

# The First Americans

*How did the first Americans adapt to their environment?*

## Introduction

As a cold winter wind howls outside, the children huddle under thick fur blankets. They listen to their grandmother's soothing voice tell about a Great Spirit who ruled over a world of sky and water at the beginning of time. Then the Great Spirit, says Grandmother, created land, plants, and animals. Finally, from living wood, the Great Spirit carved people for the new world.

These Abenaki (a-buh-NAH-key) children of New England are learning a traditional story about how their people began. Most groups have beliefs about where they came from. You may have heard stories about how your own relatives first arrived in the United States. But do you know where your ancestors were living 10,000 years ago?

Only if you are American Indian did you have relatives in the United States that long ago. Europeans and other groups did not establish permanent settlements in North America until a little more than 500 years ago. For thousands of years, the first Americans had the American continents to themselves. In this lesson, you will learn about these **resourceful** people and the creative ways they adapted to their environments.

Even today, scientists are still trying to find out more about the first Americans. These early people left few written records, so researchers study other items they left behind. Not much has survived except for a few animal and human bones, some stone and metal tools, and bits of pottery. Scientists sift through these clues trying to imagine how they lived and how their lives changed over time. They come up with ideas about how American Indians adapted to their physical surroundings. When scientists find a new object, they try to figure out whether it supports their current ideas or suggests new ones. In your lifetime, we will probably learn much more about how the first Americans adapted to their environments and may **revise** many of our conclusions.

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## **Social Studies Vocabulary**

cultural region

culture

environment

migrate

natural resource

## **1. Migration Routes of the First Americans**

Scientists believe that the first Americans **migrated** on foot from Siberia, in Asia, to present-day Alaska. Today, a strip of ocean called the Bering Strait separates Alaska and Asia. But there was a time when a land bridge connected them.

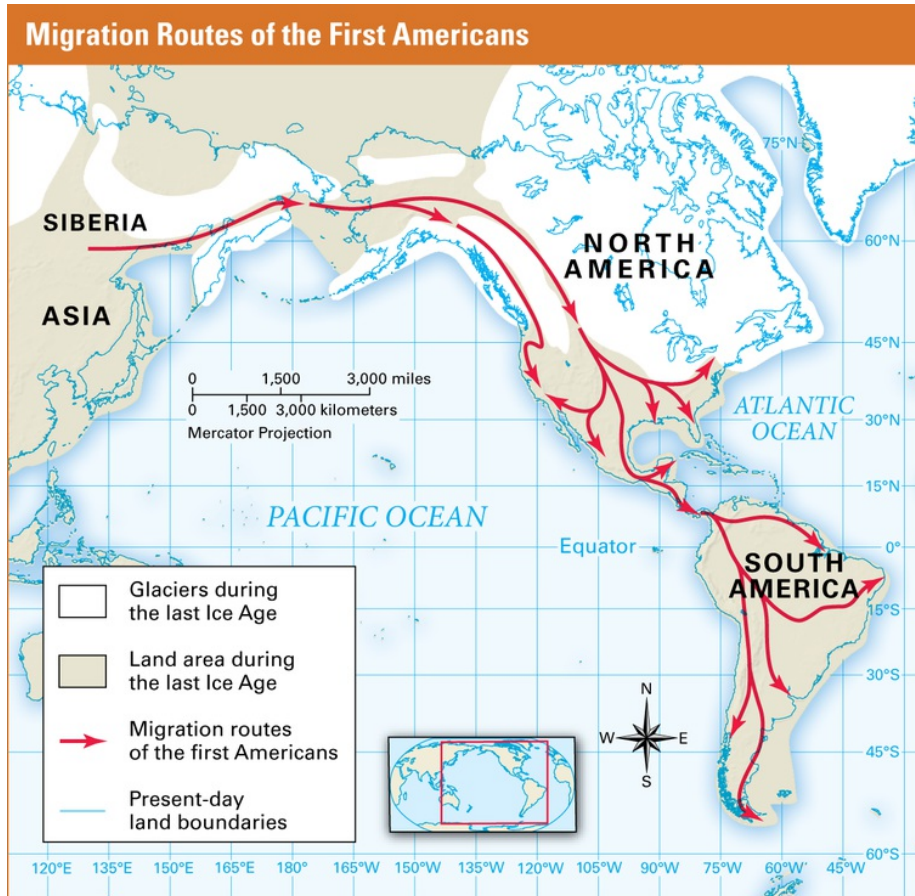
**Across a Land Bridge** About 30,000 years ago, during the last Ice Age, temperatures fell, and much of Earth was covered by glaciers, sheets of ice up to a mile thick. With water locked up in the glaciers, the level of the oceans dropped an estimated 300 feet. This exposed a wide bridge of land between Asia and North America that scientists call Beringia (bear-IN-jee-uh).

In the summer, Beringia's grasslands attracted large Asian mammals, such as mammoths, which are long-haired cousins of the elephant. Over thousands of years, the animals slowly spread eastward, and generations of Siberian hunter families soon followed. Armed with only stone-tipped spears, they killed these huge, powerful animals for food. Eventually, perhaps between 10,000 and 20,000 years ago, some of the hunters reached America. Other migrants may have traveled along the coast of Beringia by boat to catch fish, seals, and other marine mammals.

**Migrating East and South** Once in America, hunters followed the animals south, where spring brought fresh grasses. Then, about 10,000 years ago, Earth warmed again. As the glaciers melted and the oceans rose, the land bridge disappeared. Mammoths and other traditional prey began to die off, perhaps from overhunting, the change in climate, or a combination of the two.

The descendants of Siberian hunters had to find new sources of food and new materials for clothing and shelter. These people, now known to us as American Indians, became hunter-gatherers, catching smaller animals, fishing more, and collecting edible plants and seeds. Over thousands of years, they spread across the two American continents, from the Pacific to the Atlantic and from Alaska all the way to the tip of South America.

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## 2. The First Americans Adapt to the Environment

American Indians lived, and continue to live, in a variety of places, from snowy forests to dry deserts and vast grasslands. Each of these kinds of places is an environment. An **environment** includes everything that surrounds us—land, water, animals, and plants. Each environment also has a climate, or long-term weather pattern. Groups of early American Indians survived by **adapting**, or changing, their style of living to suit each environment, its climate, and its **natural resources**.

