The United States
A Brief Narrative History

Link Hullar
Scott Nelson

Third Edition
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The United States (front endpaper)
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In presenting this third edition of *The United States: A Brief Narrative History,* our intent remains to provide a basic, readable, affordable core text for the introductory survey of United States history. Most assuredly, the book is not designed as the only resource for students in such courses. Its length, approach, and price give an instructor the freedom to complement it with an abundance of supplemental books, research projects, and primary documents (many of which are now available on the Internet). With more than fifty years of combined teaching experience, from middle school through graduate seminars in history, we know there is a real and growing need for a book such as this. Increasingly we find that the average student is intimidated, overwhelmed, and drained financially by the massive texts that dominate the genre. Even so-called brief editions often weigh in at a thousand pages or more, leaving the reader lost in a maze of confusing—and expensive—information.

Needless to say, in order for this book to fulfill its mission, we had to leave a great deal out. In deciding what to include, we worked toward a cultural-literacy approach. Names, terms, and concepts with which an educated American should be familiar are highlighted. By no means, however, is this book a quasi-dictionary or almanac. Big ideas, major themes, important events, and basic facts are arranged in a chronological narrative that tells a lively story without talking down to the reader. As generalists, we have studiously avoided most controversies within the various specialties, ideologies, and schools of academic historians. Students who read this book can obtain the big picture of United States history, while each instructor may provide added depth and perspective by using supplemental material to emphasize particular interests or areas of expertise. As historians, we would be the first ones to object to the idea that our book tells the whole...
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story, but as teachers, we think such an approach works best for introductory students.

It’s staggering to contemplate how much has been added to the American story since the last edition of this book appeared in 2006. In addition to taking the narrative right up to the present, we have made corrections and changes in response to feedback from student readers and other instructors. We have also added new maps and, in an ongoing effort to make ours the most accessible U.S. survey available, re-edited the entire work with an eye toward simple—but by no means simplistic—and engaging language.

We have benefited greatly from the careful reading of Andrew J. Davidson, who shares our vision of an intelligent, readable, student-friendly text, and is an accomplished editor. We also appreciate the thousands of students who have passed through our classrooms over the years and sincerely hope this book will help many more in the future.

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Scott Nelson
The First Americans

Scientific and linguistic analysis suggests that the first people came to America some 15,000 to 25,000 years ago, during the last Ice Age. There was never a large or continuous migration of these early settlers to North America, the ancestors of the American Indians. Rather, they came to this continent in small hunting groups over a period of thousands of years. Archaeologists who have studied the early Indians’ material culture (pots, tools, weapons, and the like) estimate that the migrations ended less than five millennia ago. According to a recent calculation, the last migration, composed of Eskimo or Inuit groups, took place about 2500 B.C.

The Ice Age began long before the first human beings came to America. Scientists estimate that it started some 3 million years ago and ended about 10,000 years ago. During this period temperatures were so cold that the seas and oceans froze, the water turning into mile-thick glaciers. As the water froze and massive glaciers covered vast areas of the North American continent, global water levels dropped, sometimes by as much as hun-
hundreds of feet. The Bering Strait, which today separates northeastern Asia from northwestern North America, became a stretch of dry, wind-swept land hundreds of miles wide. Over this frigid Bering land bridge, also called Beringia, the first people evidently migrated from Asia to America.

The newcomers, after settling in present-day Alaska for a long time, slowly began to follow the game herds southward through the ice-free corridors along the slopes of the Rocky Mountains. They eventually passed below the southern edge of the glaciers into the present-day continental United States. Doggedly pressing forward toward the east, the west, and the south, humans eventually reached the southernmost part of the Western Hemisphere, present southern Chile and Argentina, by 8000 B.C.

The early Indians who migrated to the present-day United States encountered a comparatively uniform climate warmer than that of Alaska. Temperatures were mild and rainfall abundant. The land was covered by dense forests, tall grasses, numerous lakes and swamps, and lush plant life. The first Americans were hunters who used simple weapons and tools made of stone or wood to bring down prey like mammoths and mastodons, the giant animals of the Ice Age. They also hunted smaller game such as wolves, deer, elk, and rabbits. Between 25,000 B.C. and 8000 B.C., the early Indians, as they explored and settled the American continents, improved their technology by carving stones into sharp-pointed darts, which look similar to arrowheads. They attached some of these sharpened stones to the tips of wooden spears and used them as weapons for protection and hunting. Other stone tools served as knives to skin animals.

