

Native American Kiosk

Native American Lifeways

The Native Americans living in the Northeast at the time of European settlement were said to be tall, robustly built, well formed, well nourished, and without infectious diseases. They were light in skin color, and their facial features were caucasoid. Algonquian was spoken in several dialects along the Atlantic seaboard from the Carolinas northward into Canada.

Indian socio-political organization was tribal, based on kinship, each tribe headed by a chieftain or sachem, who occasionally was a woman. Sub-tribal groups might be led by a sagamore.

Tribal leadership was usually hereditary through the mother's line. A leader's degree of authority varied among the tribes, but most chiefs governed with advice from their council of elders, and opinions were sought from subordinate chiefs. There was no law in the western sense; custom and tradition were the law. The elderly were honored for their wisdom, gained through experience.

Each tribe's territories—for fishing, hunting, berry picking, nut gathering, crop fields, etc.—were defined by a river drainage system or other topographical feature. These lands were held in common, although the chief would allot to each family its own area for crops, fishing, hunting, etc. The concept of private property in land, which is an English invention, did not exist among the Indians, a fact that led to many disputes between the two cultures. Personal items, tools, food, and dogs were a family's own, excepting for the observance of hospitality customs.

Southern New England Indians ate a well-balanced diet, according to white settlers, who found them better nourished than Londoners of the same era. The Natives lived in small settlements near their crop fields, where they grew the trio of corn, beans, and squash, as well as melons and pumpkins. By clearing trees, they maintained berry patches, where they harvested blueberries, strawberries, blackberries, cranberries, along with grapes, plums, and many others. Nut-bearing trees were abundant; beech nuts, hazel nuts, and butternuts were eaten raw, chestnuts boiled, and acorns blanched and ground into flour. Summer surpluses were dried and stored for winter consumption.

Large areas of inland forest were cleared and maintained with grass to attract deer, which sheltered in the woodlands. When the harvesting of summer crops was finished, the men turned to hunting deer and other game. Turkeys abounded. Fish weirs were constructed on streams like this Nashoba Brook, where early spring runs of eels and alewives to spawn upstream made fishing easy. The now semi-ruined Robbins Mill dam is thought to have been constructed on the remains of such a weir. Fresh water and sea shellfish were gathered.

Though no obvious habitation sites have been observed in this large conservation area, there is little doubt that Native Americans would have exploited the abundant resources of the extensive wetlands bordering this portion of Nashoba Brook during ceremonial activities. Ducks

raising ducklings in spring or migrating in the fall were easy targets. The coarse sedges and reeds could be woven into mats and baskets. Certain woody stems made excellent arrows.

The Indians of this region cooked in stone, wood, or birch bark pots, either set into hot coals or filled with water heated with hot stones. Foods were combined in numerous ways to provide soups, stews, roasts, berry cakes, and vegetable breads. Maple syrup was prepared. It is said that there were 150 recipes for maize alone, and not a few Indian recipes have been passed down through New England families for generations: for example, Boston baked beans, succotash, corn bread, and Indian pudding.

Most New England Indians did not live in wigwams. The southern tribes, living in villages next to crop fields, built permanent shelters. Flexible saplings, firmly secured into the ground in a roughly circular or oval plan, were bent into a curve so that ends met in the middle where they were secured with withes. Cross pieces of flexible, strong reeds or long branches were interwoven among the saplings to create a secure frame. A smoke hole was left open at the top, while the rest of the structure was covered with woven mats and animal skins. A doorway, or two, to provide ventilation, could be covered with a leather flap.

Sleeping platforms were fashioned at a low height around the interior walls and covered with skins. A ring of stones provided a hearth for inside cooking. Baskets holding household items as well as herbs, medicinals, and dried food stores were stashed under the bed platforms.

Further north, long houses were built to accommodate several families, each with its own hearth. Because wigwams were easily transportable, they were used primarily for temporary camps established during the growing season at various places for the gathering of different foods.

Tools and implements were crafted with ingenuity and often artistry from a wide variety of natural materials. Bowls and cooking pots were made from steatite, a soft stone, until about 1500 AD, when women learned to make pottery from clay by coiling long slender rolls in a circular pattern on top of each other. These vessels were then hardened with fire. Other containers were made by weaving grasses, reeds, and strips of birch bark into baskets of all sizes and shapes for specialized purposes. Both baskets and birch bark canoe coverings were made waterproof by the application of animal fats and vegetable tars and resins.

A variety of knives, adzes, chisels, axes, fish hooks, and many other implements were made by knapping or grinding stone, bones, and antlers. A woman's pestle, or grinding stone, was often carried with her, and basins for the grinding of meal and flour from grains were often created out of conveniently shaped boulders located at well-used camping sites (Figure 11).

Clothing was fashioned from carefully treated skins, made into a variety of types of leather, and from woven textiles. In summer, men wore loin cloths and women, short skirts. Children ran naked. Both genders often wore a short cape that covered the shoulders to the waist. In winter, particularly in more northerly territory, fur lined clothing was tailored. Moccasins were made

from soft leather. Leggings were worn by men when going into the bush. Feathers were used for decoration, and sometimes were woven into capes. Bead decoration, after Contact, was very popular.

Corn (Maize) inset on the panel:

Corn, zeamays, called maize in many languages, was domesticated in prehistoric times by Mesoamericans. It became the staple starch for all native North Americans. A tall, leafy stalk produced several large ears, or cobs, each of which contained many kernels. These grains were ground into flour or meal.