



Prehistoric times

Most anthropologists agree that the North American Indian originated in Asia and migrated over the Bering Sea from Siberia. Recent discoveries of primitive tools have led some to speculate that man was present in the New World as early as 40000 B.C., when North America was largely covered with glaciers. With the melting of the glaciers (around 8000 B.C.), these prehistoric inhabitants adapted their lifestyle from hunting the giant sloth and mammoth to pursuing much smaller prey such as deer, bear and elk. By 1000 B.C., prehistoric populations had become more stable and individual cultures began to emerge in different areas of the continent.

Cultures

In Canada, six distinct Indian culture areas have generally been recognized. In each case, the geographical environment played a large role in shaping the culture. Each culture was composed of a number of tribes, some of which are now extinct.

Woodland Indians

The easternmost culture area was that of the nomadic Woodland Indians, who lived in a harsh climate of long, cold winters and short, hot summers. This culture area encompasses what are today the provinces of Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Quebec and much of Ontario. The Woodland tribes were the Micmac, Malecite, Montagnais, Naskapi, Ojibway, Algonkin, Cree and the now extinct Beothuk.

These tribes depended on moose, deer, bear, beaver and caribou for food and clothing. Diets were supplemented by fresh-water fish and fowl, and by shell-fish and cod harvested along the Atlantic coast. All Woodland tribes lived in "wigwams," essentially a framework of poles covered with bark, woven rush mats or caribou skin.

Iroquoian Indians

By contrast, the Iroquoian Indians lived in more permanent villages in the area that is now southeastern Ontario. There were nine principal tribes — the Huron, Tobacco, Neutral, Erie, Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga and Seneca (the latter five tribes were known collectively as the Iroquois). Theirs was a fertile land where a mild climate provided ample time to plant and cultivate crops.