

## Native American Origin and Creation Stories

THE ORAL LITERATURE OF Native Americans includes poems, songs, and stories, many of which existed centuries before the arrival of the earliest European explorers in the late-fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Although the Europeans could not comprehend it, the Native American societies they encountered had long, dynamic, and complex histories. There were multiple civilizations in existence throughout the Americas. Even the more limited boundaries of what is today the continental United States

### ▲ Secotan Village

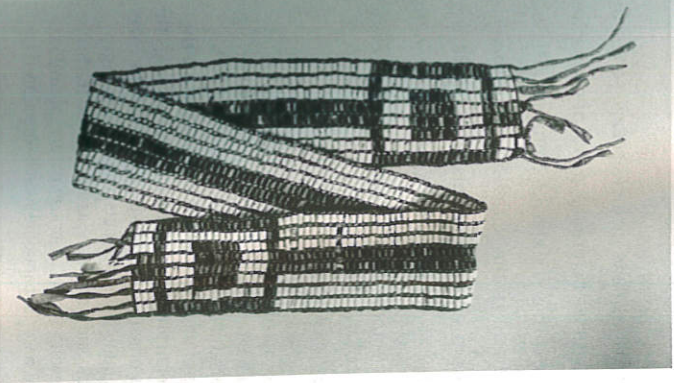
This engraving by Theodor de Bry was copied from a drawing by John White, an English artist who visited the village of Secotan on the coast of present-day North Carolina in 1585. White notes on the original that the building marked A at the lower left was a tomb where the bodies of important leaders were kept, while the fire burning at B was “the place of solemn prayer.” In addition to the dwellings lining the central space, where men and women ate, the drawing illustrates the careful management and use of land. Men hunt deer on the outskirts of the village, whose crops include tobacco, pumpkins, and sunflowers, as well as corn in three stages of growth. White’s idealized drawing depicts a world of natural abundance and social harmony, religion and peace, a world that would soon be disrupted by invaders from England.

contained enormous diversity. Native American peoples ranged from the Iroquois Confederacy of tribes in the Northeast to the Cherokee in the Southeast, from the Akimel O'odham (Pima) in the Southwest to ancient tribes like the Hupa on the West coast and several groups that came to be called the Sioux in the upper Mississippi valley and on the Great Plains. Native American peoples were divided among many tribes and bands, spoke literally hundreds of mutually unintelligible languages, and lived under a wide variety of political and social organizations. Some subsisted by hunting, fishing, and gathering nuts, seeds, and berries, while many others were farmers living in villages and towns, especially in the Northeast and Southeast. Still others lived in urban centers in the middle of the continent, where the great Mississippian culture lasted for nearly nine hundred years, as well as in the Southwest, where many tribes built complex cities and developed extensive irrigation systems for their crops.

Native American peoples were also culturally diverse in ways that were difficult for European explorers to understand or value. In contrast to Christianized Europe, a wide variety of religious and mythological beliefs flourished throughout the Americas. Although there were no written languages that Europeans could fully comprehend, Native Americans had developed various forms of writing, including Incan *quipus* (knotted cords), Mayan hieroglyphics, and the wampum belts used by the Iroquois.

#### Iroquois Wampum Belt

Wampum belts, made of beads acquired through trade with coastal tribes in the Northeast, were used by the Iroquois to commemorate events, record beliefs, and seal agreements. This wampum belt represents an alliance between two peoples, symbolized by the straight path running between its two outer bands.



But the primary vehicle for the preservation of culture was spoken language, through which poems, songs, and stories were passed down from generation to generation. Storytelling was a central feature of communal life, a principal way in which Native American peoples provided entertainment, educated their young, and transmitted their traditions. European explorers and missionaries, who were emissaries of an increasingly pervasive print culture, consequently tended to view Native American societies and religions as simple and unsophisticated. They also misunderstood the names of and distinctions among various tribes and groups. For example, when the Spanish missionaries encountered tribes in the southern part of present-day Arizona, they named them the "Pima," a corruption of the tribe's word for "no," which the missionaries mistook for a proper noun. Later, the French used the word *Sioux*, their rendering of an Ojibwa word meaning enemies or "treacherous snakes," as the collective name for three large nations with different cultures and dialects. The loosely constructed group that came to be known as the Sioux called themselves names that signified allies or an alliance of friends: the Dakota, the Lakota, and the Nakota.

