

# THE INDIAN NATIONS: THE FIRST AMERICANS

*A Historical Perspective*

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*The acquisition of the horse increased Native Americans' ability to migrate.*

In return, American Indians made greater and more lasting contributions not only to the first European colonists but also, subsequently, to the world. Corn, beans, sunflowers, squash and pumpkins are only a few of the many important products of Indian agriculture that found their way into the diet of the early colonists and now of millions of Americans. Indians also cultivated tobacco, mainly for ceremonial use, and had developed a sophisticated knowledge of the medicinal properties of countless herbs and other plants. Many of the medicines used today derive from remedies they found in nature; most of the more than 200 drugs listed in *The United States Pharmacopeia* were known to the Indians. (The great variety and importance of Indian gifts to the world is discussed by Jack Weatherford in *Indian Givers: How the Indians of the Americas Transformed the World*.)

The American Indian also made important conceptual contributions to American political and social life. Although historians still debate the extent to which the Iroquoian model influenced the development of the United States Constitution, clearly the political principles of representation and governance guiding intertribal confederations greatly impressed our nation's founders. In 1750 Benjamin Franklin noted in a letter to James Parker:

*It would be a very strange Thing if six Nations of . . . Savages should be capable of forming a Scheme for such a Union, and be able to execute it in such a manner, as that it has subsisted for Ages, and appears indissoluble; and yet that a like Union should be impracticable for ten or a Dozen English Colonies . . . . (The Writings of Benjamin Franklin, Albert Henry Smyth, ed.)*

Among the Iroquois, as in many other tribes, Indian women exercised considerable influence in tribal affairs and were by no means subordinate to men. Similarly, the contributions of individual American Indian women earned them a place in American history. Pocahontas, the daughter of the chief of the Powhatan Confederacy, saved the life of Captain John Smith at Jamestown, Virginia, and Sacajawea, a Shoshone woman, contributed to the success of the Lewis and Clark expedition.

Sadly, all of this did not help the American Indian. Nowhere was the unevenness of the Native American–European exchange more evident than in the repeated, massive land cessions forced on the Indian nations by colonial powers and then, more significantly, by the United States.

## Treaties, Land Loss and Compensation

Indians had clear and well-defined concepts of individual/personal and communal property but regarded land more in terms of “usage” than of “real property” in the European sense. As the colonies grew, so did their demand for more land. Indian attempts to resist encroachment did not succeed both because of Indians' lack of unity and of Europeans' military superiority. Europeans, while considering Native Americans culturally inferior, could not avoid recognizing that they constituted politically separate and independent nations. Despite this ambivalence, which characterized most Native American–European relations, the colonial powers and the United States entered into political, military and territorial transactions with the Indian nations. This interaction strengthened the understanding that Indian tribes were indeed sovereign entities with a natural and legal right to their political and territorial integrity. Such a mutual understanding provided the basis for the negotiation and ratification of scores of treaties and official agreements.

Tribal chiefs and headmen negotiated and signed treaties on behalf of their respective tribes, while the Constitution of the United States (Article 1, Section 8, Clause 3) invested Congress (federal authority and not the individual states) with the power to administer Indian affairs. From 1778, the year of the first American government treaty with the Delaware, to 1871, when Congress unilaterally ended the treaty-making period, the United States signed more than 380 treaties with Indian tribes. (The original documents are preserved in the National Archives; Charles Kappler compiled most of these and other related documents in a five-volume set titled *1904–1941, Indian Affairs: Laws and Treaties*.)

Treaties spelled out the responsibility of the federal government to provide reimbursement and services to Indian tribes as payment for their massive land cessions. The federal commitment to Indians, referred to as trust responsibility, and its nature and extent were defined by treaties, executive agreements, congressional acts and court decisions.

A fundamental aspect of Indian treaty law is that treaties were not a grant of rights *to* Indian nations, but rather a grant of rights and property *from* the Indian nations to the European newcomers. Indian tribes, in fact, reserved unto themselves those land, water, mineral and sociopolitical rights they did not specifically agree to cede. Unfortunately, the initial cessions did not satisfy the Europeans' appetite for Indian lands, and they consistently encroached on these without the tribes' consent. A century of treaty-making policy, backed by American military force, led to the erosion of the Indian land base, the collapse of Indians' economic self-sufficiency and the assimilation of tribal societies.