**Using Natural Resources** American Indians had a strong connection to their surroundings and viewed themselves as a part of the community of plants, animals, and other natural objects. They learned to use the natural resources in their environments for food, clothing, and shelter. By using most or all parts of the plants and animals they took, American Indians were careful to not waste anything.

American Indians also learned to modify the land to suit their needs. For example, tribes that lived in the woodlands along the Atlantic Ocean often set fires to clear heavy forest growth so deer could browse and

berries could grow. American Indian farmers in the desert built ditches to carry water to dry fields.

In the frigid regions of the north, American Indians fashioned homes made of animal skin to protect them from the icy winds. In warmer climates, American Indians gathered wild plants or learned to raise crops such as squash, chili peppers, beans, and corn. Growing their own food enabled them to settle in one place instead of following animals or searching for edible plants in the wild. These early farmers built the first villages and towns in America.

**American Indian Cultural Regions** Over generations, groups of American Indians developed their own **cultures**, or ways of life. Many became part of larger groupings that were loosely organized under common leaders.

Groups living in the same type of environment often adapted in similar ways. Forest dwellers often lived in houses covered with tree bark, and many desert peoples made shelters out of branches covered with brush.

By studying artifacts (items made by people) like old American Indian dwellings, historians have grouped American Indian peoples into cultural regions. A **cultural region** is made up of people who share a similar language and way of life.

By the 1400s, millions of American Indians lived in ten major cultural regions north of Mexico. In this lesson you will take a closer look at nine of these regions. They include the Arctic, Northwest Coast, California, the Great Basin, the Plateau, the Southwest, the Great Plains, the Eastern Woodlands, and the Southeast.

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## 3. American Indians of the Arctic

The Arctic cultural region extends throughout the northernmost regions of Canada and Alaska. Much of the Arctic region is made up of **tundra**,



a type of climate zone with cold temperatures and no trees.

In the winter, the Arctic region's temperatures are below freezing and are often accompanied by snowstorms. During the summer, the temperature is still cool, but the sun rarely sets fully, so it is often bright outside even at night. Because of these extreme conditions, few people called the Arctic cultural region home.

**Finding Food** The cold climate often made finding food difficult in the tundra since few plants were able to survive the harsh environment. Throughout most of the year, the tundra was covered in a thick layer of frozen soil, which (in combination with the continuous daylight in summer and the powerful winds all year long) prevented many plants from surviving in the region. The vegetation that was hardy enough to survive the harsh conditions was usually inedible to humans. Without edible food to find or grow, the people of the region could not rely on agriculture to survive.

This vegetation did, however, attract herds of caribou and other animals to the region. During the summer months, the people of the Arctic followed the caribou into the tundra for food. As winter approached, they would migrate to the coast of the Arctic Ocean and hunt sea mammals and fish.

**Settling the Arctic** Though some Arctic people created large permanent settlements along the coast, many others migrated between the coast and tundra in search of food. As they did, their requirements for a shelter changed. Scarce resources often influenced what kinds of shelters they could create, as well.

During the summer months, as they followed caribou through the tundra, the people of the Arctic built movable animal-skin tents. These tents provided shelter from the cold and harsh winds, but also allowed the people to easily follow the caribou herds. In the winter months, these tribes did not need to move as often in search of food. However, without trees, the options for shelter were limited. Many built **temporary** shelters called *iglus* (IG-looz) out of blocks of snow or partially underground homes made out of stone or soil. These shelters kept them warm during frigid winters.



### 4. American Indians of the Northwest Coast

The Northwest Coast cultural region extends from southern Oregon into Canada. Winters along the ocean are cold but not icy, and summers are cool. To the east, thick forests of fir, spruce, and cedar cover rugged mountains. The mountains trap Pacific storms, so there is heavy rainfall much of the year.

**Abundant Food** Northwest people found food plentiful, particularly that taken from the sea. They built their villages along the narrow beaches and bays of the coastline and on nearby islands where they gathered clams, other shellfish, and seaweed from shallow waters. They ventured onto the sea in canoes to hunt seals, sea lions, and whales, as well as halibut and other fish. The forests provided deer, moose, bear, elk, beaver, and mountain goat.

For each kind of creature, hunters developed special weapons. To catch seals, for example, they made long wooden harpoons, or spears. The harpoon had a barbed tip made of bone that held firmly in the seal's hide once it was struck, and at the other end, hunters fastened a long rope so that they would not lose either the weapon or their prey.

In early summer, masses of salmon swam from the ocean up the rivers

to lay their eggs. Men built wooden fences across the rivers to block the fish, making them easier to net. Women dried salmon meat so that it could be eaten all year long.

**Builders and Carvers** The forests of the Northwest provided materials for houses and many useful objects. Using wedges and stone-headed sledgehammers, men cut long, thin boards from logs or living trees. They then joined them together to build large, sturdy houses. To keep out the rain, they made roof shingles out of large sheets of cedar bark.

Women cut strips from the soft inner bark and used them to make baskets, mats, rope, and blankets. They may have even woven the strips of bark into waterproof capes.

With abundant food nearby, the Northwest people had time to practice crafts. Women made decorative shell buttons and sewed them onto their clothing with ivory needles. Men used tools such as wooden wedges, bone drills, stone chisels, and stone knives to carve detailed animal masks and wooden bowls.



### 5. American Indians of California

The California cultural region stretches from southern Oregon through

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Baja California. Ocean storms bring winter rains to this region. Summers are hot and dry, particularly inland.

The California region includes not only the coast, but also the coastal foothills, an inland valley, deserts, and the western side of the Sierra Nevada mountain range. Over 100 different groups made their homes in these diverse environments, more than in any other cultural region.

**Many Sources of Food** Groups living along the coast of northern California depended on salmon for much of their food, while farther south, coastal people relied more on shellfish. Away from the coast, groups hunted deer with bows and arrows, set snares to trap rabbits, and used nets to capture ducks. California people also gathered roots, berries, and pine nuts.

Most people in the region relied on acorns from oak trees as a basic food. In the fall, women harvested the acorns, shelled them, and pounded the nuts into meal. Water was rinsed through the meal to remove its bitterness. Women cooked the meal by mixing it with water in tightly woven baskets and then dropping hot cooking stones into the mixture.

