

Fast Facts about American Indians

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By the numbers: According to the U.S. Census Bureau, as of July 1, 2004, there were approximately 4.4 million American Indians/Alaska Natives in the United States. They made up 1.5 percent of the total population. According to the 2000 Census, the largest tribal groups nationwide included the Cherokee, Navajo, Choctaw, Sioux, and Chippewa. More than 729,000 people claimed at least some Cherokee ancestry. The estimated number of residents age five or older speaking a Native North American language at home at that time was 381,000. (The most common language: Navajo.) See pages 21–23 for some North Carolina data.

What’s in a name? “Indian” was the name that fifteenth-century Italian explorer Christopher Columbus wrongly gave to the people he encountered when he arrived in what he believed was the “Indies,” or part of Asia, but actually was the Americas. In the 1960s, the name “Native American” was introduced to eliminate confusion between people from the country of India and the native people of the Americas. “American Indian” has been used for the same purpose. Some have viewed the use of “Indian” in any form as insulting and related to stereotypes. Native American, seen as more respectful by some, became seen as too generic, bureaucratic, or tied to the government by others. Other terms such as “indigenous people of North America” and “Amerindians” have been used.

In 1995 a U.S. Census Bureau survey of preferences for racial and ethnic terms indicated that 49 percent of Native people preferred being called American Indian (the term used by the N.C. Commission of Indian Affairs); 37 percent preferred Native American; 3.6 percent preferred another term; and 5 percent had no preference.

On the menu: American Indians introduced many food items to early European settlers, including pumpkin, succotash, corn, chili, squash, several kinds of beans, peas, and sunflower seeds. They taught settlers the drying process used to preserve foods and make things such as raisins, and taught them new ways to hunt and fish, as well as medicinal cures for some illnesses. To catch prey such as deer, bears, wild turkeys, rabbits, and squirrels, early American Indians in what is now North Carolina used methods like hunting with spears, bows and arrows, or blowguns, and trapping. They fished in many different ways. Most lived in longhouses made of materials such as wood and reeds, rather than tipis. Today, of course, Indians get their food, live, work, and dress like other Americans do.

Ready to wear: American Indians introduced colonists to clothing such as moccasins and ponchos, as well as to cotton, which is used to make many clothes today. Much of early Indians’ clothing was made from deer skins. (Indians in different areas at varied times had different ways of dressing. In the eighteenth century, for example, many Cherokee women wore skirts made from the inner bark of mulberry trees.) Women and

men often wore earrings, necklaces, and bracelets fashioned from copper, shells, bone, and stone beads.

The word: Many common English words have American Indian origins. These include bayou, chipmunk, hickory, hominy, pecan, squash, toboggan, and tomahawk.

Devastating effects: By some estimates, in the span of about 150 years after the arrival of Europeans, as much as 95 percent of the American Indian population died out from diseases for which they had built up no immunity—such as smallpox and measles.