

“Heaven and Earth never
agreed better to frame a place
for man’s habitation.”

Jamestown founder John Smith, 1607

THE FIRST AMERICANS

At the height of the Ice Age, between 34,000 and 30,000 B.C., much of the world’s water was locked up in vast continental ice sheets. As a result, the Bering Sea was hundreds of meters below its current level, and a land bridge, known as Beringia, emerged between Asia and North America. At its peak, Beringia is thought to have been some 1,500 kilometers wide. A moist and treeless tundra, it was covered with grasses and plant life, attracting the large animals that early humans hunted for their survival.

The first people to reach North America almost certainly did so without knowing they had crossed into a new continent. They would have been following game, as their

ancestors had for thousands of years, along the Siberian coast and then across the land bridge.

Once in Alaska, it would take these first North Americans thousands of years more to work their way through the openings in great glaciers south to what is now the United States. Evidence of early life in North America continues to be found. Little of it, however, can be reliably dated before 12,000 B.C.; a recent discovery of a hunting lookout in northern Alaska, for example, may date from almost that time. So too may the finely crafted spear points and items found near Clovis, New Mexico.

Similar artifacts have been found at sites throughout North and South America, indicating that life was probably already well established in

much of the Western Hemisphere by some time prior to 10,000 B.C.

Around that time the mammoth began to die out and the bison took its place as a principal source of food and hides for these early North Americans. Over time, as more and more species of large game vanished — whether from overhunting or natural causes — plants, berries, and seeds became an increasingly important part of the early American diet. Gradually, foraging and the first attempts at primitive agriculture appeared. Native Americans in what is now central Mexico led the way, cultivating corn, squash, and beans, perhaps as early as 8,000 B.C. Slowly, this knowledge spread northward.

By 3,000 B.C., a primitive type of corn was being grown in the river valleys of New Mexico and Arizona. Then the first signs of irrigation began to appear, and, by 300 B.C., signs of early village life.

By the first centuries A.D., the Hohokam were living in settlements near what is now Phoenix, Arizona, where they built ball courts and pyramid-like mounds reminiscent of those found in Mexico, as well as a canal and irrigation system.

MOUND BUILDERS AND PUEBLOS

The first Native-American group to build mounds in what is now the United States often are called the Adenans. They began construct-

ing earthen burial sites and fortifications around 600 B.C. Some mounds from that era are in the shape of birds or serpents; they probably served religious purposes not yet fully understood.

The Adenans appear to have been absorbed or displaced by various groups collectively known as Hopewellians. One of the most important centers of their culture was found in southern Ohio, where the remains of several thousand of these mounds still can be seen. Believed to be great traders, the Hopewellians used and exchanged tools and materials across a wide region of hundreds of kilometers.

By around 500 A.D., the Hopewellians disappeared, too, gradually giving way to a broad group of tribes generally known as the Mississippians or Temple Mound culture. One city, Cahokia, near Collinsville, Illinois, is thought to have had a population of about 20,000 at its peak in the early 12th century. At the center of the city stood a huge earthen mound, flattened at the top, that was 30 meters high and 37 hectares at the base. Eighty other mounds have been found nearby.

Cities such as Cahokia depended on a combination of hunting, foraging, trading, and agriculture for their food and supplies. Influenced by the thriving societies to the south, they evolved into complex hierarchical societies that took slaves and practiced human sacrifice.

In what is now the southwest United States, the Anasazi, ancestors of the modern Hopi Indians, began building stone and adobe pueblos around the year 900. These unique and amazing apartment-like structures were often built along cliff faces; the most famous, the “cliff palace” of Mesa Verde, Colorado, had more than 200 rooms. Another site, the Pueblo Bonito ruins along New Mexico’s Chaco River, once contained more than 800 rooms.

