By 1500, a variety of Native American groups—each with a distinct culture—lived in North America. Many Americans today claim one or more of these cultures as part of their heritage.

**ONE AMERICAN’S STORY**

Many Native Americans today work to save their culture. Haida artist Bill Reid took part in this effort. When he was a teenager in the 1930s, few Haida artists were making totem poles or other Haida crafts. Reid began to learn about Haida arts from his grandfather. Reid studied Northwest Coast native arts and jewelry making. Soon he created gold jewelry with Haida designs and carved sculptures. When Reid died, his work was praised.

**A VOICE FROM THE PAST**

Canada has lost one of its greatest artists. A descendant of a lineage of great Haida artists . . . , Bill Reid revived an artistic tradition that had survived only in museum collections.

Dr. George MacDonald, at Bill Reid’s memorial service, March 24, 1998

Written records and people like Reid have preserved knowledge of the cultures that flourished in the Americas when Europeans arrived. This section explains the diversity of Native American groups in 1500.

**Native American Diversity**

By 1500, Native Americans had divided into hundreds of cultural groups, speaking perhaps 2,000 languages. One reason Native Americans were so diverse was that each group adapted to its own environment—whether subzero ice fields, scorching deserts, or dense forests.

Environment shaped each group’s economy, technology, and religion. **Technology** is the use of tools and knowledge to meet human needs. In some regions, Native Americans based their economy on farming. In others, they relied on hunting or fishing. Different environments caused technology to vary. In coastal areas, farmers made tools from shells. In
deserts, they used irrigation. Environment affected religion, too. Native Americans strongly believed that certain places were sacred—and that animals, plants, and natural forces had spiritual importance.

Although Native American groups had many differences, they all felt closely connected to nature, as shown in the following chant.

In addition, trade linked Native Americans. Trading centers developed across North America, especially at points where two cultures met.

**Peoples of the North and Northwest Coast**

The Aleut (uh•LOOT) and the Inuit (IHN•yoo•iht) were peoples of the far North. The Aleut lived on islands off Alaska, and the Inuit lived near the coast on tundra. **Tundra** is a treeless plain that remains frozen under its top layer of soil. Ice and snow cover the ground most of the year.

Because their climate was too cold for farming, the Inuit and Aleut were hunters. They paddled **kayaks**, small boats made of animal skins.
into icy seas to spear whales, seals, and walruses. They hunted these mammals for food, and they made seal and walrus skins into clothes. Some Inuit religious ceremonies honored the spirits of the whales and seals they caught. The Inuit also hunted such land animals as caribou. They made arrowheads and spear points from bones and antlers.

Farther south, Northwest Coast people also hunted sea mammals. But they mostly fished for salmon. Living by forests, Northwest Coast people used wood for houses, boats, and carved objects. They traded such coastal products as shells for items from the inland, such as furs.

Northwest Coast groups such as the Kwakiutl (kWAh•kee•OOT•uhl) and Haida had a special ceremony—the potlatch. Individuals would give away most or all of their goods as a way to claim status and benefit their community. They held potlatches to mark life events, such as naming a child or mourning the dead.

Peoples of the West

Unlike the Native Americans of the Northwest Coast, those of the West did not rely mainly on the sea. The peoples of the West included tribes in California, the Columbia Plateau, and the Great Basin. Much of the West is desert or is not suitable for farming. The people who lived there existed mainly by hunting and gathering.

The men hunted deer, elk, antelope, rabbits, and birds. They also fished, especially for salmon that swam up the western rivers. Women gathered such wild foods as nuts, seeds, and berries. Many western groups moved with the seasons to collect food.

The women of some western tribes became expert weavers. Pomo women wove beautiful baskets that they used to gather and store food. They wove some baskets tightly enough to be watertight.

The peoples of the West had strong spiritual beliefs, often linked to nature. Some held ceremonies to ensure a large food supply. Others held dances to ask for rain, for plant growth, and for good hunting. Still others believed that their religious leaders could contact the spirit world.

Peoples of Mexico

Far to the south, the Aztecs ruled a great civilization in what is now central Mexico. The origin of the Aztecs is unclear. They may have been hunters and gatherers like the Native Americans of the West. Sometime during the 1100s, they migrated into the Valley of Mexico.

In 1325, they began to build their capital city, Tenochtitlán (teh•NAWCH•tec•TLAHN), on islands in Lake Texcoco. Two things helped the Aztecs become a strong empire. First, they drained swamps and built an
irrigation system. This enabled them to grow plenty of food. Second, they were a warlike people who conquered most of their neighbors. The defeated people then had to send the Aztecs food and resources.

The Aztecs had a complex society. Rulers were the highest class. Priests and government workers ranked next. Slaves and servants were at the bottom. The Aztecs had elaborate religious ceremonies linked to their calendar and their study of the sun, moon, and stars. Many of their beliefs came from earlier Mesoamerican cultures.

