Who are the people represented in the Hall of Eastern Woodlands Indians?

This hall portrays the lives of the Native Americans in the Woodlands of eastern North America during the time from the 17th century into the early 20th century. Environments ranged from boreal pine to temperate birch forests to warm swampland. The Eastern Woodlands Indians inhabited an area that ranged from the Atlantic seaboard to the Mississippi, and from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico. Like all cultures, the many different Native American societies in this region changed over time. Their members traveled widely, intermarried, traded, and sometimes warred. The housing, ways of obtaining food, and social organization of the Eastern Woodlands Indians differed, but their lifestyles had much in common. In parts of the Eastern Woodlands, aspects of cultures represented in the hall persist today.

What do objects in the hall tell us about how the Indians of the Eastern Woodlands lived?

The Eastern Woodlands Indians developed myriad ways of using natural resources year-round. Materials ranged from wood, vegetable fiber, and animal hides to copper, shells, stones, and bones. Most of the Eastern Woodlands Indians relied on agriculture, cultivating the “three sisters”—corn, beans, and squash. All made tools for hunting and fishing, like bows and arrows and traps, and developed specialized tools for tasks like making maple sugar and harvesting wild rice. All gathered wild greens, seeds, nuts, and fruit. In addition to being hunters, fishermen, shellfish collectors, and horticulturalists, the native populations were also weavers, basket makers, carvers, and stoneworkers. Women tended the crops, made mats for housing, and reared the children. Men prepared the fields, made stone tools and canoes, and hunted. Other activities—basket-making, woodcarving, pottery-making, and fishing—were carried out by both sexes. Housing reflected available materials, climate, and social structure—a wigwam typically sheltered a single family, while a longhouse would shelter several related families. Some groups used snowshoes and toboggans when wintering in isolated hunting camps; others used dogs to pull sleds, or traveled in canoes. Clothing, often richly decorated, also reflected available materials and climate. Wampum was used to record and commemorate specific important events.

Objects in the hall reflect changes that occurred with the arrival of Europeans in the 17th century. Native Americans adapted their traditional dress to incorporate manufactured fabrics, and began using European glass beads for decoration. Iron replaced wood or clay in many tools and household objects, including axe heads, spears, and pots, and the gun almost completely took the place of the bow and arrow. Eventually, Europeans claimed the land, forcing the Indians into restricted areas called reservations.

How do we study culture?

What we call “culture” is everything that makes up the way a group of people live. It includes their beliefs, values, and traditions. Cultural anthropologists are scientists who observe groups of people in the present or recent past in an effort to understand what it would be like to be part of that culture. They read about the people’s history and customs, study how they behave and interact with their environment, learn their languages, find out what they remember and have recorded, and examine the objects they made, used, and left behind. Cultural anthropologists assembled and contextualized the artifacts in this hall, which opened in 1966.

The Arrival of Europeans

When Spanish, French, Dutch, and British colonists, as well as African slaves, arrived in the Americas in the 16th and 17th century, they encountered societies as sophisticated and diverse as their own. The interaction took a devastating toll on the Native populations—a huge percentage of indigenous people died from a combination of violence, enslavement, and disease within 100 years of the arrival of Europeans. At the same time, relations between Europeans and Native Americans were extraordinarily complex. Certain groups entered into strategic military and trading alliances with the competing colonial powers, a very successful policy until the close of the “French and Indian Wars” in the 1760s. Many Europeans and Africans married into Native societies, and many northeastern Native people fought in the War of Independence. Processes of cultural exchange continue today.
This hall portrays the material culture of the many groups of Native Americans who lived in the Woodlands of eastern North America from the 17th century into the early 20th century. Each section of the hall is organized around a theme. Although the objects within each section were used for similar purposes, they were collected from different cultural groups and represent various time periods. Each object has a label that identifies the group it came from.

The guided explorations below center on four major themes in the hall: housing, food, transportation, and clothing.