**Clothing, Houses, and Baskets** As they worked, the women wore aprons or skirts made from grasses or other plants, or sometimes from leather strips. In colder months, men and women wrapped themselves in animal hides.

California people built different types of homes depending on where they lived. In forested areas, men used tools made from the antlers of deer and elk to strip large slabs of bark from redwood trees. They draped these into a cone shape to form a house. In marshy areas, people wove thick mats of reeds to drape over a cone-shaped framework of poles.

California people wove plant materials into many useful items. They made cooking baskets, storage baskets, sifters, and fish traps. Women used fine weaving and elegant patterns to make beautiful baskets, decorating their work with clamshells and bird feathers.



## 6. American Indians of the Great Basin

To the east of California lies the Great Basin, a low area between the Sierra Nevada and the Rocky Mountains. The mountains on either side of this region block the rain, making this land mostly desert.

The types of plants that grow in this area are those that need little water, such as low grasses, sagebrush, and craggy *piñon* (PIN-yon) trees. Many small animals, such as rabbits and lizards, live in this harsh region.

With limited food and water, only a few families could live in a place at one time. For this reason, people of the Great Basin traveled in small groups and spent much of their time looking for food.

**Extreme Heat and Cold** Wherever people camped, they made temporary shelters of willow poles shaped into a cone and covered with brush or reeds. Almost all year, they carried water in baskets coated with sap from pine trees.

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When winter came, temperatures dropped below freezing. To keep warm, people made robes out of rabbit hides by twisting long strips of hide so that only the fur showed. Then they wove these strips on a loom. Each adult robe required between 50 and 100 rabbit hides.

**Searching for Food** In this arid (dry) environment, most people followed food sources from season to season. In spring, they camped by valley lakes and streams swollen with melted snow. Men attracted migrating ducks with floating decoys made from reeds and, as the birds landed, chased them into nets. Meanwhile, women gathered duck eggs and the tender shoots of cattail plants.

When the streams dried up in summer, some Great Basin people enjoyed snakes and grasshoppers as treats. But mostly they ate plants. Women used sharp sticks to dig up roots. They used them to weave flat baskets, called seed beaters, which they used to knock seeds loose from plants. From the mountain slopes, they gathered ripe berries.

In autumn, bands harvested pine nuts and hunted rabbits. As winter arrived, most Great Basin people bundled into their rabbit robes in the warmer hills. In huts and caves, they lived off food they had dried earlier, waiting for the ducks to return in spring.



## 7. American Indians of the Plateau

North of the Great Basin lies the Plateau cultural region. This region is bounded by the Cascade Range to the west, the Rockies to the east, and the Fraser River, in present-day Canada, to the north.

The mountains in this area have dense forests. The flatter, central part of the region is drier and covered with grass and sagebrush. Winters are long and cold, while summers remain gentle.

The Plateau people hunted and gathered with the seasons. The cool, wet climate made it fairly easy to find enough to eat. So, too, did the Plateau's two mighty river systems, the Columbia and the Fraser.

**Sturdy Houses and Clothing** Plateau people built their villages along major rivers, which provided drinking water, fish, and driftwood to use for shelter and firewood.

Food was so plentiful that some groups were able to live in their villages year-round. To stay cool in summer and warm in winter, they built their homes partly underground. They dug a pit, lined it with a frame of logs, and covered everything with saplings, reeds, and mud.

Plateau people used their weaving skills to create many kinds of baskets, as well as elaborate hats. As the cold months approached, they spent more time making clothes. In the fall, men hunted antelope and deer. Then women scraped and softened the hides for dresses, leggings, and shirts. They decorated their work with designs of seeds, shells, and other materials.

**Camas and Salmon** Although hunting usually provided plenty of meat in the fall, most of the time Plateau people relied on fish and plants for food. In spring, they gathered sprouts of wild onions and carrots from the low grasslands. Their particular favorite was camas, a starchy root related to lilies. Women uprooted it with digging sticks and ate it raw, roasted, or ground into flour.

The food most important to Plateau people was salmon. When the salmon migrated upstream, men stood on wooden platforms built over the water. From there, they could spear or net fish easily.



### 8. American Indians of the Southwest

The Southwest cultural region includes present-day Arizona, New Mexico, southern Utah and Colorado, and portions of Texas, Oklahoma, and California. This region has many environments—canyons, mountains, deserts, and flat-topped mesas. It even has two major rivers, the Colorado and the Rio Grande. However, rain seldom falls anywhere in this region.

The heat and lack of water made living in the Southwest a challenge. Yet some American Indians learned to love this arid land. “The whole Southwest was a House Made of Dawn,” goes an old American Indian song. “There were many colors on the hills and on the plain, and there was a dark wilderness on the mountains beyond.”

**Mesa People** Different groups found different ways of surviving in the Southwest. Some lived as nomadic (wandering) desert hunters. Along the Colorado River, small groups hunted, gathered, and farmed. Others planted fields of corn, beans, and squash on the tops of high, flat areas called *mesas*.



The mesa people lacked trees for building homes. Instead, they made homes from the earth itself. Using bricks of *adobe* (sun-baked clay), they built thick-walled houses that protected them from summer heat and winter cold. Their villages looked like apartment houses that reached up to five stories high and had up to several hundred rooms. A single village, called a *pueblo* (PWEH-blo), might house 1,000 people.

To protect their bodies from the sun, mesa people wore clothes made of cotton that they grew, spun, and wove into cloth. Using plants and minerals, they dyed fabrics with bright colors.

**Corn Culture** Despite living in a desert, the early mesa people grew corn, beans, and squash. Corn was by far the most important crop that the mesa people had.

To make the most of infrequent rain, farmers planted near naturally flooded areas like the mouths of large streambeds or the bases of mesas, where rain runoff flowed. Men dug irrigation ditches from the streams to the fields and built small dams to hold summer rain.

Women spent many hours a day grinding corn kernels into cornmeal. They cooked the cornmeal into bread in clay ovens. In clay pots, they cooked stews of corn, rabbit meat, and chili peppers.



