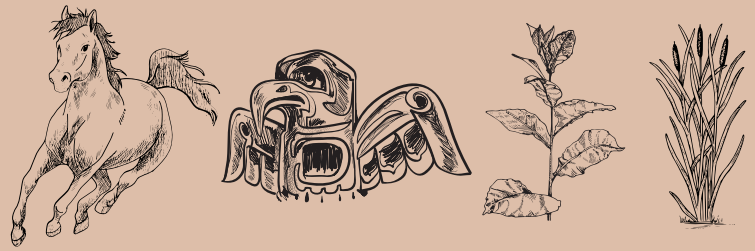


# SIMILAR, BUT NOT THE SAME: MAKING SENSE OF NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURAL DIFFERENCES



When you hear the term “Native American,” what type of homes come to mind? Many people picture a conical tent, known as a tipi, while others picture a bark structure called a wigwam. As a matter of fact, although Native Americans today live in houses and apartments, tipis and wigwams are two types of traditional homes that Native Americans lived in. The fact that different Native Americans lived in different types of homes shows that there were, and still are, differences between different Native American groups. While there are many reasons why people might choose to do things differently in different areas, many of the differences in Native American traditions are the result of access to different types of resources in different regions of North America.

So what do we mean by “region,” and how have they affected Native American cultures and traditions? From rolling plains to great swathes of forest land, to deserts and tundras, the continent of North America is wide and vast in both climate and landscapes. In order to make sense of these differences, we divide the continent into different sections based on the weather patterns and resources that are usually found in a certain area, or region. Over thousands of years, the Native people of North America adapted to the specific lands that they lived on, using the different resources that existed around them to survive, make things, and pass down knowledge to future generations.

Let’s take a look at some specific examples of how the different regions of North America affected how different groups of Native Americans traditionally lived. We’ll start with the region where our museum is located: the Eastern Woodlands.

## THE EASTERN WOODLANDS

The Eastern Woodlands covers most of the Northeastern United States, including what we now call New England and the Midwest, as well as parts of Ontario and Quebec. This region has a temperate climate, which means that the weather can change a lot from season to season. Sometimes it can be quite hot and sometimes it can be quite cold. Also, as you might guess from the name, there are many forests in the Eastern Woodlands (and there were even more hundreds of years ago). These forests provided many resources for the Native peoples of this region.



Their houses took the forms of either wigwams or longhouses, built from tree bark and saplings. These homes were built with four different seasons in mind. In the colder months, low entrances kept the heat from a central fire in and reed or cornstalk mats could be woven together to create insulation. Additionally, these homes could stand the weight of snow if it piled on top. If it rained, reed mats would soak up water keeping those living inside dry. If it grew too hot, bark could be shifted around or removed and reed mats would provide some natural air conditioning!

The varying seasons also meant that different resources were available throughout the year. As such, some animals could only be hunted in the right weather conditions, particular plants could only be found during certain seasons, and specific activities, such as growing a garden, could only be done at specific times of the year. Nonetheless, by planning ahead and keeping track of the change in seasons, the inhabitants of this region could survive in very different types of weather, allowing villages of a few dozen to a few hundred people to form. Plus, by using dugout or birchbark canoes, the inhabitants of the Eastern Woodlands were able to travel the many rivers to trade with other groups for resources not found in their location.

## THE SOUTHEAST

Such lifeways would not work so well in other parts of North America. For instance, in the Southeast, which covers the southern United States and areas of Northeastern Mexico, there is a humid subtropical climate. This means it is generally hot and there is a lot of moisture in the air. This difference in climate created different resources and needs for the people living in this region compared to those north of them. The people of this area grew corn, beans, squash, tobacco, and other crops, and had a longer growing season. Due to the warm weather, there was also a wide variety of wild edible plants, fish, shellfish, and animals to be found in this area.



While some groups in this region also lived in wigwams, others preferred earth-berm dwellings. Such homes were usually built near giant mounds made of dirt, which were carved into the landscape by Native people in this region thousands of years ago. Another type of home in this region is the Chickee of the Seminole, which is made of wooden poles with a grass roof. This type of home was most often used in the 1800s, during a time when the US government was trying to move many of the Native groups in the Southeast, including the Seminole, to different locations. The Chickee could be quickly taken down if the group had to flee or move to a new location.

There are many reasons why this removal of Native Americans in the Southeast took place, but part of it was because this region had such abundant resources, as well as a good climate and soil for growing crops. The example of the Chickee also shows how differences in cultures can come about for other reasons than climate and access to resources. In other words, geography is only one of the reasons why different groups of people, including different Native Americans, have different ways of life.

## THE PLAINS

Nonetheless, regional differences in North America certainly had an effect on Native American cultures over time, as can be seen even more clearly as our study of these cultures moves westward across the continent. For instance, life on the Plains was quite different to life in the two eastern regions. The Plains refers to the wide open grassland and prairies of the United States and Canada in the central part of the continent. If you’ve ever been to Kansas, Oklahoma, the Dakotas or Saskatchewan, you’ve been to the Plains.



Remember that word temperate? Like the Eastern Woodlands, the Plains also have a temperate climate, but it is much drier than the east coast and there are far fewer forests. The landscape is generally much flatter, too. Buffalo and deer were key to the Native people of this region. Indeed, the tipis that many people picture when they think of Native Americans were mostly used in this region. This is because tipis are created from the hide of the large buffalo herds that roam these landscapes. Tipis are also ideal housing for a nomadic lifestyle, which is one where people frequently move around, because tipis can be taken down and set up again in different locations as the group follows the migration of animal herds. Because of this nomadic lifestyle, over time, many of the tribes in this region developed a close connection to horses that was key to travelling the wide open landscapes of this region.

## THE SOUTHWEST

The Southwest region is made up of large portions of what we now call Arizona, New Mexico, as well as parts of southern California, western Texas and Northwestern Mexico. This region has a semi-arid to arid climate, meaning it is very dry with several deserts. While it is often very hot, there is snowfall in the mountains of this region.



As with other regions, the houses built in the Southwest region depended on the specific culture of the builders, although what they could build was based on the resources they had. For example, the Hopi peoples built apartment-like houses of adobe (dried mud and plant fibers) and stone masonry, while the Navajo built round houses called Hogans. Others, like the Apache, Yuma, and Pima of the Tohono O’odham built thatched houses or brush shelters. In many cases, these communities had to develop creative ways to farm because of the dry climate, sometimes choosing to plant varieties that could go longer periods without rain, other times planting their crops in river valleys that would flood from time-to-time. The primary crops grown were corn, beans, and squash, also known as the Three Sisters.

## THE NORTHWEST COAST

The close proximity to the Pacific Ocean and to the great temperate rainforests are primary characteristics of this next region. The Northwest Coast covers the Northwest corner of the United States, British Columbia in Canada, and parts of Alaska. In this region, the Pacific Ocean was a main source of the resources and the cultural practices, and even appears in much of the imagery and art of the people in this region. The Ocean provided abundant and reliable supplies of salmon and other fish, sea mammals, shellfish, birds, and wild edible plants.



Another feature of this region is a wet and cool climate that supports the growth of large evergreen trees. From these trees, these cultures would craft wood carvings, totem poles, large and seaworthy watercraft, plank houses, and something known as potlatch trays. The potlatch, a feast associated with the bestowal of lavish gifts, is the most widely known cultural event of this region, surviving decades of attempts by Non-Native governments to destroy the practice.



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