People have been living on the landmass we now know as the United States for at least the past 12,000 years—long before civilizations emerged among the Sumerians in Mesopotamia, the ancient Egyptians, the Greeks, and Jesus Christ, whose estimated time of arrival, however incorrect, is the measure by which western European time came to be measured. As a political nation, however, the United States is less than 250 years old, encapsulating roughly just nine or ten generations. Although this book is mostly about that relatively recent political nation and the people who lived in it, this chapter deals with the three groups of people—Indians, West Africans, and Europeans—who came together in North America more than five hundred years ago, setting in motion the process by which America would become an independent nation. This chapter begins in the Ice Age and ends as Christopher Columbus sets foot in North America in 1492, becoming, perhaps, the first European to ever do so.

LO1 Native America

The Paleo-Indian Era: The First Settlers (15,000–10,000 years ago)

Arrival

We will probably never know when the first people set foot on what we now call the United States. For a long time, archaeologists believed that the first people came not for fame, fortune, or freedom (as subsequent immigrants would), but simply because they were hungry. According to this theory, about 12,000 years ago, thousands of young adults and their families left their homes in Asia and crossed a narrow passage of icy-over land called Beringia, southwest of today’s Alaska. These people were supposedly following herds of woolly mammoths, intending to hunt the animals to feed and clothe their families. Many of these hunters followed the herds south along the western coast of present-day Canada and ended up in what is now the United States. Many of their latter-day ancestors continued southward and, after many generations, made it all the way to the southernmost tip of South America, to a place now called Tierra Del Fuego.

Recent evidence casts doubt on this theory. Carbon dating suggests that the first people on the continent were probably here much earlier than 12,000 years ago. This has prompted a reevaluation of the Beringia theory, with some scholars suggesting that the first settlers came on boats, either following whales across the Pacific from Asia, or coming from Europe, along Greenland, in search of fish, or following the Pacific Coast of today’s Alaska, British Columbia, and Washington state (see Map 1.1).
In 1996, two men watching hydroplane races in Kennewick, Washington, discovered what turned out to be a 9,000-year-old skeleton. The skeleton, dubbed Kennewick man, baffled scientists, mainly because a physical reconstruction of the skull revealed a man who looked "more like a middle aged European accountant than he did a Paleo-Indian hunter." People with European features were not thought to
have been in North America for another 8,500 years, so Kennewick man presented the possibility that North American settlement happened in different waves, from a variety of locations, with older groups dying out, being replaced by yet newer immigrants. Another scientist then suggested that Kennewick man’s features resembled those of people living in specific parts of Asia rather than Europe, further complicating the initial origins of humankind in North America. Was he a man with a European face (and genetic origins), an Asian one, or did he resemble one of America’s indigenous Indians? Current DNA sampling technology cannot tell us, but a final report written by one of the principal scientists concludes that “methods developed in the near future could be successful in extracting suitable DNA for analysis.” Meanwhile, many of today’s Indian tribes resisted the supposed European or Asian appearance of Kennewick man because their beliefs maintain that they are the one, true indigenous group in North America. Regardless of the dispute, and regardless of when or from whence they came, their age suggests that calling North America the “New World” might be a misnomer. England, for instance, was not inhabitable until 12,500 BCE, suggesting that the “New World” may actually have a much longer human history than what we now think of as the “Old World.” Today we call these initial North American settlers the Paleo-Indians.

Although the initial origins and timing are in question, what is known for certain is that the greatest flow of people in this early period came between 20,000 and 10,000 BCE, and that sometime between 9,500 and 8,000 BCE, the ocean level rose due to what we would today call global warming. This covered over the Bering Strait that connected Asia to North America, effectively ending the first major wave of immigration. That path has remained submerged ever since.