Perhaps the most affluent of the pre-Columbian Native Americans lived in the Pacific Northwest, where the natural abundance of fish and raw materials made food supplies plentiful and permanent villages possible as early as 1,000 B.C. The opulence of their “potlatch” gatherings remains a standard for extravagance and festivity probably unmatched in early American history.

NATIVE-AMERICAN CULTURES

The America that greeted the first Europeans was, thus, far from an empty wilderness. It is now thought that as many people lived in the Western Hemisphere as in Western Europe at that time — about 40 million. Estimates of the number of Native Americans living in what is now the United States at the onset of European colonization range from two to 18 million, with most historians tending toward the lower figure. What is certain is the devastating effect that European disease had on

the indigenous population practically from the time of initial contact. Smallpox, in particular, ravaged whole communities and is thought to have been a much more direct cause of the precipitous decline in the Indian population in the 1600s than the numerous wars and skirmishes with European settlers.

Indian customs and culture at the time were extraordinarily diverse, as could be expected, given the expanse of the land and the many different environments to which they had adapted. Some generalizations, however, are possible. Most tribes, particularly in the wooded eastern region and the Midwest, combined aspects of hunting, gathering, and the cultivation of maize and other products for their food supplies. In many cases, the women were responsible for farming and the distribution of food, while the men hunted and participated in war.

By all accounts, Native-American society in North America was closely tied to the land. Identification with nature and the elements was integral to religious beliefs. Their life was essentially clan-oriented and communal, with children allowed more freedom and tolerance than was the European custom of the day.

Although some North American tribes developed a type of hieroglyphics to preserve certain texts, Native-American culture was primarily oral, with a high value placed on the recounting of tales and dreams. Clearly, there was a good deal of trade among various

groups and strong evidence exists that neighboring tribes maintained extensive and formal relations — both friendly and hostile.

THE FIRST EUROPEANS

The first Europeans to arrive in North America — at least the first for whom there is solid evidence — were Norse, traveling west from Greenland, where Erik the Red had founded a settlement around the year 985. In 1001 his son Leif is thought to have explored the northeast coast of what is now Canada and spent at least one winter there.

While Norse sagas suggest that Viking sailors explored the Atlantic coast of North America down as far as the Bahamas, such claims remain unproven. In 1963, however, the ruins of some Norse houses dating from that era were discovered at L'Anse-aux-Meadows in northern Newfoundland, thus supporting at least some of the saga claims.

In 1497, just five years after Christopher Columbus landed in the Caribbean looking for a western route to Asia, a Venetian sailor named John Cabot arrived in Newfoundland on a mission for the British king. Although quickly forgotten, Cabot's journey was later to provide the basis for British claims to North America. It also opened the way to the rich fishing grounds off George's Banks, to which European fishermen, particularly the Portuguese, were soon making regular visits.

Columbus never saw the mainland of the future United States, but the first explorations of it were launched from the Spanish possessions that he helped establish. The first of these took place in 1513 when a group of men under Juan Ponce de León landed on the Florida coast near the present city of St. Augustine.

With the conquest of Mexico in 1522, the Spanish further solidified their position in the Western Hemisphere. The ensuing discoveries added to Europe's knowledge of what was now named America — after the Italian Amerigo Vespucci, who wrote a widely popular account of his voyages to a "New World." By 1529 reliable maps of the Atlantic coastline from Labrador to Tierra del Fuego had been drawn up, although it would take more than another century before hope of discovering a "Northwest Passage" to Asia would be completely abandoned.

Among the most significant early Spanish explorations was that of Hernando De Soto, a veteran conquistador who had accompanied Francisco Pizarro in the conquest of Peru. Leaving Havana in 1539, De Soto's expedition landed in Florida and ranged through the southeastern United States as far as the Mississippi River in search of riches.

Another Spaniard, Francisco Vázquez de Coronado, set out from Mexico in 1540 in search of the mythical Seven Cities of Cibola. Coronado's travels took him to the Grand Canyon and Kansas, but