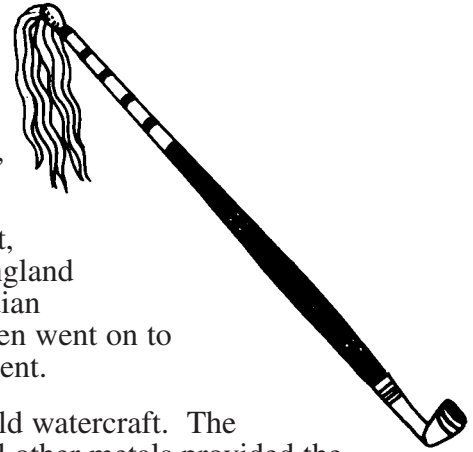


Native American Contributions to American Culture

Americans owe a much larger debt to the American Indians than most of them realize. Almost every aspect of American life has been influenced by the first peoples of America. They have helped to shape the destiny of modern man in such diverse areas of life as agriculture, government, religion, trade, mythology, literature, economics, and arts and crafts.



When the white man first landed on the North American Continent, the Indian supplied him with food. Those early settlers in New England probably would not have survived their first winter had not the Indian people taught them how to use native foods. The Indian people then went on to teach whites how to fish, hunt, and plant foods native to the continent.

The natives helped the newcomers travel over Indian trails and build watercraft. The Indians supplied the whites with furs for clothing. Indian gold and other metals provided the economic means for funding European and American armies, navies, and courts. Americans also owe to the Indians many of the social and political ideas they consider most “American,” such as the individual liberties and personal freedoms which are spelled out in the U.S. *Constitution*.

Almost half the crops now grown for the world’s food supply were first grown by the Indians. Corn and potatoes were not known to the white man until he came to North America. Among the other foods first grown and/or harvested by the Indians were pumpkins, pineapples, avocados, cacao for chocolate, and many kinds of beans. Cotton was first grown and made into fabrics by the Indians. Many modern medicine sources are native to North America, as well.

American Indian inventions commonly used around the world today include canoes, snowshoes, moccasins, hammocks, kayaks, ponchos, rubber syringes, dog sleds, toboggans, and parkas. Many Indian designs and Indian games have added to American life. Thousands of names for cities, states, lakes, mountains, rivers, and other geographical sights are Indian names. Some words originally Indian include wigwam, succotash, tobacco, chipmunk, skunk, opossum, tomahawk, moose, mackinaw, hickory, pecan, raccoon, cougar, woodchuck, hominy, and hundreds more. Common expressions coming from the Indian include war paint, Indian file, bury the hatchet, paleface, warpath, big chief, and Indian summer.

Although often misinterpreted, Indian mythology and folklore have contributed much to literature, music, art, drama, dance, movies, and television programs. The mythology and folklore of the American Indian is rich and rooted in the past. Only now are non-Indians recognizing the history and vibrancy of this heritage and its importance. The stories of the American Indians explained the universe and how people came to be. They told the way people should behave and how they should worship. The Indians’ entire religious, social, and political lives were laid out in their beliefs and mythology.

Indian stories told of creation and of a time before the humans came, and they are as rich and varied as the stories of ancient Greece and Sumeria. There are many reasons in today’s modern, “civilized” world, with its water and air pollution, crime, and breakdown of the family, to look back on the Indian beliefs and see in them a wisdom which is eternal.

Other aspects of modern life have also been influenced by Indians. The Boy Scout and Girl Scout movements had their beginnings in Indian life, and only now are non-Indians beginning to realize the need to return to some of the Indian ideas of how land should be used. The whole conservation and ecology movement stems from Indian ideas about nature, and we now know what the Indians knew long ago, that the babies yet to be born have a claim on the land which is equal to our own. We are learning to revere the land, and we know that to “conquer” the land destroys much of what we need for survival.

Native American Contributions to American Culture *(cont.)*

One of the most important ways in which Americans were influenced by the Indians was through the Iroquois Confederacy, from which they took many ideas for government and outlined them in the *Constitution of the United States*. In 1754, long before the United States gained its independence as a nation, Benjamin Franklin proposed a union of colonies similar to that of the Iroquois Confederacy, and in time the structure of the Confederacy indirectly influenced the makers of the *Constitution*. The ways in which the Senate and House of Representatives work out bills in compromise sessions, for example, stems from the ways the Confederacy worked toward the consensus of its members.

Quite possibly the belief most Americans hold most precious is the right to individual freedom. This American belief in individual dignity and individual freedom came, at least in part, from the beliefs of many Indians. In most tribes, an individual was free to be himself, as long as that did not hurt others, even to the extent of being able to leave a battle to do what he thought right or to go his own way in other things. An example of this is in the following situation.

The ideal of manhood was to be a good warrior and hunter. A young man generally could not hope to gain high status in the tribe otherwise; however, he was not coerced into being a warrior or hunter if he did not wish to be one. This even applied to the man who chose to do the work normally done by women or who chose to wear women's clothing.

Pretty-shield, wife of the Custer scout, Goes-ahead, told of one such man in her tribe when she was a young woman. He enjoyed doing women's work and wearing women's clothing, but he was also a brave warrior. When the Crows fought with another tribe, he wore men's clothing in battle, because if he was killed he did not want the enemy to find him hiding behind women's clothing. During peacetime, however, he was free to dress and work the way he wished, and the tribe accepted him as he was. By the same token, women sometimes became warriors.

American lives have been enriched in many ways, not only by the land on which they live, but more so by the people who "met the boat" when the Europeans came, the American Indians. Their lives, beliefs, and accomplishments have contributed many of the best parts of what has come to be the United States.

To gain an understanding of just how much is owed to the Indians, do the following activities.

Activities

1. Imagine that the Americas truly were "new" lands as the early settlers said they were, and that no Indians were there to meet the Europeans when they came to the continent. On the back of this paper, write a description of what the land would now be like without the influence of the native people. Also write how the lives of the people would be different. Consider, for example, such things as the American holiday of Thanksgiving and the U.S. *Constitution*.
2. In each of three columns labeled respectively "Plants," "Arts and Crafts," and "Ideas and Concepts," list some American Indian contributions to American life.

