1600-1754: Native Americans: Overview

[**American Eras**](http://www.encyclopedia.com/American+Eras/publications.aspx?pageNumber=1)| 1997 | 700+ words

COPYRIGHT 1997 Gale Research Inc.

1600-1754: Native Americans: Overview

**The People.**

 In 1492 the native population of North America north of the Rio Grande was seven million to ten million. These people grouped themselves into approximately six hundred tribes and spoke diverse dialects. European colonists initially encountered Native Americans in three distinct regions. Eastern Woodland tribes included the Five Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy, Abenakis, Shawnees, Delawares, Micmacs, Mahicans, and Pequots. Some of these tribes were sedentary hunter-gathers while others grew maize (corn), beans, and squash. In the Southeast white settlers came into contact with Powhatans, Catawbas, Cherokees, Creeks, Natchez, Choctaws, and Chickasaws; these people were primarily agriculturalists. Pueblos, Zunis, Navajos, and Hopis represented some of the adobe-dwelling bands in the arid Southwest. Regardless of their differences, these groups shared some common characteristics. For Native Americans the family, clan, and village represented the most important social groups. In addition, religions revolved around the belief that all of nature was alive, pulsating with spiritual power.

**Contact.**

When the various European nations reached the New World, the encounters were predictably diverse. Culture, climate, and the location and timing of the contact all affected the nature of the experience.

One common factor was disease, as large numbers of native peoples succumbed to the microbes that the Europeans unwittingly carried with them in virtually every encounter. Massive population declines undoubtedly placed great stress on economic, social, political, and religious systems of native peoples.

From 1492 until the Revolutionary War, trade was a central theme of interaction between natives and Europeans. This relationship shifted over time, transforming native life by drawing North America into a web of global economic connections. The process began when the first traders offered textiles, glass, and metal products in exchange for beaver pelts and buffalo robes. The transactions did not end until Europeans had virtually dispossessed the native people of the land that produced the goods the foreigners desired.

Spanish and French relations with native peoples were often contradictory. Spanish colonists developed a reputation for harsh treatment, but because the Spanish sent almost no women to the New World, Spanish men often intermarried with native women. Spaniards sent priests to Christianize native peoples even as they stole their land and exploited their labor. The French have been portrayed as sensitive to the culture of native peoples, but under their influence, the Fox were all but destroyed.

Europeans initially mistook the natives of the Caribbean islands for inhabitants of Asia, the continent Columbus had expected to find, and called them Indians. Struck by the peoples’ nudity and gentility, some Europeans considered them to be members of the lost tribes of Israel and the New World as the physical location of the Garden of Eden. As conflicts led to violence and colonization spread to the mainland, however, the view of Indians as naive innocents soon gave way to an image of native peoples as satanic fiends bent on the destruction of white colonists. Europeans engaged in formal academic debates on the nature of Native Americans and where they fit into the world.

**Southwest.**

Spanish colonists pushed northward from their base in Mexico in search of precious metals and created the new colony of Nuevo México. In 1598, about four hundred Spanish colonists settled along the Rio Grande. The Pueblo people accepted their presence without resistance, adopting some of their innovations in cooking, architecture, and town planning. These Spaniards had profound effects on the local ecology. They brought cattle and sheep which grazed on the land. Their use of baking ovens greatly increased the need for firewood, depleting local supplies. And the Spanish organized Indian laborers to expand the existing network of irrigation canals. One group, Acoma Pueblo, refused to submit to the forced labor, and hundreds of Indians were killed or enslaved. This policy of “blood and fire” produced a legacy of resentment. The Spanish never found gold or silver, struggled economically, and maintained an uneasy peace with their neighbors. In 1680 Acoma warriors expelled the Spanish, driving them all the way back to Mexico and keeping them out for a decade.