The Archaic Age

The Ice Age came to an end about 8000 B.C. As it did, the weather became warmer, the massive glaciers steadily melted, and North America’s climate changed as the weather patterns that we know today began to emerge. The eastern portion of what is today the continental United States remained humid and rainy. In the Southwest, however, dry plains and deserts began to appear. The great Ice Age animals, apparently incapable of adapting to the newer climate and environment, soon became extinct. The Indians of the Archaic Age, which lasted from about 8000 B.C. to 1200 B.C., had to
alter their way of life to survive in this changing environment. Compelled during this time of dramatic changes to look for new sources of food and to develop better technology, Archaic Indians met these challenges with remarkable ability.

Western Archaic Indians lived in a region that had become dry and barren, where animal and plant resources were in short supply. Life for them was hard and demanding as they had to move continuously to find enough food. Eastern Archaic Indians, on the other hand, had a far easier existence because they lived and developed cultures in a region full of forests and lakes. Fish, animals, and plants were plentiful, with the result that the population in the East grew much larger than that of the West.

Archaic Indians lived in small, mobile, extended-family groups. They began to use a variety of materials to make tools, weapons, and utensils. In addition to stone and wood, they now also crafted items from bone, horns, shells, hide, and copper. Archaic Indians became more than just hunters: they fished when possible; gathered edible items such as seeds, nuts, berries, and roots; and ascertained how to catch animals with nets, traps, and pits dug in the ground. To assist them with hunting and to help guard their camps, they began to train wolf pups, beginning the process of the domestication of dogs. They also learned how to use fire for cooking and for warmth.

The most important and far-reaching advancement Archaic Indians made, however, was farming, as they discovered how to adapt wild plants, such as corn, to home cultivation. Farming changed their way of life dramatically. Those people who learned how to grow crops no longer had to wander in search of food. For them, farming provided a more dependable source of food than had hunting and gathering alone. A more sedentary way of life became feasible.

Early Indians of the West

The spread of agriculture across the Southwest gave rise to three great early Indian cultures—Mogollon, Hohokam, and Anasazi.

Mogollon society developed first, sometime around 300 B.C. It was centered in the mountain region of southwestern New Mexico and eastern Arizona. The Mogollon were skilled craftspeople who made beautiful pottery and fine bows and arrows. They relied on hunting and gathering to supple-
ment the fruits of their new agricultural skills. Mogollon farmers raised corn, beans, and squash.

Hohokam society, located in present-day southern Arizona, relied principally upon crops for sustenance, but the predicament these people faced was that their land received little rainfall. Sustaining an agrarian way of life was enormously challenging due to the dry soil. To solve this problem, Hohokam farmers developed a system of irrigation for their land. Large work crews built and maintained a network of canals that directed floodwater and water from rivers like the Gila, Salt, and Santa Cruz to crops in their fields. The canals were almost six feet deep, thirty feet wide, and often ten miles long.

For recreation, the Hohokam people played a game similar to basketball on outdoor ball courts. Some courts were almost as large as modern football fields. Sometimes the game was played for more than recreation, also being used as a tool of diplomacy—a way to settle arguments between villages.

The last great early western culture was the Anasazi, or the “old ones.” The Anasazi lived in the four-corners region where the borders of the present states of Utah, Colorado, Arizona, and New Mexico meet. They were the ancestors of the modern Pueblo, Hopi, Zuni, and Tewa Indians. The Anasazi had the most advanced culture in the West during this period.

Anasazi settlements, peopled with skilled farmers and basketmakers as well as excellent designers and builders, were constructed high above river valleys along canyon walls. There, safely protected from their enemies, the Anasazi lived in tall, apartment-like buildings. Some of the buildings were five-stories high and contained up to 800 rooms. Ground-level dwellings were built without doors. The upper levels were reached by ladders that could be pulled up in case of an enemy attack. Within each building were a number of rooms in which family members lived, worked, and slept.

The Anasazi practiced the domestication of animals. They used dogs to guard their households, and they found that turkeys were easy to tame and breed as a food source. The Anasazi were a deeply religious people who believed in supernatural beings or spirits. In or near each settlement was a kiva, a circular underground building or room used for religious purposes. The Anasazi believed that spirits from within the earth could appear to them in the kiva. Only men were allowed to enter this sacred area.
The great Anasazi buildings were in use from about A.D. 900 to about A.D. 1300. We are not sure why they were abandoned. Perhaps the Anasazi came under assault from more aggressive Indians in the region and decided to relocate their settlements to a safer setting, such as on top of a mesa. It is clear that in some cases the Anasazi vacated their buildings quickly, because they left behind rooms filled with food, tools, and various personal articles.