### 9. American Indians of the Great Plains

The Great Plains cultural region is a vast area of treeless grasslands. In the United States, the Great Plains stretch for about 2,000 miles from the Rockies to the Mississippi Valley, and from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico. The eastern part of this region has more water and softer soil than the western part. In the drier west, short, dense grasses provided perfect grazing for millions of bison.

**Bison Hunters** On the eastern Great Plains, various groups took up farming, only going on bison-hunting trips a few months each year. On the western Great Plains, American Indians followed bison herds much of the year.

In the spring and early summer, small groups lay in ambush where bison came. The hunters gripped hardwood bows reinforced with strips of bison tendon. Taking aim, each man let loose a wooden arrow tipped with a sharp stone and arrayed with feathers to help it fly straight.

In the fall, huge bison herds gathered, and Plains people traveled in

larger bands. The men sometimes trapped the bison by circling the herd while on horseback. The men forced the bison closer together as they approached a cliff. Sometimes people set a grass fire or made loud noises to panic the bison until the animals stampeded over the cliff edge. Below, waiting hunters finished them off with spears or bows and arrows.

**Using the Bison** Bison provided the main food for Plains people. Women and young girls cut up the bison with bone knives, and extra meat was dried and kept for winter.

Plains people used every part of the bison. Bison hides were turned into shields, waterproof containers, warm robes, and bedding. For clothing and bags, women softened the hides with scrapers and rubbed in bison brains and fat. Bison hair and sinew (tough cords made from the animals' tendons) were twined into bowstrings and rope. Horns and hooves became spoons and bowls or were boiled down to make glue. Dried bison dung provided fuel for fires.

Bison provided materials for housing as well. Using tendons as thread, women sewed many bison hides together. The skins were then fastened around a tall cone of poles to make a *tepee*, a Plains word for "dwelling."

Plains people became even more successful hunters when Spanish explorers introduced horses to the region. With horses, they could bring down more bison and move faster and more comfortably to new hunting grounds.



### 10. American Indians of the Eastern Woodlands

The Eastern Woodlands cultural region reaches from the Mississippi River eastward to the Atlantic Ocean and from Canada to North Carolina. Winter snows and summer rains produced plentiful forests, lakes, and streams.

Two major language groups emerged in this cultural region. In most of the territory, people spoke Algonquian (al-GON-kwee-in) languages. In New York and around the southern Great Lakes lived the Iroquoian-speaking groups.

**Plentiful Woods** The forests provided most of what the Haudenosaunee (hoe-dee-no-SHOH-nee), commonly referred to as the Iroquois (EER-uh-kwoi), needed to live. For food, hunters prowled through the forests to track deer. Men also hunted bears, trapped beavers, and caught birds and fish. Women gathered fresh greens, nuts, and berries. They made syrup by boiling down sap from maple trees.

Instead of walking through the thick forests, Iroquois often paddled log

and bark canoes along lakes and rivers. Because waterways also provided fish and drinking water, Iroquois built their villages nearby.

Each settlement could have dozens of sturdy log-frame houses covered with elm bark. Such longhouses were usually about 20 feet wide and up to 400 feet long. Several families lived in sections of the longhouse.

**Women Farmers** To clear a space for farming, Iroquois men burned away trees and underbrush. Women did the rest of the farming. After hoeing the soil, they planted corn, sometimes several varieties. Around the cornstalks, they let beans twine. Squash grew near the ground, keeping down weeds and holding moisture in the soil.

When the planting was done, women tanned deerskin to make skirts, capes, and moccasins (soft shoes). They sometimes scraped corn kernels with bone tools and ground the corn between stones. In the fall, they stored the harvest, often in large bark barrels in the longhouses. Iroquois crops included sunflowers, tobacco, and many vegetables that are still planted in American gardens today.



### 11. American Indians of the Southeast

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The Southeast cultural region stretches from the southern part of the Ohio Valley to the Gulf of Mexico and from Texas to the Atlantic Ocean. This region's fertile coastal plains, river valleys, mountains, and swamps all have long, warm, humid summers and mild winters. In this green countryside, the people of the Southeast found growing crops fairly easy.

**Towns Built Around Mounds** Some Southeastern peoples built towns **dominated** by large earthen mounds. The first mounds were likely burial sites. Centuries later, people made mounds several stories high as platforms for temples.

Building these mounds took months, even years, because people had to move the dirt one basketful at a time. Workers building mounds had less time to help grow or find food. However, Southeastern groups had developed a type of corn that grew so fast, they could harvest plenty of crops for the year. Farmers raised enough food to feed the people building the mounds.

A single Southeastern town might have had 2 to 12 mounds arrayed around a central town plaza. People clustered their houses around these mounds. They built their homes from posts of young trees constructed into a rectangular frame and plastered with mud. Roofs were pointed and made of leaves.

**A Fertile Region** Beyond their homes, fields lay in all directions. With the region's long growing season, Southeastern people relied on corn, beans, squash, pumpkins, and sunflowers for most of their food.

Women worked the fields with hoes made of stone, shell, or animal shoulder blades fastened to wooden handles. Men sometimes hunted, using blowguns for squirrels, rabbits, and turkeys and bows and arrows for large animals like deer. Sometimes they even brought home alligators and turtles.

To complete their varied diet, women gathered edible plants like sweet potatoes and persimmons. They wore short deerskin skirts, so they didn't have to spend much time making clothing. Instead, they had time to fashion rings, earrings, arm rings, and hairpins from stones, shells, bones, and other natural materials.



## Lesson Summary

**In this lesson, you read about the first people to settle in North America and the adaptations they made to the environments they found there.**

**Migration Routes of the First Americans** Scientists believe that ancestors of American Indians migrated to America from Asia across a land bridge during the last Ice Age. As their descendants traveled east and south, they adapted to the challenges of living in many different environments.

