently were adopted by other tribes, but the fate of their parents was far worse. After 23 days, a thunderstorm struck on the night of September 8th, and the Fox took advantage of this to break out and flee. They did not make it. The French and their allies caught up and killed between 600 and 800 of them. There were no prisoners.

### Shawnee

In desperation, Amherst wrote the commander at Fort Pitt, Captain Simeon Ecuyer,

suggesting he deliberately attempt to infect the Shawnee, Delaware, and Mingo besieging his fort with gifts of smallpox-infected blankets and handkerchiefs. Ecuyer took this as an order and did exactly that. It proved particularly effective...

### **Susquehannock**

The Susquehannock have been called noble and heroic. They have also been described as aggressive, warlike, imperialistic, and bitter enemies of the Iroquois. They may also have warred with the Mahican from the central Hudson Valley. When he first met the Susquehannock in 1608, Captain John Smith was especially impressed with their size, deep voices, and the variety of their weapons.

### **Tionontati**

In 1615, Samuel de Champlain made the long journey west from Quebec to the Huron villages. The following year he met the Tionontati. While the French were welcomed because of their trade goods, the Tionontati were not nearly as enthusiastic about their religion. Protecting their trade advantage with the French as middleman, the Huron had secretly told the Tionontati that the French priests were sorcerers who used magic to cause epidemics.

### **Tsalagi (Cherokee)**

Male and female, they were hospitable but uneffusive. The men appeared to be respectful but remained aloof, were secure within themselves. They would shake a stranger's hand silently while looking off toward the horizon, securing their own independence. They never bowed to any other creature; they were not even willing to nod. They spoke one at a time, deliberately and with many motions, then fell silent, listened without looking at their companion.

They were of a copper color and proud of it, referred to Europeans as 'ugly whites,' were lighter than their Indian neighbors, the Creeks and Choctaws and Iroquois. They were lithe, tall, erect, and without noticeable deformities. Their spoken language was musical, punctuated by guttural, breathy breaks. The men enjoyed ball games, hunting, and warfare. Indeed, warfare was their favorite activity and occupied much of each winter.

They were a clean people, when compared to the white English, German, and Scots-Irish settlers drifting in, infiltrating their territory, most of whom were satisfied to bathe in autumn and not again til spring. The Indians "went to water" often, considering water, the sun, and fire to be three holy gifts of the Great Spirit...

A Tsalagi Agehya speaks...

### Wampanoag

European captains were known to increase profits by capturing natives to sell as slaves. Such was the case when Thomas Hunt kidnapped several Wampanoag in 1614 and later sold them in Spain. One of his victims - a Patuxet named Squanto (Tisquantum) - was purchased by Spanish monks who attempted to "civilize" him. Eventually gaining his freedom, Squanto was able to work his way to England (apparently undeterred by his recent experience with Captain Hunt) and signed on as an interpreter for a British expedition to Newfoundland. From there Squanto went back to Massachusetts, only to discover that, in his absence, epidemics had killed everyone in his village. As the last Patuxet, he remained with the other Wampanoag as a kind of ghost.



### Wappinger

Rodolf and his men just slaughtered every Wecquaesgeek in the sleeping village at Pavonia without regard for age or sex. The killing by these Dutch "Christians" was especially brutal involving babies hacked to death in their mother's arms, torture, and mutilation. When the attacks began, some Wecquaesgeek made the mistake of fleeing to Fort Amsterdam. They were murdered in cold blood outside the gates and their bodies tossed into the Hudson. De Vries, who had relocated near the Tappan villages at Corlear's Point and apparently bore no hatreds after his plantation on Staten Island had been destroyed by the Raritan, saved some of the Wecquaesgeek who came to him for protection by telling them to hide in forest. In all, Andriansen killed 31 but brought 30 prisoners back to an uncertain fate at Fort Amsterdam. Rodolf butchered 80 Wecquaesgeek and took no prisoners. His soldiers reportedly brought the severed heads of their victims back to the fort and played kickball with them. Preparing for a possible siege, Kieft further inflamed the situation by seizing corn from the Metoac on Long Island and killing three Canarsee warriors in the process.

### Wenro

Wenro is a short form of their Huron name, Wenrohronon, meaning "the people of the place of floating scum." The name derived from the location of their main village near the site of the famous oil spring at Cuba, New York.



## Winnebago

Nicollet in 1634 described them as brave but lacking in humility ...almost to the point of arrogance. Their clothing was fringed buckskin, which the Winnebago frequently decorated with beautiful designs created from porcupine quills, feathers and beads - a skill for which they are still renowned. Men originally wore their hair in two long braids, but in time this changed to the scalplock and roach headdress favored by the Algonquin. Body tattooing was common to both sexes.