Expansion and Development

As these migrants moved from region to region across North America, they adapted their lifestyle according to the climate and the land, as people do. The people of the Paleo-Indian era (15,000 to 10,000 years ago) thus lived a wide range of lifestyles, develop-
became the primary source of sustenance for most of the people of Native North America. This trend was perhaps the most significant development in American prehistory, because settled agriculture permitted the establishment of a sedentary existence, without the need to pursue herd animals. Maize, a form of corn, was one key element of this existence. Maize is a highly nutritious cereal, containing more nutrients than wheat, rice, millet, and barley. Its development was a remarkable feat of genetic engineering: Indians in today’s southern Mexico some 6,000 years ago cultivated the crop through the careful selection of desirable seeds, ultimately producing corn.

Populations grew larger, not only because food supplies increased, but also because the size of groups was no longer limited by the arduous demands of hunting. Many tribes became semi-sedentary, settling in camps during the agricultural growing season and then breaking camp to follow the herds at other times of year. Others became increasingly urban in their development, building permanent cities, some of monumental proportions. This was the formative period of the first settled tribes in North America—the immediate ancestors of many of the Indian tribes with which we are most familiar today. The Mesoamerican civilization, founded and developed by the Olmec people, thrived in today’s Mexico and served as a precursor to the many maize-based societies that developed throughout North America. Another successful ancient civilization—the people of Norte Chico, in today’s Peru—flourished by cultivating cotton, which they used to weave nets and catch the plentiful fish off the Pacific Coast, which they then transported to high-altitude cities in the Andes, some 5,500 years ago. Although nature has reclaimed much of what they created, the developments and accomplishments of these early civilizations are testaments to the capacity of humankind to create and develop monumental societies. One historian has argued that the only way to fully grasp the earth-changing significance of these early civilizations is to take a helicopter ride over undeveloped parts of Mexico and Central and South America, realizing that many of the hills and creeks below are actually the buried remains of temples and canals built by those early civilizations.

Many of the hills and creeks below are actually the buried remains of temples and canals built by early civilizations.

The Pre-Columbian Era: Developing Civilizations (500 BCE–1492 CE)

Of all the people living in North America before contact with Europeans, we know the most about the people of the pre-Columbian era (500 BCE–1492 CE). The great civilizations of the pre-Columbian world (the phrase means “before Columbus”) usually based their economy on agriculture, thus enabling them to endure in a single location long enough to create complex, hierarchical societies and develop long-standing trading networks.

The largest Indian civilization in this period was that of the Incas, who lived on the western coast of South America, from the equator to the southern tip of Chile. The Incas built large cities and fortresses on the steep slopes of the Andes Mountains (and were the beneficiaries of fish deliveries from the people of Norte Chico). Other impressive pre-Columbian societies include the Maya, who, with their step-tiered temples, dominated southern Guatemala and the Yucatan Peninsula (in present-
The Anasazi

In the present-day United States, two of the largest pre-Columbian cultures were the Anasazi and the Mississipians. In the American Southwest, the Anasazi founded a vast civilization by combining hunting and gathering with sedentary agriculture in order to sustain a large population in the arid desert of present-day New Mexico. As a testament to the grandness of their civilization, between 900 and 1150 CE the Anasazi built fourteen “great houses” in the Chaco Canyon, each one several stories tall and containing more than two hundred rooms. They were perhaps used as large apartment buildings, as the canyon served as the major trading post for turquoise and other material goods. Several of these great houses still stand today, near Albuquerque, New Mexico.

The Mississipians

A second large, pre-Columbian culture to develop on the land now known as the United States was that of the Mississippian, who lived at about the same time as the Anasazi, from 700 to 1500 CE, although their civilization peaked around 1100 CE. The largest Anasazi city was called Cahokia, located eight miles east of present-day St. Louis. Inhabited by more than twenty thousand people (comparable in size to London at that time), Cahokia served as the civilization’s crossroads for trade and religion. It was the land’s first metropolis. Webs of roads surrounded the city, connecting rural villagers for hundreds of miles in all directions. Many different tribes made up the Mississippian civilization. The Mississipians developed an accurate calendar and built a pyramid that, at the time, was the third largest structure of any kind in the Western Hemisphere. The Mississipians also left many earthen mounds dotting the landscape.