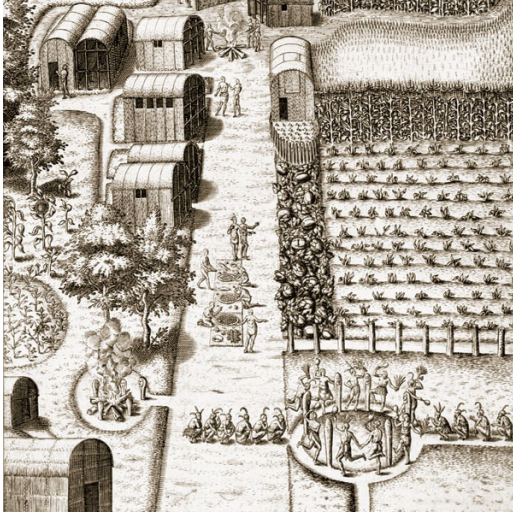
**How American Indians Viewed the Environment** Wherever they settled, American Indians had a special relationship with the world around them. They believed they were part of nature, and they treated the environment with respect.

**Adaptations to the Local Environment** Depending on where they lived, American Indians ate different food, built different kinds of houses, and clothed themselves in different ways. They also practiced many kinds of crafts, making such things as jewelry, fine baskets, and animal masks. American Indians built the first towns and villages in North America, and they were the continent's first farmers.

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**Languages and Lifestyles** American Indians living in different cultural regions developed distinctive ways of life that were suited to their environment's climate and natural resources. Scientists study these early ways of life by examining the artifacts of America's first people.



Reading Further

Digging Up the Past

**As a boy growing up in southern Illinois in the 1960s, Tim Pauketat loved to explore and to collect the ancient arrowheads that he found. One day, as he rode in his father's delivery truck, he saw a great, flat-topped pyramid. To Tim, it looked 100 feet tall, all built of earth. He was instantly captivated by the mysterious mounds of Cahokia.**

Many mysteries surround the mounds of Cahokia (kuh- HO-key-uh). As an adult, Tim Pauketat would devote his time to solving some of them.

The first mystery was who built the mounds. Tens of thousands of mounds, some shaped as tremendous snakes, birds, or cones, have been discovered in the nation's interior. The most enormous of these mounds is the great mound of Cahokia, which is more massive than the pyramids of Egypt, rises 10 stories high, and contains 25 million cubic feet of earth.

Early settlers pushing west in the 1700s first discovered the mounds. The settlers believed that the American Indians who lived in the area could never have been capable of building such awesome earthworks. Instead, the settlers believed that a lost race of superior beings had



built the magnificent mounds.

Popular books and poems were written about the “lost race” that had built a great civilization and then vanished. The mystery gripped the public as they looked to Europe, Asia, and Africa for ancient mound builders. Some claimed that the mound builders were Vikings, while others were sure they were Phoenicians. Hindus, Greeks, Romans, Persians, and the lost tribes of Israel were each “proven,” incorrectly, to be the lost race of mound builders.

The first American to answer the question scientifically was the third president, Thomas Jefferson. Based on the skeletons and artifacts he found when he dug into a mound, Jefferson was certain that American Indians were the builders. People claimed, however, that Jefferson was wrong, and 100 years later, the battle over who built the mysterious mounds still raged.

Finally, in 1881, the Smithsonian Institution hired archaeologist Cyrus Thomas to find out who the mound builders really were. Like most people, Thomas thought the mounds were built by a long-lost race. Over seven years, Thomas and his team unearthed thousands of artifacts. In the end, he disproved his own theory, declaring that the mound builders were indeed early American Indians.

But many mysteries remained that Tim Pauketat, the young boy from Illinois, became interested in solving. What culture had built the monumental works, and why had that culture vanished?

### **Cahokia Uncovered**

Today, Tim Pauketat teaches archaeology and brings his students to Cahokia, where they dig very carefully, looking for clues to the past. What they and other archaeologists have learned helps us imagine what Cahokia might have been like in the year 1150 C.E.

At dawn, the Great Chief might have stood atop what was the greatest earth mound in the Americas. As he raised his arms to welcome the sun, its first rays would have hit his tall-feathered headdress. Slowly, the sun would have lit his jewelry, made from carved shells and copper, and the cape of feathers that hung from his shoulders. The sun was sacred to the people of Cahokia for it made the corn grow.

The mound the Great Chief called home, which we know as Monks Mound, rose 100 feet from the vast, flat plain of what is now southern Illinois. From its top, the Great Chief could look down upon a city of

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some 20,000 subjects. In addition, thousands lived in villages beyond the city. Consequently, the chief ruled what was probably the largest urban area in the world at the time. He could have seen more than 120 other mounds nearby, and more in the distance (toward what is now St. Louis, Missouri).

A towering wall surrounded the city's center. To the west was a great circle of upright logs—a kind of giant solar calendar that priests used to mark the beginning of spring and fall (the equinoxes) and winter and summer (the solstices).



A huge plaza stretched out over 50 acres from the base of Monks Mound where hundreds or maybe thousands of people gathered for feasts, ceremonies, or a wild game of *chunkey*. This game of skill, daring, and high-stakes gambling involved two spear-throwing players and a wheel-shaped stone that was rolled across the hardened, flat court. The object was to land a spear closer to the chunkey disk than an opponent did.

The Great Chief ruled all this and more. Cahokia was not only a cultural and spiritual center, it was a trade center for an area stretching a thousand miles in all directions. Cahokia's sphere of influence was enormous, and the Great Chief was its most powerful ruler.

## The Archaeologist's Toolkit

How did archaeologists figure all this out even though the people of Cahokia had no system of writing and left no written records? How do we know about the Great Chief and his welcoming of the sun in 1150 C.E.?

People who have no written histories have oral histories—stories that are passed from one generation to the next. Scholars searched for such a story to explain Cahokia but, strangely, never found one. In 1539, however, Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto (ehr-NAN-do day SOH-toh) led an expedition through the Southeast looking for treasure. He didn't find gold or silver, but he did find mound builders much like the people of Cahokia. Written accounts of the expedition describe the mounds and the powerful sun-worshiping rulers who lived atop them.

How do we know the date in the story about the Great Chief? To determine the date of a site, archaeologists look for “black gold,” or charcoal. With a process called radiocarbon dating, a piece of charcoal will reveal the date when the wood it was created from burned.

To discover what life in Cahokia was like, archaeologists search for artifacts. When they carefully dug into one small mound at Cahokia, archaeologists discovered the remains of a chief along with a wealth of artifacts, including thousands of shell beads, fine carvings, copper, and all the things a chief might need in the next life. Based on these artifacts, we know what the Great Chief wore.