1. Housing
   1a. Iroquois long house model
   1b. Seminole, Creek, Ojibwa, and Natchez structures

2. Food
   2a. Farming
   2b. Gathering
   2c. Fishing
   2d. Hunting
   2e. Cooking & Storage

3. Transportation
   3a. By Land
   3b. By Water

4. Clothing
   4a. Hides
   4b. Textiles & Matting
   4c. Clothing

Visit the Warburg Hall of New York State Environment and use the Teaching in the Hall insert to learn more about an environment that the Eastern Woodlands Indians inhabited. In particular, have students examine the “An October Afternoon Near Stissing Mountain” diorama (Stop 1) to look for birch trees like the ones that Native people used to build canoes.
1. Housing

The Eastern Woodlands Indians relied mainly on trees to make their homes, using trunks and branches to frame the buildings and bark for covering. They wove reeds into mats for walls and floors. This section contains five models of dwellings built by groups that lived in different climates. Sides and tops are cut away to reveal the interiors.

1a. Iroquois (Haudenosaunee) longhouse model: The Iroquois lived in longhouses—very large buildings made of young trees covered with slabs of tree bark, usually elm. Several related families lived in each longhouse, and shared food, household chores, and childcare. Two families shared each fire. Have students count the smoke holes in the roof to determine how many families lived in this model longhouse (four smoke holes = eight families). Have students look inside the structure to see which areas were used for cooking and for storage.

1b. Seminole, Creek, Ojibwa (Anishinaabe), and Natchez structures: Buildings reflect the climates for which they were constructed. Have students look closely at how these structures are built, what they’re made of, and the surrounding environment for clues about the local climate. Also have students observe what the people in and around the houses are doing.

2. Food

The Eastern Woodlands Indians depended on farming, hunting, fishing, and gathering wild plants. Some groups, like the Iroquois, farmed much of their food. Those living in colder climates where farming is harder, like the Penobscot, relied more heavily on hunting, fishing, and gathering. This section contains paintings and models of the processes of farming, hunting, and gathering, as well as examples of the tools that were used.

2a. Farming: The main domesticated crops were the “three sisters”—corn, beans, and squash—which were planted together. This exhibit, which consists of three paintings, a model, and objects, shows Iroquois and Cherokee techniques for planting and harvesting corn. First (starting from right to left) ask students to look closely at the three paintings, which show preparing the land (killing the trees by stripping bark), planting, and harvesting corn. Next have them examine the model and the caption above it to follow the steps involved in turning corn into cornmeal. Then, have them look at the related tools and labels.

2b. Gathering: The Indians of the Eastern Woodlands used hundreds of plant species for food, medicine, and raw materials. Where available, wild rice and maple sugar were dietary staples. Have students look at the pictures that illustrate how the Menomini harvested rice and how the Ojibwa gathered maple sap to make syrup.

2c. Fishing: For people who lived near water, fish were an important food source all year long. Some of the catch was dried, to be eaten later in the year. Have students examine the fishing tools in this case, which include hook and line, bow and arrow, nets, traps, and spears.

2d. Hunting & Trapping: The Eastern Woodlands Indians developed many tools and techniques for hunting and trapping wild game. First draw students’ attention to the model of a trap and have them observe how it’s suited for catching grouse. Next, ask them to examine the four paintings of traps and imagine how they would be used to catch bear, rabbit, lynx, and marten. Students can examine other objects such as blowguns and bows and arrows, and consider how these were used.

Planting different crops together can increase productivity by improving pest control, providing habitat for beneficial species, and enriching the soil for one another. These three foods also provide better nutrition when eaten together.
2e. Cooking & Storage: The Eastern Woodlands Indians used the materials available to them—wood, grasses, bark, and iron after the arrival of Europeans—to make utensils for daily life. Ask students to compare and contrast the cooking methods depicted in these two paintings. In one, a Cree woman uses hot stones to heat food in a wooden bowl. In another, a Penobscot woman boils food in a bark basket directly on the fire.

3. Transportation

These two back-to-back exhibit cases show some ways the Indians of the Eastern Woodlands transported themselves and their possessions.

3a. By Land: Depending on the season and the terrain, they used snowshoes, toboggans, baskets, burden frames, cradleboards, and burden strap—as well as horses, after European settlers brought them to North America. Have students compare devices for carrying infants to those in use today. Then have them look at the devices designed for travel across snow and discuss how they worked.

