

NATIVE AMERICAN CONQUEST



**Native American Conquest:
Background, Trail Brief and
Florida Landing**

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Native America's Background

By Donald E. Sheppard and Jeremiah Wolfe, Cherokee

In the heart of the Great Smoky Mountains live a people whose ancestors came to America thousands of years before Columbus. We call them Cherokee Indians. Their ancestors followed large animals over a land bridge from Asia when the seas had frozen into glaciers during the last Ice age, making the oceans shallow. Clans hunted large animals with stone-tipped spears then roasted meat over fires in coastal caves and rustic abodes. Hides were used for clothing, shoes and blankets. Clans moved down the shorelines with the animals and gathered wild fruits and vegetables along the way. Fire was carried from place to place. Fish were caught and seashells were used for knives, tools and utensils. Colorful feathers, gems and shells were strung with animal hide and worn for tribal identity.

When the climate turned warmer, the glaciers melted, the oceans rose, smaller animals prevailed and people moved inland with the oceans. Tropical currents flowed into the Gulf of Mexico, causing rains that kept the Mississippi River, America's largest, full year-round. Fish

and migratory animals ate the foods that grew near that river's bottomlands and thousands of people settled along it and its feeder streams. As the climate became warmer, people fanned farther up that giant river into the mountains. Various tribes gathered to form villages to protect themselves from others and wild animals. Some of them fished, others hunted, some made blankets and clothes from plants and animals, while others gathered wild fruits and vegetables. Pottery was made from clay and seeds were planted in fertile places along the rivers. Houses were made with wood and covered to keep them dry. Fireplaces were built and used to smoke fish and meat for the winter. Crops were gathered and stored in dry places.

Villages united into networks bordered by natural barriers. Dugout canoes were invented and networks enlarged into nations of people who shared certain customs and gestures. Culture grew rapidly with the exchange of news, foods, clothing, metals and art. The Cherokee Indians, the upper Tennessee River people, became one of the nations residing along the Great River system - the Mississippi and all of its giant tributaries. Other nations were forming along the Great River's other tributaries: the Ohio, the Missouri, the Arkansas and the Red Rivers. Trade was conducted along the Great River from the Rocky

Mountains to the Appalachians and down to the Gulf of Mexico. Large cities grew where the big tributaries merged. Indian economy focused into the heartland of the continent, with Illinois at the center of trade, not outward across the seas, as was the habit of European nations at the time Columbus discovered America.

The Cherokee Indians lived along the Tennessee River in the Appalachian Mountains. They thrived in the bottomlands from Virginia southward. They built their houses in villages, much like early American settlers did. Villages were separated by day-long walks, houses were built of wood and stone, fields were planted, nuts and berries were gathered, game was cured and tobacco was smoked. The Cherokee people adhered to high ethical standards. "Fire," the center of life, became the Cherokee word for "home."

Rivers between the Cherokees' Smoky Mountains were fed by creeks running from all directions, but flowed north and west into the Great River. A network of roads followed those rivers and streams to connect Cherokee villages. Steep mountain gaps limited routing choices so Cherokee roads converged at certain gaps, just as roads do today in those mountains.

Village chieftains lead and represented their people to the tribe as a whole. They and their people used the

roads to trade and compete with other villages. They continued to grow and flourish well after Columbus discovered America, but when Hernando DeSoto followed their roads into their villages in 1540, everything changed.

DeSoto brought foreign diseases, horses, whips, swords and vicious dogs to America; he took women, food and slaves as he went. Interior North America withstood the onslaught to become the only place in the New World that Spain never colonized. Spain reacted by blaming American Indians for DeSoto's defeat. They conceived a prejudice against Indians that others acquired. Our image of the Devil, a "Red Man with a Spear," was born when DeSoto died in America. It differs substantially from all previous Old World "Devil" concepts. It was used to symbolize the American Indians who resisted European settlement of North America. DeSoto devastated America's Indians with foreign diseases; his people crippled the survivors with an enduring prejudice. The Cherokee, one of the only tribes still living where DeSoto found them in 1540, remember his legacy all too well.

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