

Native Americans of the Northeast Cultural Area

by Jennifer Kenny

The Eastern Woodlands is the eastern part of the United States, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Mississippi River. It includes the Great Lakes. Most scientists divide the region into the Northeast and the Southeast. The Northeast portion of the region runs from Canada to Kentucky and Virginia. It has a temperate climate. It is somewhat humid. There are widespread forests and hundreds of rivers. Much of the soil is adequate for agriculture.



Approximately 10,000 years ago, ancient hunter-gatherers followed game animals into the region. Around 9,000 years ago, the climate warmed, and these Native Americans became dependent on deer, nuts, and wild grains. Then, 5,000 years ago, they began cultivating plants. By the year 400 AD, maize agriculture was common. Women tended to plots of corn (or maize), squash, and beans. To the Iroquois in this area, those were the three most important crops. They planted them on small earthen hills. The Iroquois called these crops "the Three Sisters."

The Algonquians introduced the Pilgrims to these crops. Squanto shared the traditional Native American harvesting festival with the English. The Pilgrims had the first Thanksgiving with members of the Wampanoag. Food was plentiful. Besides farming, people there hunted rabbits, deer, squirrels, beavers, turkeys, partridges, ducks, and geese. Far in the north, they hunted moose, elk, and bears too. In areas closer to the prairie, they sometimes took buffalo as well. The Northeast Indians also used traps and deadfalls, traps that made heavy things fall on prey to hurt or kill them. They were able to fish with hooks, spears, or nets in the numerous rivers, streams, lakes, and ponds.

The Indians near Nova Scotia liked to fish at night using torches. Fish came to the surface because the light attracted them. Then the men in canoes speared the fish. They gathered wild plant foods, such as berries, too. Where there were maple trees, the Native Americans had maple syrup and sugar to enjoy. Food in the Northeast was cooked in wooden vessels or simple black pottery.

There were two main groups in this area: the Algonquian-speaking group and the Iroquoian-speaking group. Tribes from both groups were organized into clans. Clans were clusters of related families who claimed a common ancestor. A clan would take an animal name, such as the Deer Clan. In the Iroquois society, family ancestry and property passed through the female line (matrilineal). A clan mother, an elder woman with much power, headed each clan. The Algonquian society, though, was a patrilineal society. Chiefs or leaders of the woodland tribes were called sachems.

The Iroquois men owned their clothing, personal possessions, and weapons. The women owned everything else. They were responsible for growing crops, managing stored food, and supervising men during harvest. If the women wanted to discourage a war, they would refuse to

give the men their moccasins and food. The girls helped with their mother's chores and chased animals from fields. The boys learned to hunt so they could become men.

The Iroquois lived in longhouses. A longhouse was a communal dwelling that could hold twelve or more families. There were doors at both ends, and it had a pointed or round roof with a smoke hole. A longhouse was made from post-and-beam and bent sapling frames. It was covered with elm bark. The Iroquois slept on raised platforms in the longhouse.

The Algonquians enjoyed wigwams instead. Wigwams were domed or cone-shaped dwellings. They were made of pole frames covered in bark, reed mats, or animal hides. They were built over a shallow pit with earth piled around the base. Fires were in the center for heat and light. The Native Americans in this area made clearings in the woods near water. Sometimes they surrounded them with palisades (tall walls made from sharpened logs stuck upright in the earth) for defense. Birch bark canoes were used in the Northeast. They were used for transporting people and provisions. They were elegant-looking boats, and they were light and strong as well.

Deerskin was the choice for clothes. Shirts, leggings, dresses, skirts, and moccasins were made from softened deer hide. Robes and mittens were made from beaver or bear fur. The Native Americans in this area decorated clothes with feathers, shells, stones, paint, and porcupine quill embroidery. They often painted their faces, and the men sometimes painted their bodies. The Northeast Indians believed in a spirit world that interacted with the physical world. They believed the Great Spirit was present in all things. The Algonquians called the Great Spirit "Kitche Manitou." The Iroquois called the Great Spirit "Orenda."

Throughout the Northeast, wampum was used. Wampum was small beads made from shells or the strings, belts, or sashes made from these beads. The Native Americans placed high value on wampum. They kept tribal records by arranging wampum in pictographs. They also communicated peace or war to other tribes by using wampum. White stood for peace; black stood for gloomy matters. Wampum was used to decorate tools, weapons, and jewelry.

To reduce conflict and maintain unity against enemies, the Northeast tribes organized into confederacies. The Algonquian alliances included the Powhatan Confederacy and the Delaware Confederacy. The Iroquois Confederacy was called the League of Five Nations. It was founded by the late 1500s and included the Mohawk, the Oneida, the Onondaga, the Cayuga, and the Seneca. The famous story of Hiawatha explains the formation of the league.

In the 1600s, the Native Americans traded goods with the Europeans. On the positive side, they were introduced to iron tools and pots, bright clothes, and firearms. On the negative side, diseases and warfare became all too common.