Early Indians of the East

Three advanced cultures also emerged in the East during the same period. These eastern cultures were centered near the Mississippi, Missouri, and Ohio rivers. The Adena culture arose first, followed by the Hopewell and then the Mississippian cultures. Although these three cultures developed during different time periods between 800 B.C. and A.D. 1250, they shared many similar characteristics.

All three culture groups lived in large, permanent villages typically protected by earthen walls. All were skilled at making pottery, which they used to store food and other objects of value. They were able craftspeople who fashioned beautiful ornaments for both personal and ceremonial use. All three groups traded goods with other Indians who lived in distant places to the east and west. The Adena people secured their food principally through hunting. In contrast, the Hopewell and the Mississippian peoples relied more heavily on farming. Their chief crops were corn, beans, pumpkins, squash, and sunflowers.

What the Adena, Hopewell, and Mississippian peoples are best remembered for are their great ceremonial mounds. For this reason, the three societies are often referred to by a single name: the Mound Builders. Like many ancient peoples, the Mound Builders were sun worshippers, their religious beliefs and ceremonies focusing on death and an afterlife. Anthropologists and archaeologists believe that they built the huge mounds for religious purposes. Some mounds were hollow, serving as burial places. Valuable objects were often placed beside the bodies in the tombs. Other mounds were solid, earthen structures built high into the air. Sometimes temples were built on these solid mounds and used by priests for religious ceremonies.

Cahokia in western Illinois, the most sophisticated prehistoric site north of Mexico, had such an assortment of mounds. The city covered nearly six square miles and contained houses arranged in rows, around
open plazas, for its population of tens of thousands. Wooden stockade walls surrounded Cahokia, offering protection from attackers. Just west of that ancient city is a site now referred to as “Woodhenge.” Long ago tall vertical posts, arranged in a huge oval, lined up with the sun at certain times of the year and served Cahokians as a calendar for their civil and religious festivals, the agricultural cycle, or solar alignments like the solstices and the equinoxes.

Other groups of Mound Builders constructed earthen mounds in the shapes of animals, called effigy mounds. The Great Serpent Mound in Adams County, southwestern Ohio, for example, zigzags for 1,348 feet from tail to open jaws. It is the largest known serpent effigy in the United States.

The Mound Builder cultures prospered for well over a millennium. They began to vanish around 1250, or about 250 years before the coming of European explorers. Scholars are not sure why this happened. They do know that other, less-developed but more warlike Indian groups lived in the same region. The Mound Builders feared these hostile groups, taking great care to strengthen their villages against attack. It is possible that, in the end, the Mound Builders were unable to defend themselves and thus were destroyed. Other theories suggest that depletion of local resources, climate changes affecting crop production, or bitter arguments and infighting tore their societies apart, ultimately causing their downfall.

Variety and Indian Societies

It is a common belief that the Americas were thinly populated at the time the Europeans first explored and settled there. Actually, the opposite is true. In about 1500, at the time of Christopher Columbus’s voyages, the indigenous population numbered approximately 60 to 70 million people. This was larger than the population of the continent of Europe at that time. Comparatively, the nation of England, in the colonial era, had about 4 million inhabitants. About 7 to 12 million Indians lived north of the Rio Grande in what is today the United States and Canada. Another 25 million natives lived in Mexico and Central America. The rest, some 30–40 million people, lived on islands in the Caribbean Sea and in South America. Within a hundred years of colonial settlement, the Indian population declined drastically (perhaps 30 to 50 percent) due to the introduction of European diseases, especially smallpox. This undoubtedly contributed
to the common European perception that North America was sparsely populated by native peoples. One historian suggests that while many colonizers were confident that they were settling in a virgin land, they were in fact taking up residence in a *widowed land*.

The diffusion of native peoples across the American continents brought the parallel diffusion of native languages. Estimates of the number of Indian languages vary, but it is probable that as many as 300 different languages were spoken north of Mexico. These languages belong to at least a half-dozen different American Indian linguistic stocks, that is, stocks without a common origin. It is hypothesized that as many as 2,000 separate languages were spoken among the tribes of North and South America. These are languages, not dialects, nor are they variations of a single, universal Indian tongue. The Sioux, for example, spoke a language completely different from that of the Cheyenne of the same Great Plains region. Indian languages were as different from each other as were the English, French, and Spanish languages spoken by European explorers and settlers.