In the mound were fine circular stones called chunkey disks, too. But if it were not for witnesses, no one would know what the disks were used for. French explorers later came through the area and saw tribes of farmers playing the last version of the game. They described it in their journals.

Determining the population of Cahokia is harder. One estimate was made by counting the number of laborers it took to build the homes, walls, and especially the mounds of Cahokia. Monks Mound alone required some 14 million baskets of earth dug by hand, carried, deposited, and pounded firmly in place. This number led to an estimate of as many as 43,000 people who had lived in the local region.

How did archaeologists figure out there was a solar calendar given that the logs had rotted away hundreds of years ago? As wood rots, it turns the soil a darker color, so the archaeologists carefully searched for these wood stains in the soil.

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Today, we know all this about Cahokia and a great deal more. However, a great many mysteries still remain to be discovered.

### **Cahokia Abandoned**

When the first explorers reached Cahokia, the mighty city was completely gone. Only the silent mounds remained. Tim Pauketat says radiocarbon-dating evidence shows that Cahokia was abandoned in the 1300s. He wants to find out why.

Several theories exist about why Cahokia was abandoned. Many of these focus on the important relationship between people and their environment. Some scholars say a drought or a change in climate caused crop failure. Since it took 25,000 to 30,000 pounds of corn a day to feed the Cahokians, a lack of crops would cause a lot of people to leave the area.

Others suggest that with so many people packed together in a place without a sewage system, the water became contaminated, causing disease. Still others think that local resources such as wood and game must have grown scarce, forcing the Cahokians to abandon their homes.

Pauketat agrees that these factors would have caused some people to move away. However, since every last person had fled by 1350, Pauketat believes a great power struggle that led to the failure of the government caused people to leave.

He and his students are finding evidence of protective walls surrounding the homes of the powerful, which show that the occupants were afraid and felt they needed protection. Pauketat also found several such homes that were burned. Strangely, no one returned to these homes after the fire to gather up the fine tools and baskets of stored food, which suggests that the occupants had to flee the area.

Tim Pauketat has not discovered all the answers yet. However, he is optimistic that young people will continue to unravel the mysteries that surround Cahokia.

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### What Is History?

What is history? This question may seem really easy, even silly. Most people would say that history is the study of the important people, dates, and events of the past. This answer is true as far as it goes. But who decides what people, dates, and events are important? And why should we bother learning about them in the first place?

Let's dig a little deeper into the question "What is history?" First of all, history is an important way of thinking about the world. To see what this means, imagine waking up tomorrow and not being able to remember a single thing about your past. You can't remember your name, who your parents or family members are, the rules to your favorite game, or anything you ever learned in school.

Without a knowledge of your own past, you might feel lost and lonely. You wouldn't even know who you are. And you would have a difficult time making good decisions about what to do next.

In a similar way, history helps us make sense of the world. It is the memory of communities, peoples, and nations. Without history, individuals and whole countries would lose their sense of direction. The

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next time you watch the news on TV, notice how often reporters, politicians, and others mention something about the past. Humans constantly use their knowledge of the past to make sense of what is happening today.

History is not just important to understanding what happened. It also allows us to understand why something happened. Events can be connected in several different ways: cause and effect, correlation, and sequences. Historians look at cause and effect, or how one event caused another event to happen. For example, if you get a high score on a test, you might say this is because you spent a lot of time studying. The effect of studying was a good grade. However, sometimes events might appear to be related, but one does not always cause the other. This is known as correlation. If you ate toast for breakfast and then later did well on a test, you might think that you did well on your test and start to eat the same breakfast before every test. You may also look at your day as a series, or sequence, of events. You studied, ate toast, went to school, and received a high score on your test. In examining the details of your day, you may be able to come up with an answer about why you are doing well in school.

Historians look at history like this, too. They must ask themselves what caused something to happen, what might just be a correlation of events, and were there a series, or sequence, of events that led from one event to another? Sometimes, it is hard to tell how one event affects another. The answer might not be immediately clear because it takes a long time to come to an understanding.

History is also an academic discipline. It is a systematic way of using evidence to make sense of the past. When you think about it, the past is not an easy thing to study. After all, it's not here any longer for historians to observe. So historians turn to many kinds of evidence to describe and understand the past. They're fascinated by things like old letters, diaries, photographs, paintings, film footage, speeches, political cartoons, newspaper articles, maps, tools, and many other kinds of evidence. They want to know who created them and for what reason, and what they can teach us about the past.

### **History as an Ongoing Argument**

Some people think that history is just a listing of facts. That is not true. Historians argue all the time. They argue about what the facts really are. They also argue about how to interpret the facts.

Think about it this way. Suppose you, your parents, and a good friend



sit down to write separate versions of your life story. Would the stories be alike in every way? Or would each of you include events that the others don't know about or don't think are important? And even when you included the same events, would everyone's version describe the events in the same way? What if you or others were embarrassed by some part of the story? Might you change things a little to make yourself look better? Now suppose a historian came along to write your life story. How would the historian make sense of these different versions?

History works in a similar way. Historians have countless pieces of evidence to work with, and yet there is no complete record of the past for them to look at. To make sense of the past, historians must weigh the available evidence and try to figure out what the facts are. Then they need to stitch the facts together to answer the questions that interest them. In doing this, they must use their judgment. And that means that their own viewpoints come into play.

Historians will often make an argument by attempting to identify patterns in the facts. If historians can identify these patterns, then they can also identify how people and societies change, and how they remain the same. This is called historical continuity. Events are important, but they cannot only be listed as separate facts. As historians build arguments that combine their ideas about the past with the facts of what happened, new patterns begin to emerge.

History, then, is much more than a listing of “facts.” Some people have even described history as an ongoing argument about the past. Why does the argument go on? Sometimes historians chance upon new evidence, such as a forgotten document or a new archaeological discovery. The new evidence may lead them to challenge old interpretations. Sometimes historians reconsider existing evidence and see things that others have overlooked. Historians are always considering evidence from new angles. As they do so, they may correct an earlier historian's error or explain events in a different way.

## **Reading History**

Our discussion leads to some key points about how to read history. You can't just assume that what you're reading is the final truth. If you read more than one version of history, you are likely to find differences. So when you read history, ask yourself these questions:

- Who wrote this document?
- When was it written?

