

Passage #1

Native Americans

An Overview

Native Americans were the original inhabitants of the Americas. Anthropologists agree that they are descended from people who traveled to America from Asia. They originally formed small wandering groups, hunting for food and living off the land. Later they formed larger groups. The type of food they hunted and the ability to store food for coming years is thought to be one of the main reasons for the cultural differences between the groups.



The first people to live in North America are called Native Americans. When Christopher Columbus first landed in the Americas, he thought he had landed in India, and so he called the people Indians.

Gathering Food

At first they lived in small groups. They were nomadic hunter-gatherers. This means that they moved around in search of food, hunting wild animals and gathering wild plants to survive. This type of living can only support small groups. People living like this build small shelters, from animal skins and poles that can be moved easily. They may also build using poles, branches and grass, and just abandon their homes when they move on. They tended to move southwards, in search of food, as food was more plentiful in warmer climates.

Growing Food

As some groups moved further south, they found that they were able to grow their own crops. These groups were agrarian, meaning they planted and harvested their own crops. The ability to grow crops meant that there was enough food to support a larger group. The groups became larger and more permanent. Homes became more elaborate, and less movable, and small villages started appearing. At this stage, they were still unable to store much food. This meant that in years when they had a bad harvest, they didn't have enough to eat. Two or more years of bad harvests following each other meant they had to move again, or face starvation.

As the groups became larger, and moved further south, they learned valuable lessons on the way. Not everyone moved south. Those who stayed remained in fairly small groups, or tribes, and were able to support themselves with the farming and hunting methods they already used. Most of the tribes who remained in North America had less than 1000 people in each group. The size of the group depended on the availability of food. In some areas, where food was plentiful, the groups were much larger.