3b. By Water: The birchbark canoe was one of many types of canoe used in the Eastern Woodlands. This canoe was built to traverse the many rivers and lakes of the heavily wooded northern part of the region. Built from wood and bark, it was light enough to be carried between streams; it could travel across water only a few inches deep; and the largest canoes could hold two to three tons of cargo. First have students look at the paintings that depict the traditional canoe-making process. Then have them examine the finished canoe on display, and look for evidence that it was made after contact with Europeans (it contains iron nails, which were manufactured by the Europeans).

4. Clothing

The Eastern Woodlands Indians dressed mainly in clothing made from animal hides that were softened, tanned, and sewn. Their basic wardrobe consisted of soft-soled moccasins, leggings, and a long-sleeved shirt or coat, over which women wore long skirts and men wore breechclouts and short kilts. Long robes kept people warm in the winter. These three stops begin from right to left.

4a. Hides: Most animal hides were made into clothes, pouches, and bags. Have students look at the model that shows how the Yuchi people prepared hides, and examine the tools they used.

4b. Textiles & Matting: Across the Eastern Woodlands, women used plant fibers and materials to make bags, burden straps, nets, and mats. After European contact, they augmented these native materials with wool and cotton. Have students look at the model of the Fox (Meskwaki) people making a fiber mat and identify the steps involved in making a mat from basswood bark. Then have them look at the various tools and examples of different textile designs and techniques on display in this case.

4c. Clothing: After the Europeans introduced manufactured cloth, it was often substituted for animal hides in clothing. Glass beads obtained from Europeans generally replaced the dyed porcupine quills and moose hair used for decoration in pre-colonial times. Have student look at the garments and discuss what materials they’re made of.

Tips for Exploring Other Sections

Students can explore the physical objects in other sections of the hall: Music, Games, Warfare, Shamanism, Pipes. Ask them to identify what materials the items on display were made of, and to imagine how the Eastern Woodlands Indians might have used them in everyday life.

In the Wampum section, students can examine these beads made of seashells, which were made by the Indians of the northeastern part of the Eastern Woodlands. Typically woven into belts or strings, wampum recorded speech, guaranteed agreements, and came to be used as currency. Important events like treaties, alliances, marriage, and condolence ceremonies were woven into wampum belts. Wampum was also used in marriage proposals, to ransom captives, and to express condolence at death. Have students examine the wampum belts on display and read about the messages they convey.
Come Prepared Checklist

- Plan your visit. For information about reservations, transportation, and lunchrooms, visit amnh.org/plan-your-visit/school-or-camp-group-visit.
- Read the Essential Questions to see how themes in the hall connect to your curriculum.
- Review the Teaching in the Hall section for an advance look at what your class will encounter.
- Download activities and student worksheets at amnh.org/eastern-woodlands-indians/educators. They are designed for use before, during, and after your visit.
- Decide how your class will explore the hall:
  - You and your chaperones can facilitate the visit using the Teaching in the Hall section.
  - Students can use the worksheets and/or maps to explore the hall on their own or in small groups.

Correlation to Standards

Connection to the National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies Themes

Theme 1: CULTURE
Human beings create, learn, share, and adapt to culture.

Theme 2: TIME, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE
Studying the past makes it possible for us to understand the human story across time.

Theme 3: PEOPLE, PLACES, AND ENVIRONMENTS
The study of people, places, and environments enables us to understand the relationship between human populations and the physical world.

Classroom and Museum visit activities, available online, are correlated to Common Core State Standards and New York State Social Studies Standards.

Glossary

boreal: northern, characterized by evergreen forests
breachclout: a strip of bark, cloth, or leather passed between the thighs and secured by a belt around the waist
burden frame: a wooden frame for carrying heavy loads
burden strap: a woven strap worn across the forehead, for carrying heavy loads
colonist: a person who leaves their native country to settle in a new place
horticulture: the cultivation of land for food
longhouse: a very large building made of young trees covered with sheets of tree bark, usually elm. Today, longhouses are used for religious ceremonies.
toboggan*: a long, narrow, flat-bottomed sled made of a thin board curved upward and backward at the front, used for sliding over snow or ice.
wampum*: beads of polished shell strung in strands, belts, and sashes, for trade, ceremonies, and decoration
wigwam*: small, often dome-shaped houses made of a wood pole framework covered with elm or birch bark, or woven and sewn mats of cattails. Larger wigwams housed several related families, while smaller ones held only one.