- What kinds of evidence does the author use?
- Is the evidence reliable?
- Does the author have a particular viewpoint that he or she is trying to promote?

### **An Example of a Historical Argument**

Let's look at one example of a historical argument. *History Alive! The United States Through Industrialism* says this about a man you may or may not have heard of—Denmark Vesey:

*In 1822 authorities in Charleston, South Carolina, learned that Denmark Vesey, a free black, was preparing to lead a sizable revolt of slaves. Vesey, along with more than 30 slaves, was arrested and hanged.*

If you look in 10 different American history textbooks, you are likely to find similar passages. In this case, the facts seem straightforward. Historians have long accepted the fact that Denmark Vesey led what would have been the largest planned slave revolt in American history. The main piece of evidence for this was the Official Report written at the time.

In 2001, a historian named Michael Johnson came up with an entirely different version of the same story. Johnson was skeptical of the Official Report. Instead of relying on this source, he looked to the court transcripts (records of what was said in court) as evidence for his arguments.

According to Johnson, Vesey may not have been the leader of any revolt. In the court transcripts, Johnson found six witnesses who said that someone else led the rebellion.

And that's not all. Johnson argues that the so-called “Vesey rebellion” was not a rebellion at all. He claims that whites made up the charges and frightened witnesses into testifying against others by threatening them with hanging. The “Vesey rebellion,” Johnson argues, was not a revolt among blacks at all. Instead, it was a conspiracy among whites to kill blacks.

Johnson's conclusions have raised quite a stir. Many historians believe that Johnson has misread or exaggerated the evidence. Articles and books challenging his position have been printed, and the argument goes on.

Did Johnson get it wrong? Or are his critics the ones who are in error? The one sure thing is that historians are human, and they do make mistakes. In reading history, it's up to us to look at the evidence and the arguments and to make our best judgment about who is right.

## **Skills You'll Acquire by Studing History**

As you continue to study history, you'll ultimately gain a certain set of very valuable skills. These skills can be applied to any historical time, place, event, or individual. You'll be able to

- • explain the central issues and problems from the past, placing people and events in a matrix of time and place.
- • understand and distinguish cause, effect, sequence, and correlation in historical events, including the long- and short-term causal relations.
- • explain the sources of historical continuity and how the combination of ideas and events explains the emergence of new patterns.
- • recognize the role of chance, oversight, and error in history.
- • recognize that interpretations of history are subject to change as new information is uncovered.

## **Conclusion**

We started with a simple question: What is history? As you have seen, this question has many answers. History is a study of the past. It is a way of making sense of the world. It is an academic discipline. It is a combination of facts and interpretations of facts. It is also an ongoing argument that changes as new evidence is uncovered. And that is the most exciting thing of all, because it means that history is very much alive.

## **Library and Information Literacy Skills**

Never before in history has there been so much information available for research. Knowing how to access, evaluate, and analyze materials available in your school's library or media center is a key skill.

Your teacher may assign one of the Internet projects that relate directly to this program. If so, your teacher will identify excellent Web sites that you can trust to complete the assignment. Similarly, your teacher may

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want you to search the Internet for more information about a specific topic.

Your teacher might also decide to give you an open-ended research project. In this kind of project, you'll need to find information yourself. Here are some ideas to help you navigate the resources that are available to you.

### Research Steps

**1. Carefully review the assignment and define your research topic.** Your teacher may assign a topic or allow you to pick one. The important thing at the start of your research is to know exactly what you're expected to do. Don't go to the library or media center without the project requirements. They are your guide.

In selecting topics, you may want to begin by browsing in general works like a textbook or encyclopedia. These sources will help you identify topics for which a lot of information is available.

**2. Identify many possible sources.** Spend some time browsing in the card catalogue (or database) or looking over the library's shelves to identify books that might be helpful. Remember that you may find your topic in books about a broader subject. For example, suppose you're researching the Battle of Gettysburg. Looking only for books about Gettysburg would limit your sources. That battle will likely be discussed in books that cover the Civil War in general. For more current topics, look at the Guide to Periodical Literature. This reference work will help you find recent magazines and newspaper articles. Using the Internet will also help in your search. Bookmark the most promising sites to refer back to.

**3. Identify the best sources.** Once you've listed possible sources, select those that will best help with your research task. Keep in mind how much time you have to complete the project. Some sources will require you to spend much more time gathering the information you need. Use newer books and articles when possible. Generally, newer sources are more likely than older ones to reflect current research. Of course, this does not apply to primary sources (sources from the period you are studying).

**4. Gather information from your sources.** Once you have identified your sources, it is time to compile the information you need. You may decide to take notes on note cards or binder paper. However you decide to do it, be sure to go back to the project requirements as you gather

information. Think of these two questions: (1) Which pieces of information will help you complete the research task? (2) What is the best way to organize the information? Also write down bibliography information as you research. That will save time and confusion at the end of your project.

**5. Create the product.** Sometimes you may have to write a paper. At other times, you may be required to produce a poster, computer presentation, oral report, or other assignment. In all cases, keep in mind who your audience is. Strive to create a product that meets the needs of the audience. Here's a helpful hint: if something is interesting for you to write or create, it is more likely to be interesting to your audience. If you are bored, your audience will be too. Adding visuals such as pictures, graphs, maps, timelines, and artifacts will add interest to your presentation.

**6. Reflect on what you have done.** When your project is complete, stop and reflect. What did you learn about researching a topic and presenting the results? What went well? How would you tackle the same task in the future? What would you do differently?



### Ideas About Sources

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There are many kinds of sources you can use. A primary source is direct or firsthand evidence about an event, person, or object. Primary sources can be speeches, letters, artifacts, and more. Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address speech is a primary source. A secondary source describes, analyzes, and discusses a primary source. Secondary sources can be in books, articles, or newspapers. A secondary source can also contain a primary source. For example, a book that talks about Lincoln's speech is a secondary source. The book could also have a copy of Lincoln's letter inside.