The Aztecs' most important ritual involved feeding their sun god human blood. To do this, the Aztecs sacrificed prisoners of war by cutting out the person's heart while he was still alive. One reason the Aztecs fought so many wars was to capture prisoners to sacrifice.

**Peoples of the Southwest**

North of the Aztec, in what is now the American Southwest, lived the Pueblo people. Their ancestors were the ancient Hohokam and Anasazi. Like their ancestors, the Pueblo used irrigation to alter their desert region for farming. They lived in many-storied houses of adobe—dried mud bricks. These large buildings sometimes held an entire village.

Pueblo Indian farmers raised corn, beans, and squash. For meat, they hunted game and raised turkeys. Men did most of the farming, hunting, weaving, and building. Women ground the corn and cooked the food, repaired the adobe houses, and crafted pottery.

The Navajo and the Apache were nomadic, or wandering, hunter-gatherers who came to the region later than the Pueblo. For food, they relied mainly on game and on cactus, roots, and piñon nuts. Often, they traded these wild products for crops that the Pueblo had grown. Over time, the Navajo adopted farming and other Pueblo practices.

**Peoples of the Great Plains**

Farther north, the Great Plains is a flat grassland region stretching from the Mississippi River west to the Rocky Mountains. Today, most people think of Plains Indians on horseback, but originally they had no horses. The Spanish first brought horses to the Americas in the 1500s.

Some Plains groups were nomads. Others lived in villages by rivers, where land was easier to farm. In summer, entire villages set out to track bison. Hunting bison on foot was difficult, but Plains tribes used their environment to help them. Working together, the villagers stampeded the herd over a cliff, so the fall would kill or disable the animals. Plains Indians not only ate the bison's meat. They also made its hide into clothes and its bones into tools.
In winter such northern Plains groups as the Mandans and Pawnee lived in large circular lodges. Wooden beams held up the earthen walls. A hole at the top provided air, light, and an outlet for smoke from the fire. Buried partly underground, the earth lodge protected the people from the extreme cold and wind of the Plains climate.

The spiritual beliefs of Plains tribes varied. Some felt a close tie to regional animals such as the bison or plants such as corn. Some honored sacred places, such as the Black Hills of South Dakota and Wyoming. Many Plains tribes held a ceremony called the Sun Dance, which involved making a vow and asking the Creator for aid.

Peoples of the Southeast

The Southeast, which stretches from east Texas to the Atlantic Ocean, has mild winters and warm summers with plentiful rainfall. The long growing season led the Choctaw (CHAH•taw), Chickasaw (CHIH•uh•SAW), and other southeastern groups to become farmers. As many other Native Americans did, they grew corn, beans, squash, and pumpkins.

Women did most of the farming, while men hunted, fished, and cleared land. The men spent months in the forest tracking deer. In the Southeast, people traced their family ties through the women. Societies in which ancestry is traced through the mother are called matrilineal.

In southeastern villages, people gathered at a central square for public meetings and such religious ceremonies as the Green Corn Festival. Held once a year, this festival offered thanks for the corn harvest and also served as a kind of New Year’s celebration. People cleaned their houses, threw away old pots, and settled quarrels as a sign of a fresh start for the year.

Peoples of the Eastern Woodlands

Like the Southeast, the Northeast had plenty of fish, game, and rain. But the climate was colder with snowy winters. Forests covered much of the region, so it is called the Eastern Woodlands. Most of the people living there spoke either an Iroquoian or Algonquian language.
Like all Native Americans, the Iroquois learned to live in their environment. They hunted wild game. They adapted the forest for farming by using slash-and-burn agriculture. In slash-and-burn agriculture, farmers chopped down and then burned trees on a plot of land. The ashes from the fire enriched the soil. When a field’s soil became worn out, the farmer abandoned it and cleared a new field. The Iroquois lived in longhouses, bark-covered shelters as long as 300 feet. One longhouse held eight to ten families.

The Algonquin lived in wigwams, domelike houses covered with deerskin and slabs of bark. For protection, both the Iroquois and Algonquin surrounded their villages with high fences made of poles. Iroquois villagers often needed protection not only from the enemies of the Iroquois, but from each other. The Iroquois often raided neighboring villages for food and captives.

In the late 1500s, five northern Iroquois nations took the advice of a peace-seeking man named Deganawida. They stopped warring with each other and formed an alliance. This alliance of the Cayuga, Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, and Seneca was the Iroquois League. The League brought a long period of peace to the Iroquois. A council of leaders from each nation governed the League. They followed rules called the Great Law of Peace. The Iroquois were also a matrilineal society. If a leader did something wrong, the women of his clan could vote him out of office.

Across the Atlantic, the peoples of West Africa also adapted to their environment and engaged in trade. West Africa was the region from which most Africans were brought to the Americas. You will read about it in the next section.