Indian political organization also took a wide variety of forms. The Plains Indians, for example, organized themselves into small tribal groups. Others, like the Indians of the Southeast, often organized into confederacies, or unions of independent groups or societies. Some, like the five tribes of the League of the Iroquois of New York State, were democratic in some of their governmental activities. The Natchez of Louisiana, on the other hand, lived in a theocracy ruled by religious leaders.

American Indian societies varied greatly not only in language and methods of government, but in culture and way of life. Many were farmers who grew a wide variety of crops. Others engaged in fishing or hunting. Still others combined hunting, gathering, and farming. The Indian societies living in what is now the United States can be divided into at least seven cultural areas, according to the geographic locales they occupied.

1. Eastern Woodland Indians lived in the great forests of the present-day northeastern United States, mainly east of the Mississippi River and north of Tennessee and North Carolina. They lived in permanent villages, their lifestyle based primarily on farming, but supplemented by hunting. Plenty of forests, fertile farmlands, lakes and rivers, and game allowed these people to develop stable, sedentary communities.

2. The Southeastern Indians lived south of the Eastern Woodland tribes, likewise developing stable, sedentary communities based on an agricultural
economy. Many tribes of this thickly populated region were organized into political confederacies.

3. The homeland of the Plains Indians was the central portion of the country, roughly between the Missouri River and the Rocky Mountains. Although some tribes were sedentary, the majority were roving bison hunters.

4. The Great Basin and Plateau Indians lived in the arid and semiarid lands between the Rocky Mountains on the east and the Sierra Nevada on the west. Because of the harsh environment, the region had only a small population. The Shoshone who lived there fished, hunted, and gathered. Plant and animal life were sparse, however, making life very difficult for these Indians.

5. The Indians of the Southwest made their homes in the desert areas of what is today Arizona, New Mexico, western Texas, and parts of Utah, Colorado, and northern Mexico. Many Southwest Indians lived in villages, some on top of high mesas, and their homes were made of adobe, or sun-dried bricks. Most who lived in the pueblos were farmers. Other groups were hunters and gatherers.

6. The lands along the Pacific coast were home for people called the California Indians. They enjoyed a temperate climate and plenty of food—acorns, game, fish, fowl, and various wild plants. California Indians prospered in a land of plenty.

7. Finally, the Northwest Coast Indians lived along the Pacific coast in the area of northern California, Oregon, and western Washington. They relied primarily on salmon and halibut fishing, as well as seal hunting for their food supply. Northwest Coast Indians were skilled at working with wood. They crafted beautifully carved totem poles. They also fashioned wooden boats—used for fishing and warfare—that were as long as 60 feet.

By looking at these groups—Eastern Woodland, Great Plains, and Southwestern Indians—one can see the extensive variety more clearly.

**Eastern Woodland Indians**

The northeastern section of the country was covered by dense forests, its rolling hills and valleys well-supplied by lakes, rivers, and streams. The region was crossed by a network of natural waterways connecting the Atlantic to the Great Lakes and the Ohio River Valley. Except in the northernmost
regions, the rich soil and temperate climate made it suitable for intensive agriculture. Wild animals, such as bison, bear, and deer, roamed freely, providing sustenance for the inhabitants. Birds and wild plants were also in abundance, and the waterways teemed with several species of fish.

On the whole Eastern Woodland Indians were farmers and hunters. Some also fished and conducted intertribal trade. Two linguistic groups dominated the region: the **Algonquian** and the **Iroquois**. Although most tribes spoke Algonquian languages (like the Shawnee, Delaware, and Miami), many Iroquois-speaking people penetrated Algonquian territory and lived in its central region. These Iroquois settled in Upper New York State, in Pennsylvania, and along the shores of the eastern Great Lakes.

The Algonquians of the Eastern Woodlands depended only partly on farming for survival. While they established villages and farm fields on rich land along rivers, they occupied these villages only during the growing season. After the harvest, the Algonquians left their summer villages and separated into smaller winter hunting bands. For summer travel, the Algonquians used birch bark canoes, which were light and efficient. In winter, they used snowshoes to travel or pursue animals. Algonquians lived in wigwams, bark-covered lodges with rounded roofs and wooden frames.

The Iroquois of present Upper New York State were aggressive warriors who raided westward against their political (native) enemies and fur-trading rivals, usually Algonquians but also other Iroquois-speaking peoples like the Erie. The New York Iroquois claimed dominion over many tribes and established a virtual monopoly of the beaver trade in lands that are now Ohio and Indiana. Their strength also came from uniting to form a political confederation: five separate Upper New York Iroquois tribes (the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca) united in the 1500s to form the Haudenosaunee, or **League of the Iroquois**. This powerful alliance, its leaders skillfully employing the might that political, military, and diplomatic unity provided, dominated much of the present northeastern United States until the American Revolution.