### *Library Books*

1. Search for books in the card catalogue or on a computer terminal at your library. Either way, your search is the same. Search by author, subject, or title.
2. Write down the call letters for books you want to find.
3. Besides doing a targeted search, browse the library's collection of books about history. Ask the librarian where to find the history section. Sometimes browsing can go faster than looking up titles in the card catalogue. This is because books on similar topics in history are often placed side by side on the library shelves. If the library uses the Dewey decimal system, history topics are in the 900 section.
4. When citing a book in a bibliography, follow the order and example below:

- author
- title of book
- city of publication
- publisher's name
- year of publication

Example: Arburn, Michael. *Learning History: An Adventure Worth Taking*. New York: Random House, 2004.

### *Newspapers and Periodicals*

1. Use newspapers and periodicals to study current events such as a recent Supreme Court decision.

2. Ask your librarian if your library subscribes to a Web-based article subscription service. If so, the service can link you to thousands of articles from a wide variety of well-respected magazines and periodicals.

3. If your library subscribes to magazines or newspapers, search the *Guide to Periodical Literature*. Ask your librarian where to find this resource. The *Guide* is arranged alphabetically by topic, so it is very easy to use.

4. When citing an article in a bibliography, follow the order and example below:

- author
- article title
- magazine or newspaper
- date of publication
- page numbers of the article

Example: Adams, Steve. "Finding a Great Hotel in Paris." *Travel Magazine*, July 2003: 38-42.

## **Internet Resources**

The Internet is an amazing research tool. There are millions of Web sites to visit. However, not all Web sites are created equal. Anybody can create a Web site and post information on it. Some sites are reliable. Others are not. Here are some ideas on picking the best sites.

In evaluating Web sites, think about three questions:

1. Is the information from a reliable source?

- Ideally, you are looking for information from an expert source. An expert source is an authority on the subject you are researching.
- Web sites that end in .edu are related to a school or college. Information on such sites can be very reliable, since it is often created by researchers or scholars. On the other hand, schools may allow or encourage all students to post information on a school-related Web site. Such material may or may not be accurate. Try to identify the qualifications of the author before you use the information. For

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example, a history professor is likely to be a better source than a student or someone with unknown qualifications.

- Web sites that end in .gov are related to government bodies. The information found on these sites can be some of the most reliable on the Internet.

### 2. Is the information biased?

- A source is biased if the author has a certain opinion or prejudice that he or she wants to promote. In looking at Web sites, it is very important to develop strong antennas to detect bias. On some Web sites, facts are far less important than the author's or group's opinion.
- Social scientists call research that is free of bias “objective.” For most research projects, you will want to find objective information. No writing is completely free of bias, but you should always be aware of possible biases. If the author is careful to separate opinion from facts, your job is easier. Be on the lookout for opinions that are disguised as facts.
- Ask yourself what person or organization prepared the information. Why did they post it on the Internet? What is their purpose? Are they trying to convince you of something?

### 3. Is the information accurate?

- To find this out, ask yourself these questions: (1) Is the information repeated on other sites or in other sources you are using? Is the information based on recent research, or is it old and possibly outdated? Does the writer reveal where he or she got the information? (Those who do not reveal their sources may not want their sources checked. This can be a sign of bad scholarship.)

For ways to write bibliographic citations for Web sites, visit [www.noodletools.com](http://www.noodletools.com). There you will find ways to cite online newspaper and magazine articles, personal Web pages, professional Web pages, and just about any source you can imagine.

## **Native Americans in Florida**

Florida is a large state. In different areas, you find different features. The panhandle is not the same as south Florida or the Florida Keys. The flat coasts differ from the hilly north. There are different types of plants and animals in these places. The climate changes from north to south.

This kind of variety existed thousands of years ago. That fact helps



explain how Native Americans in different parts of Florida developed different ways of living. Some ate food from the sea. Others grew crops or gathered wild foods. Some lived in small groups. Others lived in large villages.

Today, we call the Native American groups that developed in Florida tribes. By the 1400s, Florida had a number of tribes living in many areas.

For example, northwest Florida was home to a tribe called the Apalachees (ah-puh-LAH-cheez). These people grew their own food—mostly squash and maize, or corn. They also hunted the deer, bear, and other animals that lived in their area. The Apalachee people built large mounds. These mounds were used for special ceremonies. The mounds were also used as places for their leaders' homes.

To the east of the Apalachee lived the Timucuas (tihm-uh COO-uhz). Like the Apalachees, the Timucuas were a farming people. The men also fished and hunted animals, including alligators. The people lived in settled villages.

The Tocobagas (toh-koh-BAH-guhz) lived in the area around Tampa Bay. They tended to form smaller villages than the Timucuas. The Tocobagas depended on the sea for their food. Their villages had huge piles of shells left over from their meals. They built mounds for religious purposes. Like the Apalachees, they also built mounds topped with buildings.

The Calusas (kuh-LOO-suhz) lived in the southwestern part of Florida. Living along the coast, they depended on the sea for much of their food. Like the Tocobagas, the Calusas left behind huge mounds of shells, including an entire site on Mound Key made mostly of shells. They were also expert boaters and sailors.

On the east coast of South Florida lived the Tequestas (tee-KWEHS-tuhz). These Native Americans also lived mainly from the sea. A special food was the manatee. They hunted for animals and collected wild foods that grew in the area, too.

**"May their roads home be on the trail of peace"**

American Indians lived on a vast and varied continent. In the Great Basin, it was hot and dry most of the year, but in the Eastern Woodlands, water was plentiful in most seasons and winter snows blanketed the land. Wherever they lived, American Indians had to adapt

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to their surroundings. The environment affected everything from building materials to clothing choices. It is not surprising that American Indians developed such a strong respect for nature. All parts of nature, including the people, were viewed as one community.

A traditional prayer of the Diné (Navajo), who lived in the Southwest, celebrates that community of nature and people. In this prayer, the author uses the word *beauty* to describe the world. What does *beauty* mean for the author? How does this compare with the way you see your world?

*May their roads home be on the trail of peace.  
Happily may they all return.  
In beauty I walk  
In beauty before me, I walk.  
In beauty behind me, I walk.  
In beauty above and about me, I walk.  
It is finished in beauty.  
It is finished in beauty.*

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"May their roads home be on the trail of peace," by an anonymous Native American poet. Anonymous translation in "American Indian Poetry" by Herbert J. Spinden in *Natural History* vol. 19, 1919, p. 307.

Entire Selection: <http://digitallibrary.amnh.org/handle/2246/6343>

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