During the eighteenth century missionaries established twenty-one missions, a day’s march apart, from San Diego to San Francisco, California. Military forts, called presidios, soon were added to each mission. Native religion was suppressed; Indians who resisted who refused to convert to Christianity were physically abused; and traditional family relationships were discouraged. Native resistance took the form of poisonings, arson, and violent uprisings—with four thousand deaths recorded at Santa Barbara alone. The native population of coastal California, estimated at seventy thousand before the missions, declined to about fifteen thousand within three decades of their arrival.

**Northeast.**

 In the early 1600s, Indians in the Saint Lawrence River valley established trading relationships with the French. Natives obtained textiles and glass and metal goods in exchange for beaver skins. The French erected a fort at Quebec in 1608 to protect their trade from raids by the Mohawks. Against this alliance of French and natives were arrayed the The nations of the Iroquois Confederacy (Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas, and Senecas) were against this alliance. Dutch colonists arrived in present-day New York and hoped to trade with the Natives also, so they supplied the Iroquois with metal weaponry—hatchets, knives, and arrow points—needed to fight their native and French enemies. Dutch traders penetrated southern New England and present-day Pennsylvania.

In 1620 the first British in the Northeast, at Plymouth, began to compete for native trades. By 1630, the region bounded roughly by the Hudson River, the Saint Lawrence River, and the Atlantic Ocean was North America’s most complex zone of interaction between natives and Europeans. With increasing trade, there was increasing competition often leading to warfare among the native groups.

**Chesapeake Bay**

In early attempts to establish an English colony on Roanoke island failed, but with the aid of the Powhatans, the Jamestown colony was successfully established. The Powhatan confederacy covered nearly all of eastern Virginia. At first, relations with the English were peaceful. But in 1609, white leaders attempted to dictate unfavorable terms of trade and colonization, the Powhatan chieftain retaliated by withholding corn, and war broke out. By 1611, the English had forced all native peoples out of their immediate area. In 1614, a truce was put into effect. The native rose up twice, in 1622 and 1644, to try to stop the tide of white settlers. By midcentury Virginia had developed an economy based on tobacco, immigration remained high, and the area of settlements moved westward into Indian country. As the population grew, social divisions developed among the settlers. The colony’s leaders were the wealthy men who owned tobacco plantations near the coast and far from the Indians. Settlers who lived farther inland nearer the natives tended to be more recent arrivals, poorer an thus unable to afford rich coastal land, and more hostile to their Indian neighbors.

**Lower South.**

Natives in the lower South fought against each other as they formed alliances with Europeans just as natives in the Northeast had**.** The colony of Carolina was founded in 1669, and colonists sought trade with the natives. Some colonists also attempted to make slaves of one group of local natives, but the natives fought enslavement with violent raids on white settlements. Colonists sought the help of a rival group of natives, the Shawnees, and together they destroyed the local natives.

Colonists also expanded trade with the Creeks, who also became strong military allies of the English. Colonists and Creek forces destroyed Spanish mission villages in Florida, captured Florida Natives and sold them as slaves to Caribbean sugar planters. The powerful Creeks also began to trade with the French and Spanish and played the European nations against each other. The British had the best trade goods at the lowest prices, however, and their economic strength and military advantages gave them the greatest staying power in North America. The Creeks remained allies with the British while their other alliances weakened.

**The Colonial Wars.**

From 1689 until 1754, a series of four wars between the British and the French, sometimes involving the Spanish, racked the North America. Many native tribes were caught up in the conflict, as they were forced to choose sides. Old native enemies often chose opposite sides, and new conflicts arose. By the early 1750s the native peoples of North America were squeezed between the French, who fought to maintain control of the Great Lakes and were gaining control of the Mississippi and Ohio River valleys, the British settlements along the Atlantic coast, and the Spanish along the Gulf of Mexico. In 1754, when the British and French fought for fifth and final time in North America, Indian country would be their battlefield.

"[1600-1754: Native Americans: Overview](http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-2536600359.html)." American Eras. 1997. *Encyclopedia.com.* 13 Sep. 2016. <[http://www.encyclopedia.com](http://www.encyclopedia.com/)>.