The League of the Iroquois was ruled by a council of fifty **sachems**, or leaders, from among the five tribes. The council ruled only on affairs that affected the five member tribes collectively, and it had no say over the internal affairs of each member tribe. Women had political influence, and their views were respected in the Iroquois League. Sachems were always male,
but women within each member tribe always selected the successor of a sachem who had died.

The name *Iroquois* means “the People of the Longhouse.” As their name suggests, they lived in long, wooden, rectangular lodges with rounded edges. Longhouses were community dwellings housing up to twenty families and located in large towns, frequently protected by stockade walls. In many cases, hundreds of acres of cultivated farm land surrounded a town. Although the fields were cleared of trees and brush by the men, women did the farming.

**Indians of the Great Plains**

The Great Plains straddle the center of the nation. This is a vast region of grasslands stretching north to south from mid-North Dakota down to Texas and east to west from the Mississippi River to the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. The plains are treeless except for the river valleys. Enormous herds of bison and antelope once grazed there, and other game—deer, elk, rabbits, grizzly bears—were plentiful as well.

Two different Indian groups lived on the Great Plains. Sedentary farming peoples, like the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara, occupied the timbered Missouri River valley and some of its major tributaries on the eastern plains. The plains farmers lived in large, permanent villages with circular houses built of poles and heavy timber covered with a thick layer of dirt. The dirt covering served as excellent insulation during the winter months. The earthen lodges were large, measuring thirty to fifty feet in diameter, and housed as many as forty people.

Some two dozen nomadic bison-hunting societies, collectively referred to as the **Plains Indians**, dominated the remainder of the region. The *Dakota*, or Sioux, controlled the northeastern portion of the plains. The powerful Cheyenne and Arapahoe, long each others’ comrades and allies, ranged widely over the central plains. Across the Arkansas River to the south lived their traditional enemies: the Kiowa and the Comanche. The Comanche, the dominant tribe on the southern plains, was also the most populous, with seven thousand members. The Plains Indians were expert hunters, daring warriors, and, after Europeans introduced horses to America, superb riders. Their highly specialized way of life centered on two animals: bison, which were native to the plains, and domesticated horses, which were not.
The enormous herds of bison found throughout the region became the dietary staple of the mounted Plains Indians. The animals also supplied most of their material needs. Clothing, robes, moccasins, saddles, teepee walls, bedding, water vessels, and boats were made of bison hide. The hooves were made into glue, horns carved into cups and spoons, and tendons made into bowstrings, cord, and trail ropes for the horses. Their dried manure, called “buffalo chips,” was used for fuel, and their stomachs were fashioned into water bottles. The bison-hunting tribes had little need for permanent homes, using the tepee, a portable cone-shaped tent, for shelter. The Indians built a fire in the center of the tepee and placed their beds on the ground around it. Tepees were always made, erected, and maintained by the women of a tribe.

The use of the horse transformed Indian life on the Great Plains, especially with regard to food gathering. Before the introduction of the horse by Spanish explorers, Indians lived a meager life, always near the brink of want. They traveled and hunted on foot, which was slow, tedious, and difficult. The horse changed these conditions forever, allowing Indians to move rapidly over the immense reaches of the Great Plains, traveling and hunting in rhythm with the movement of the great bison herds. The horse also turned the Plains Indians into formidable, highly-mobile fighters—the best light cavalry in the world, as one American soldier put it. Becoming skilled and respected warriors was important to the males of Plains Indian tribes, and it was necessary for warriors to establish a record of battle feats to earn the respect of tribal members and merit positions of leadership. Tribes gave warriors recognition for taking the scalp of or killing an enemy. Those warriors exposing themselves to the greatest danger in such endeavors received the greatest honors. For example, a warrior received great honor if he touched a live enemy in battle without receiving any wounds himself.

Indians of the Southwest

The Southwest has a desert climate, with little rainfall. Most Indians there lived harsh lives, relying on gathering wild vegetation—berries, nuts, fruits, roots, seeds—but hunting when game was available. One group of Southwestern Indians, however, used agriculture successfully.

The Pueblo Indians lived in villages with stone and adobe apartment-like dwellings. Today thirty such dwellings remain in Arizona and New Mexico.