

The initial settlement of North America began around 12,000 years ago as bands of Paleo-Indians, the ancestors of modern Native Americans, spread south from Alaska. At first, Paleoindian culture was relatively homogeneous but adaptation to particular environments led to the emergence of well defined regional cultures by the end of the first millennium BC. From early times hunter-gatherers in many areas of North America had cultivated favored food plants on a small scale. Some native plant species, such as sunflowers, had been domesticated by the end of the first millennium BC and maize and beans had been introduced from Mexico. As wild food sources remained abundant, true farming communities were slow to develop.

The first mainly agricultural North American societies developed in the southwest deserts in about AD 300. Maize, beans, squash and cotton were first cultivated close to permanent water sources but by about 900 elaborate irrigation systems were in use. By the 9th century three main cultural traditions had developed – the Hohokam, Mogollon and Anasazi – together with two subsidiary cultures, the Patayan and the Fremont. In some areas (such as Chaco Canyon) these cultures developed considerable social complexity. Their most distinctive remains are the multi-roomed dwellings known as pueblos, and their fine pottery. Droughts caused their decline from around 1300.

True farming began to emerge in the eastern woodlands once hardier strains of maize and beans appeared after 700. The resulting growth in food production stimulated the rise of North America's first towns, in the Mississippi basin, by the 12th century. These centered around large earthwork temple mounds. The Mississippian cultures shared a common religion known as the Southern Cult, and were hierarchical; their rulers were buried in mound-top mortuaries with rich grave goods and even human sacrifices. Large Mississippian towns, such as Cahokia, were the centers of powerful chiefdoms. By the 15th century, Mississippian culture was declining and its heartland was depopulated (the so-called "vacant quarter"). By about 1000 permanent farming villages were established throughout the eastern woodlands. Warfare spread and by the time of European contact defensive tribal confederacies, such as the Iroquois league, were forming.

Elsewhere in North America hunting, fishing and gathering remained the dominant way of life. On the

- cultural areas**
- Arctic marine mammal hunters
 - sub-Arctic forest hunter-gatherers
 - northwest coast salmon fisher-hunter-gatherers
 - plateau fisher-hunter-gatherers
 - Great Basin hunter-gatherers
 - southwest desert farmers
 - California fisher-hunter-gatherers
 - Great Plains buffalo hunters
 - eastern woodland farmer-hunter-gatherers
 - Caribbean farmers
 - Mesoamerican farming cultures
- uninhabited**
- desert
- origins and spread**
- origin of Thule Inuit culture, 200 BC–AD 800
 - Alcuf site, AD 600–1500
 - Inuit site, AD 600–1800
 - Norse settlement, c.AD 1000
 - spread of Thule Inuit AD 1000–1500
 - Mississippian temple-mound cultures, AD 800–1500
 - temple-mound
 - the "vacant quarter", c.AD 1450
 - Northern Iroquoian territory, c.AD 1000
 - site of major bison kill
 - Plains farming village, AD 900–1800
 - spread of farming

- southwest farming cultures**
- Anasazi, AD 700–1500
 - Fremont, AD 400–1300
 - Hohokam, AD 400–1450
 - Mogollon, AD 300–1450
 - Patayan, AD 875–1450
- Pueblo
 - ballcourt
 - other important site, AD 600–1500

Pacific coast, ocean resources were so abundant that relatively dense populations and permanent village settlements emerged, with a level of social and cultural complexity far beyond that normally achieved by hunter-gatherer peoples. The Great Plains and the sub-Arctic forests were sparsely populated, though the advent of the bow and arrow in the first millennium AD made big-game hunting more efficient. At the time of European contact buffalo hunting was gradually giving way to farming, but the introduction of the horse (native American horses died out around 10,000 years ago), led many settled Plains peoples to abandon farming for nomadism.

The Paleoindians did not for the most part settle in Arctic North America. The region was uninhabited until about 2500–1900 BC when the ancestors of

the modern Inuit peoples arrived in Alaska from Siberia. Early Inuit cultures became increasingly well adapted to the Arctic environment, culminating in the Thule tradition which survived to the modern age. This originated during the Old Bering Sea Stage (200 BC–AD 800) among specialized marine mammal hunters on St Lawrence and other Bering Sea islands, from where it spread along Alaska's west coast and north to Point Barrow. From there Thule Inuit migrated east, displacing or assimilating the earlier Dorset Inuit until they reached Greenland in the 13th century. Here they made contact with Norse settlers, with whom they traded and fought. The Norse were not well adapted to life in the Arctic and by about 1500 their settlements had died out and been occupied by the Thule.

- 1 Here a cliff was used as a "jump" over which buffalo were stampeded to their deaths, from c.5400 BC to European contact.
- 2 A small Norse settlement occupied for about twenty years c.AD 1000 is the only sure evidence that Europeans reached the Americas before Columbus.
- 3 Ritual ball courts at Snaketown and Casa Grande indicate that the Hohokam culture was influenced by Mesoamerican civilizations.
- 4 From 900–1300, Chaco Canyon was the hub of a network of 125 planned villages linked by 400 kilometers (250 miles) of roads.
- 5 Iron ship rivets, textiles and chain mail found at sites at Flagler Bay show contact between the Thule Inuit and the Norse Greenlanders.
- 6 Sub-Arctic hunters typically sited their camps at river crossings used by herds of caribou (reindeer).

TIMELINE

Other areas	800	1100	1400
SW desert	800–900 Maize farming becomes an important source of food	c.1200 Construction of temple-mounds at Moundville, Alabama	c.1450 Depopulation causes decline of Mississippian towns
Eastern woodlands	550–600 Bow and arrow adopted by Plains hunters	1050–1250 Growth of towns and large ceremonial centers in Mississippi Basin	1492 Columbus reaches the West Indies
	c.900 Hohokam culture begins irrigation-based farming	c.1300 Southwest farming cultures in decline after period of drought	c.1500 Extinction of Norse Greenland colony
	c.900 Farming villages begin to spread onto Great Plains		
	c.1000 Thule Eskimos begin to migrate into eastern Arctic		



See also 4.25 (Spanish exploration of North America) and 4.26 (European exploration of North America)