

Native American Homes

by ReadWorks



Before Columbus!

Before the arrival of European explorers and settlers, there were already incredibly diverse groups of Native Americans all across North America. This period in Native American life and culture is called the pre-Columbian era.

It is important to remember that Native Americans had established customs, beliefs, traditions, and general ways of living well before European influences began to spread across the continent.

It's a Bridge! A Land Bridge!

Most anthropologists who study pre-Columbian cultures believe that the ancestors of modern Native American peoples migrated from Asia, across the Bering Strait, and south through

what is present-day Alaska, Yukon, and British Columbia. This was possible because sea levels had dropped around 300 feet during the Ice Age, between 12,000 and 60,000 years ago.

Anthropologists call the prehistoric land bridge Beringia. They believe it was open at several points: 50,000 to 60,000 years ago, 40,000 to 45,000 years ago, 28,000 to 33,000 years ago, and 13,000 to 23,000 years ago.

How Did Native Americans Live?

Anthropologists are careful to consider the different cultural reasons why Native Americans built different styles of housing, as well as reasons having to do with available resources, climate, and the landscape.

All in the Family

The Iroquois living along the St. Lawrence River in the Northeast woodlands built longhouses hundreds of feet long so that all members of the same clan could live together. Clans were organized *matrilineally*, which means that when an Iroquois man and woman married, the new husband would join his wife's household. This is the opposite of most European societies, in which new wives would join their husbands' families. When a new Iroquois husband joined his wife's family, the clan simply made the longhouse longer by adding more bent saplings to the frame and elm bark slabs to the roof. A clan's family totem would be displayed on the doorway.

A House by the Sea

In the Pacific Northwest, Native American commitment to building with wood was much more extensive. Using different stone, bone, and shell tools, native peoples would cut, carve, and smooth red-cedar boards to be attached to heavy post and beam frames. Builders would include one or more rectangular levels as support for sleeping booths. The Haida people of the Pacific Northwest would stand totem poles in front of their houses as a way of displaying family histories and myths.

Move On Out!

The nomadic lifestyle of Native Americans on the Great Plains known as the Lakota people encouraged the use of shelters that could be put up and taken down very quickly. Animal hides stretched over tent poles arranged in a cone, known today as a *tipi* (meaning "to dwell" in the Lakota language), was the shelter of choice for hunting societies that required a greater range of mobility.

A Difference in Neighbors

The American Southwest is a difficult environment to survive in, let alone live. The Pueblo Indians and the ancestors of present-day Navajos endured the harsh landscape in two very different ways.

The Pueblo peoples of what are now New Mexico and Arizona built brick and stone structures, three-to-five stories tall, clustered around plazas. The units could be circular or rectangular. Circular structures were generally free-standing, while rectangular structures were attached on different sides. Pueblo homes further to the east were built using mostly adobe clay; water was drawn from the Rio Grande, and bricks were dried in the sun. Homes further to the west were built using sandstone available in the drier climate.

By comparison, the ancestors of today's Navajo people were semi-nomadic and built family homesteads spread out across the Painted Desert of the American Southwest. At the center of these ranches was the hogan, an east-facing structure historically built with whatever materials were available, a tradition of adaptation continued well into the present day. It is easy to imagine that these Navajo homesteads might have inspired white settlers to build ranches of their own on the western frontier.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What were the homes of the Iroquois called?

- A. totems
- B. tipis
- C. longhouses
- D. hogans

2. What does the passage list?

- A. different homes built by Native American tribes in different regions of America
- B. different beliefs of Native American tribes throughout America
- C. different lifestyles of Native American tribes throughout America
- D. different ways Native Americans hunted for food throughout America

3. The Pueblo Indians and the ancestors of present-day Navajos endured the harsh landscape of the American Southwest in two very different ways.

Which information from the passage supports this statement?

- A. Circular structures built by the Pueblo Indians were generally freestanding, while rectangular structures were attached on different sides.
- B. The Pueblo Indians built brick and stone structures. The Navajo Indians built ranches made with whatever materials were available.
- C. Navajo homesteads might have inspired white settlers to build ranches of their own on the western frontier.
- D. Pueblo homes further to the east were built using mostly adobe clay.

4. How could "tipis" have helped Native Americans secure food on the Great Plains?

- A. Tipis provided a stable, long-term shelter used to gather food on the Great Plains.
- B. Tipis provided a flexible shelter that allowed Native Americans to follow animals they hunted across the Great Plains.
- C. Tipis provided a flexible shelter that allowed Native Americans to plant crops across the Great Plains.
- D. Tipis provided a place for women and children to stay while the men hunted for food across the Great Plains.

5. What is the main idea of this passage?

- A. It is important to remember that Native Americans had established customs, beliefs, traditions, and general ways of living well before European influences began to spread across the continent.
- B. Different Native American tribes used different types of shelter to survive depending on their location, lifestyle, and available resources.
- C. The nomadic lifestyle of Native Americans on the Great Plains encouraged the use of shelters that could be put up and taken down very quickly.
- D. Most anthropologists who study pre-Columbian homes believe that the ancestors of modern Native American peoples migrated from Asia, across the Bering Strait.

6. Read the following section from the passage: "The **nomadic** lifestyle of Native Americans on the Great Plains encouraged the use of shelters that could be put up and taken down very quickly. Animals hides stretched over tent poles arranged in a cone, known today as a *tipi* (meaning "to dwell" in the Lakota language), was the shelter of choice for hunting societies that required a greater range of mobility."

As used in the passage, the word "**nomadic**" is used to describe what type of people?

- A. people who stay in the same place to get food
- B. people who move frequently to get food
- C. people who use semi-permanent shelters to get food
- D. people who move irregularly to get food

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

The Native Americans on the Great Plains moved easily _____ of the flexible shelter the tipis provided them.

- A. yet
- B. in contrast
- C. instead
- D. because

8. How did the Iroquois in the Northeast change their longhouse when a new Iroquois husband joined his wife's clan?

9. Describe the shelters of the Lakota people.

10. Explain some of the factors that determined the type of housing built by Native Americans by using at least one example from the passage.

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The clan simply made the longhouse longer by adding more bent saplings to the frame and elm bark slabs to the roof.

9. Describe the shelters of the Lakota people.

The Lakota people utilized "tipis" which could be easily set up and taken down. "Tipis" were shelters made of animal hides stretched over tent poles in a cone shape.

10. Explain some of the factors that determined the type of housing built by Native Americans by using at least one example from the passage.

Answers may vary and should be supported by the text. Students may explain that the geographic location, lifestyle, and available resources of the Native Americans determined the type of housing they built. Students should also highlight one of the examples of the Native American tribes to support their answer. For example, they may explain that the ancestors of present-day Navajos were semi-nomadic so they built homestead ranches across the Painted Desert of the American Southwest. They built the hogan of the ranches with whatever materials were available to them. These homesteads allowed them to survive the difficult environment of the American Southwest.