* These three words come from the language of the Massachusetts, an eastern Algonquian group.

CREDITS

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This hall uses a particular area—the village of Pine Plains and Stissing Mountain in Dutchess County—as a case study to explore the environment of New York State. This area contains mountains, lakes, forests, and farmland. The following exhibits will help you and your students identify and explore patterns and interactions between abiotic (rocks, water, seasons) and biotic factors (plants, animals).

Before Your Visit: Have students find a satellite image of Pine Plains online to explore its current geographic features and to figure out its distance from your school.

1. “An October Afternoon Near Stissing Mountain” diorama: This scene introduces students to the region’s geology and ecology, which they will be investigating throughout the hall. Ask students to imagine they’re “on location,” and to identify all the living and nonliving things they see (e.g. birds, mammals, insects, grass, woodland, lake, mountain).

2. “A Bird’s Eye View of Stissing Mountain and the Valley of Pine” map: This aerial map shows the area in the 1950s, when the hall was constructed. Have students identify some of the region’s geographic features, such as mountains, lakes, forests, and farmland (point out that there’s no farmland on the mountain). Then invite students to consider what this place might look like today (e.g. fewer farms, more forests, more towns, more roads) and in the future.
3. “Geological History and Structure” exhibit: The cross section at the top illustrates the different kinds of rocks that underlie this region, with corresponding rock specimens displayed below. Tell students that this cross section shows an area much larger than the aerial map they just saw, and ask them to locate Stissing Mountain. Have students share observations about the types of vegetation that grow on the mountain (forests) and its surrounding valleys (crops or pastures). Then, have them use the chart on the left wall to identify the types of rock that make up the mountain (Gn = gneiss) and the valleys (C-Ow = limestone), and observe those specimens on display. Point out to students that gneiss is a type of metamorphic rock (formed from other rocks that are changed by heat and pressure underground), and limestone is a type of sedimentary rock (formed from accumulation of sediments such as sand, silt, dead plants, and animal skeletons). Tell them that in the next exhibit, they will explore why farmland is located in the valleys and not on the mountain.

4. “Relation of Plants to Geology and Soil” exhibit: The first two display cases show landscapes shaped by gneiss, which makes up Stissing Mountain, and limestone, which underlies the surrounding valley. To help students explore how the type of rock affects the composition of soil and influences which plants grow where, have them examine the two cases for information about why farmers farm in the valleys and not on the mountain.

(Gneiss weathers into a thin layer of nutrient-poor soil that is not suitable for farmland. Limestone weathers into a loose layer of nutrient-rich soil that is excellent for crop growth and pastures.)

5. “Life in the Soil” exhibit: These four display cases explore how animals in two different locations depend on the soil below ground, where the temperature is more constant than on the surface. First, have students examine the two “edge of woodland” cases to compare the animal life during different seasons, winter and spring (e.g. the chipmunk spends part of the winter hibernating in its nest below the frost line; it emerges above ground in the spring to forage for food while its young stay inside the burrow). Then, have them look for similar patterns in the “farmer’s lawn” cases (e.g. the toad overwinters below ground; it is more active above ground in the spring).

6. “From Field to Lake” diorama: This diorama shows ecosystems transitioning from field to forest to lake, along with a glimpse of what’s underground and underwater. Have students identify the different ecosystems, and then look for examples of interaction between organisms. For example, animals are taking care of offspring (e.g. Brown Bullhead Catfish in pond), feeding on plants (e.g. Common Sulphur Butterfly feeding on flower in field) or other animals (e.g. Common Box Turtle catching beetle), and collecting resources to make shelter (e.g. Muskrats using cattails). Also, have students look for evidence of human activity (e.g. domesticated cattle feeding on land cleared by a farmer for pasture).

Back in the Classroom: This case study within Dutchess County is just one example of how all plants and animals, including humans, rely on the environment around them. Encourage students to think about and investigate the interactions between living things and the environment where they live.