

Indigenous Societies of North America



How do we know that first peoples flourished in North America?

Framing the Unit

The unit is organized into three clusters of lessons. The first cluster focuses on how archaeologists develop theories about when and how first peoples came to North America. Students evaluate competing theories, including the land bridge theory and the coastal migration theory, and examine how new evidence, such as the White Sands footprints, changes our understanding over time. They also explore Indigenous migration stories, learning that oral traditions offer important perspectives alongside archaeological evidence.

The second cluster examines how archaeologists use artifacts and fossils to learn about first peoples in North America. They analyze artifacts from early societies, including Clovis points and pottery, and investigate six societies across North America. Students identify features of complex societies and synthesize evidence to explain how organizing into societies helped first peoples adapt to their environment and meet their needs.

The third cluster explores three major archaeological sites—Teotihuacan, Cahokia Mounds, and Mesa Verde—to understand why it is important to preserve archaeological sites of first peoples. Students learn how archaeologists conduct research through stratigraphy and why preserving these sites matters both for continuing archaeological study and for honoring the sacred places that remain important to Indigenous communities today.

The Summative Assessment asks students to create a poster that answers the unit's Essential Question: *How do we know that first peoples flourished in North America?* Students select three pieces of evidence from different locations and societies, analyze source information to determine relevance, and explain how each piece of evidence shows that first peoples flourished across North America. They present their evidence on a map poster.

Prepare to teach this unit by exploring the [Background Brief: Indigenous Societies of North America](#), which was designed to help you build content knowledge through a variety of resources. The brief also highlights current perspectives and research—along with potential misconceptions and any debates you should know about—so you can present this unit with confidence.

Unit Overview*Enduring Understandings*

1. Understanding of how people first came to North America is shaped by multiple forms of evidence and diverse perspectives, including scientific theories and Indigenous oral traditions. Because evidence is limited and continues to emerge, historical knowledge evolves over time.
2. Analyzing physical evidence helps us understand how complex societies organized themselves, adapted to their environments, and met their needs.
3. Physical evidence from archaeological sites provides insights into how first peoples lived and flourished. Preserving these sites allows for continued learning and honors them as sacred places that hold ongoing cultural and spiritual significance.

Connections to Current Events and Issues

Connections to today's world and students' lives are built into this unit. Other contemporary connections could be added or developed for various topics of study within this unit, and we encourage you to take advantage of opportunities to connect students' learning to contemporary local, national, and global developments that may arise as you teach this unit. Some ideas for linking this unit to current events and issues include:

While this unit focuses on first peoples across North America, Massachusetts students can deepen their understanding by exploring the Wampanoag culture in their own state. Plimoth Patuxet Museums offer virtual school visits through the "[Wampanoag—People of the Dawn](#)" program, led by an Indigenous museum educator, who uses reproduction artifacts to explore with students how Wampanoag families lived, worked, and built communities before and after European arrival.

*Vocabulary (in order of appearance)***Tier 3 Vocabulary**

archaeologist
fossil

artifact
archaeological site

Priority Tier 2 Vocabulary

flourish
migrate

theory
complex

society

Lesson Clusters*Cluster 1: The Arrival of First Peoples in North America (Lessons 1-7)*

Unit Overview**What are the theories of how people first arrived in North America?**

Focus Standards: 4.T2.1, 4.T2.2, 4.T2.3, PS 3, PS 6, PS 6, RI.4.1, SL.4.1, W.4.2b, W.4.8

In this cluster of lessons, students explore the question: *What are the theories of how people first arrived in North America?* Students discuss archaeological evidence with peers and sort the evidence into two categories: by land or by sea. They read about the land bridge theory and the coastal migration theory, examining which evidence supports each theory. Students then shift from scientific theories to Indigenous knowledge as another way to understand human migration. They listen to Indigenous migration stories and compare these stories to the scientific theories to notice similarities and differences. Finally, after discussing what we know (and don't know) about how and when people first arrived in North America, students evaluate one migration theory and identify the evidence that supports and challenges it.

Cluster 2: Evidence of Ancient Cultures (Lessons 8-12)**What can evidence tell us about how first peoples organized themselves into societies?**

Focus Standards: 4.T2.2, 4.T2.3, PS 3, PS 3, PS 5, PS 5, PS 6, PS 6, RI.4.1, SL.4.1, W.4.2b

This cluster takes students on a journey of about 20,000 years as they examine evidence of how first peoples organized themselves into societies. Students learn how archaeologists use fossils and artifacts as primary sources to understand the past. They examine fossilized footprints at White Sands that show families traveling together, analyze artifacts from early societies including Clovis points and pottery, and investigate six societies across North America. Students identify features of societies and synthesize evidence to explain how organizing into societies helped first peoples adapt to their environment and meet their needs.