Some of these early civilizations, like the Anasazi, declined about two hundred years before first contact with Europeans and Africans. Others, such as the Aztecs and some of the Mississipians, were still thriving in 1492. Why did these powerful civilizations decline? There is no single answer to the question. Some scholars say that certain civilizations outgrew their capacity to produce food. Others say that battles with enemy tribes forced them to abandon the principal landmarks of their civilization. Still others cite major droughts.

The Mississipians developed an accurate calendar and built a pyramid that was the third largest structure in the Western Hemisphere.
clan system
Living arrangement in which a tribe was divided into a number of large family groups

matrilineal
Family arrangement in which children typically follow the clan of their mother; married men move into the clan of their wives; most often seen in agricultural societies

polytheistic
Belief system consisting of belief in many deities

animistic
Belief system consisting of belief that supernatural beings, or souls, inhabit all objects and govern their actions

And indeed, not all of these civilizations did decline by the time of first contact with Europeans, and scholars estimate that in 1492 North and South America had perhaps as many as 100 million inhabitants—making it more populous than Europe at the time. These numbers are greatly disputed, however. Regardless, the idea that the Americas were barren “virgin” land before first contact with Europeans is clearly wrong. In 1492, American Indians were thriving and transforming the land to suit their needs.

North America in 1492
By the late 1400s, North America was home to numerous civilizations and tribes, some of which were sizeable, dominating large swaths of land. More than two hundred languages were spoken in North America, among hundreds of different tribes. It was as if each of today’s cities spoke its own language and had unique social rituals. Diversity abounded in this land. So did conflict.

Some Social Similarities of Native North Americans
Despite the wide variety of lifestyles developed by the pre-Columbian peoples, there are some broad general similarities among the tribes in North America during the late 1400s. Most of the tribes, for instance, were based on a clan system, in which a tribe was divided into a number of large family groups. They were also mostly matrilineal, meaning that children typically followed the clan of their mother and that a man, when married, moved into the clan of his wife. Matrilineal societies usually develop when agriculture is the primary food source for a society. In these societies women are in charge of farming (Europeans were universally surprised to see women working in the fields). Thus Indian women maintained the tribe’s social institutions while men were hunting, fishing, or off to war. This system was, however, by no means universal in Native North America, but it does signify a level of sexual equality absent from Europe at the time. Indeed, women were just as likely as men to wield political power in some of these societies. Many Algonkian tribes, for instance, had a female tribal leader.

Land was customarily held in common as well, although there are some instances in which individual rights are said to have existed and others where clan rights existed. Enslavement (usually of captured enemies) was relatively common as well, especially in the tribes of the American Southeast, but Indian enslavement varied in severity, and it is unlikely that enslavement was inherited, meaning that the children of slaves were usually not, by accident of birth, born as chattel.

Most Indian religions were polytheistic (believing in many deities) and animistic (believing that supernatural beings, or souls, inhabit all objects and govern their actions). Indian religions were usually closely related to the physical world, and local terrain was naturally imbued with spiritual meaning. Placing an emphasis on this world (and not on the next), typical ceremonies featured rain and fertility prayers. Many New England tribes, for example, believed in a ruling deity whom they called Manitou and looked to a dramatic local site (such as Mount Katahdin in Maine) as the source of divine power.

Regional Variations
These broad similarities aside, the tribes of Native America were rich in regional variety (Map 1.2). Most variations depended on how a tribe adapted to its surrounding terrain, and thus it is possible to make generalizations based on region.

The Northeast. Several sizeable societies lived in the northeast corner of the United States, in the area now called New England. These tribes included the Wampanoag, Narragansett, Massachusetts, Mohawk, Oneida, Erie, and Pequot. In general, these groups subsisted on hunting and agriculture, although most of their foodstuffs derived from agriculture. Those that lived along the coast relied on the riches of the ocean. Most of these tribes lived in small villages that were closely surrounded by forests that protected them from attack—something that was always a possibility in the congested northeastern region. Indeed, fear of attack was part of the reason why several of these northeastern tribes