At the same time, some of the early explorers attempted to learn Native American languages and record the stories they heard. One of the first was Gabriel Sagard, a French missionary and early ethnographer who visited New France, as the French colony in present-day eastern Canada was called, in 1623-24. Sagard studied the Huron language and even prepared a dictionary for missionaries to use. He also transcribed and translated a version of a creation story that he learned from the Hurons, which Sagard published in an account of his journey, *Le Grand Voyage du Pays des Hurons* (1632). Sagard's book anticipated the way in which much Native American lore would be preserved. Because the societies themselves were being systematically destroyed, the primary means of preserving vestiges of their oral heritages was through transcription and translation into European languages.

In what became the United States, however, the effort at preservation did not begin in earnest until the nineteenth century, when Native Americans and their rich cultures were being erased from the landscape and memory of the nation. The texts of many ancient narratives were consequently first published at a comparatively late date, and translations of such works continue to appear in print. Both Native Americans and European Americans have participated in the effort to record the history, mythology, and narrative traditions of the Indians. Among the first Native Americans who sought to preserve oral culture in print was David Cusick, a Tuscarora who published *Sketches of the Ancient History of the Six Nations* in 1827. Another important figure who spurred the emerging interest in Native American culture and history was Henry Rowe Schoolcraft (1793-1864), a federal agent of Indian affairs for the Great Lakes region



**Gabriel Sagard, *Le Grand Voyage du Pays des Hurons* (1632)**

As the title page of his book indicates, Sagard offers an overview of Huron culture and a review of missionary efforts in New France. The book includes one of the earliest translations of a Native American oral story, as well as a dictionary of the Huron language.



who married the half-Ojibwa daughter of a fur trader and learned both the language and much of the lore of her tribe. His wife, Jane Johnston Schoolcraft (1800–1841), was one of the first Native Americans to write short stories based on Indian lore, while Schoolcraft himself published over twenty books about Indian history, customs, and language, notably his *Historical and Statistical Information Respecting . . . the Indian Tribes of the United States* (6 vol., 1851–57).

Throughout the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries, hundreds of other anthropologists and historians also attempted to preserve the oral traditions of Native Americans. Versions of the same story often differed dramatically. By its very nature, an oral tradition is evolutionary and adaptive, so stories inevitably change from generation to generation. Moreover, different tellers shaped stories in various ways, while individual interpreters imposed their own cultural beliefs on the stories they transcribed and translated. Differences in language presented additional obstacles to these

early interpreters, since there was no English equivalent for many of the concepts and words in Native American languages. In the Lakota story included here, “*Wotpe* and the Gift of the Pipe,” for example, the term *wakan* has often been translated as “holy,” especially by missionaries eager to put a Christian spin on a narrative. But the term actually has a much more complicated meaning, blending the concepts of both mystery and power. Finally, the force and meaning of many Native American poems, songs, and stories depends on oral performance, which is difficult to capture on the printed page, especially in translation. Indeed, crucial elements of oral performance—the expressions and gestures of the speaker, the rhythms and sounds of the original language, and both the physical and cultural context in which the story is told—are quite literally lost in translation into English and onto the printed page.

When making the effort to study and understand Native American oral literature, we consequently must accept the fact that the record is fragmentary and often problematic. The following stories, taken from several geographical locations, are intended as examples of the kinds of indigenous origin and creation stories that were a part of the multiple cultures in existence at the time of the first explorations of what Europeans thought of as a “new” world. The narratives presented here include accounts of the beginning of the world, the creation of natural phenomena, the history of ritual objects and sacred places, and the origin of ceremonies and cultural traditions. Each offers at least a glimpse of the richness and complexity of the earliest literature of North America.

## Iroquois Confederacy

The people known as the Iroquois originally lived in a large area of present-day New York State, east of the Hudson River and south of the St. Lawrence River. At the time of the first European explorations of the area around 1600, there were approximately 20,000 people in the political union of the five tribes of the Iroquois Confederacy: the Cayuga, Mohawk, Seneca, Oneida, and Onondaga. The Tuscarora were incorporated into the league in 1722, and the confederacy became known as the Six Indian Nations or Six Nations Confederacy. The various tribes spoke dialects of what is called the Iroquoian-Northern language. The Iroquois were farmers and hunters who lived in small villages, a distinctive feature of which was the “longhouse,” a large multifamily dwelling that often housed an entire clan. In fact, the Iroquois called themselves *Haudenosaunee*, or “the people of the longhouse.” Their social structure was matrilineal. In addition to determining kinship and making many family decisions, women also owned property. When a couple married the man moved into the woman’s longhouse.

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