Cluster 3: Preservation of Archaeological Sites (Lessons 13-19)**Why is it important to preserve archaeological sites of first peoples?**

Focus Standards: 4.T2.1, 4.T2.2, 4.T2.3, 4.T2.4, PS 3, PS 3, PS 5, PS 6, PS 6, RI.4.1, SL.4.1, W.4.8

The inquiry arc in this cluster builds understanding about the importance of archaeological sites in the study of how people lived long ago. Students use stratigraphy in the launch lesson to show the relative age of artifacts. They investigate three important archaeological sites in North America: Teotihuacan, Cahokia Mounds, and Mesa Verde. In each investigation students are asked to use evidence to show how people lived at that time and then advocate for why the site should be preserved. The Summative Assessment Task asks students to create a map of key pieces of evidence that answer the Essential Question: *How do we know that first peoples flourished in ancient North America?*

Unit Overview*Summative Assessment: Indigenous Societies of North America (Lessons 20-21)*

Focus Standards: 4.T2.1, 4.T2.2, 4.T2.3, 4.T2.4, PS 3, PS 5, PS 6, W.4.2b

This Summative Assessment pulls together concepts from throughout the unit and asks students to create a poster to illustrate their response to the unit's Essential Question: *How do we know that first peoples flourished in ancient North America?* Students select three pieces of evidence from different regions and societies studied in the unit. For each piece of evidence, they identify key source information including the type of evidence (such as archaeological sites, artifacts, oral tradition, or fossils), the location, and the society or people it came from. Students mark the locations of their evidence on a map of North America and create evidence boxes that explain how each piece of evidence shows that first peoples flourished.

Unit Focus Standards*Content Standards*

- **4.T2.1:** Evaluate competing theories about the origins of people in North America (e.g., theories that people migrated across a land bridge that connected present-day Siberia to Alaska or theories that they came by a maritime route) and evidence for dating the existence of early populations in North America to about 15,000 years ago.
- **4.T2.2:** Using maps of historic Native Peoples' culture regions of North America and photographs, identify archaeological evidence of some of the characteristics of major civilizations of this period (e.g., stone tools, ceramics, mound-building, cliff dwellings).
- **4.T2.3:** Explain how archaeologists conduct research (e.g., by participating in excavations, studying artifacts and organic remains, climate and astronomical data, and collaborating with other scholars) to develop theories about migration, settlement patterns, and cultures in prehistoric periods.
- **4.T2.4:** Give examples of some archaeological sites of Native Peoples in North America that are preserved as national or state monuments, parks, or international heritage sites (e.g., Teotihuacan in Mexico, Mesa Verde National Park in Colorado, Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site in Illinois, Chaco Culture National Historic Park in New Mexico) and explain their importance in presenting a comprehensive history of Americans and American life.

Practice Standards

- **PS 3:** Explain how and why primary and secondary sources are used to gather information.
- **PS 5:** Identify information about a given source, including the maker, date, source type, and/or place of origin, and examine its intended audience and purpose. Using identifiable information, determine a source's relevance to an inquiry question.
- **PS 6:** Explain how an author uses reasons and evidence to support particular points in a source.

Unit Overview*Literacy Standards*

- **RI.4.1:** Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.
- **SL.4.1:** Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 4 topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.
- **W.4.2:** Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly.
 - **W.4.2b:** Develop the topic with facts, definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples related to the topic.
- **W.4.8:** Recall relevant information from experiences or gather relevant information from print and digital sources; take notes and categorize information, and provide a list of sources.

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Pilot Curriculum Authors: Educurious by NCEE

Lead Authors

Melanie Congleton
Elaine Santelmann

Lead Reviewer

Kasha Browning

Editor

Gayle Klim

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Lead Author

Naomi Tsai

Lead Reviewer

Kasha Browning

Editor

Clare Lilliston

Digital Media Specialist

Angela Rosenberg

Senior Advisor

Sara Nachtigal

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Est. 2019 by the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe Education Department

Led by

Linda Coombs (Aquinnah Wampanoag)

With

Annawon Weeden (Wampanoag, Pequot, Narragansett)

Brad Lopes (Aquinnah Wampanoag)

Darius Coombs (Mashpee Wampanoag)

Jannel Carey (Mashpee Wampanoag)

José Lugo (Chicano)

Tia Pocknett (Mi'kmaq)

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Note: ELSF does not rate or endorse materials. See the Guidebook for more information.

Unit Overview**Scholar Advisor**

Asheesh Kapur Siddique, *University of Massachusetts - Amherst*

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

Kathryn Gabriele
Dylan Geesey-Pearce
Reuben Henriques
Rebekah Judson
Miesha Keita
Julia Lucas
Katherine Tarca

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