After the treaty-making period ended, Congress enacted a devastating policy that called for the breaking up in severalty of what remained of Indian reservation lands. Under the General Allotment Act of 1887, also known as the Dawes Severalty Act, tribal lands were to be parceled out to

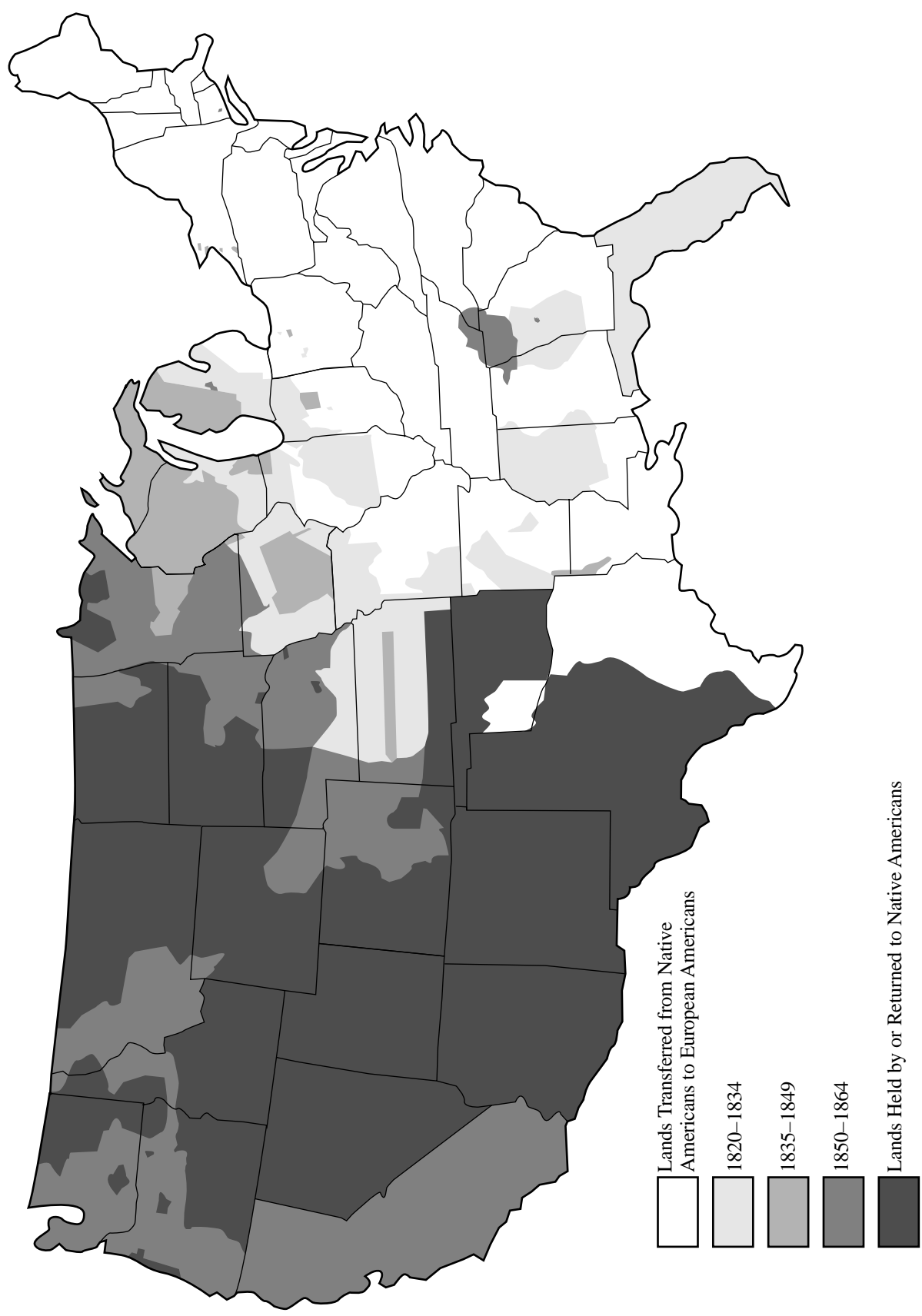
Indian heads of families in 160-acre tracts; Native Americans were supposed to make a rapid transition to farming despite their hunting, fishing and gathering traditions and the poor nature of the allotted lands, usually unfit for profitable farming. Under pressure from land speculators, Congress also provided that the remaining lands not distributed to Indians be declared surplus and opened to European Americans for homesteading. From 1887 to 1934, when the Dawes Act was abolished, the Native American land base was reduced from 138 million to 47 million acres.

David J. Wishart recently estimated that in the central and northern Plains alone, from 1825 to 1900, the government forced Indians to sell some 290 million acres at an average price of 10 cents per acre. Such a value was later ruled "unconscionable" by United States courts, which called for partial compensation to the tribes based on the "fair-market value" of the land they had lost. The Indian Claims Commission, established in 1946, received a federal mandate to review and settle land claims filed by the tribes against the United States. Although most Indian tribes received monetary compensation that extinguished their claims, a few actually received land restoration. In 1970, after a long legal battle, the Taos *Pueblo* in New Mexico gained the return of its sacred Blue Lake plus 48,000 acres. In 1975 Congress



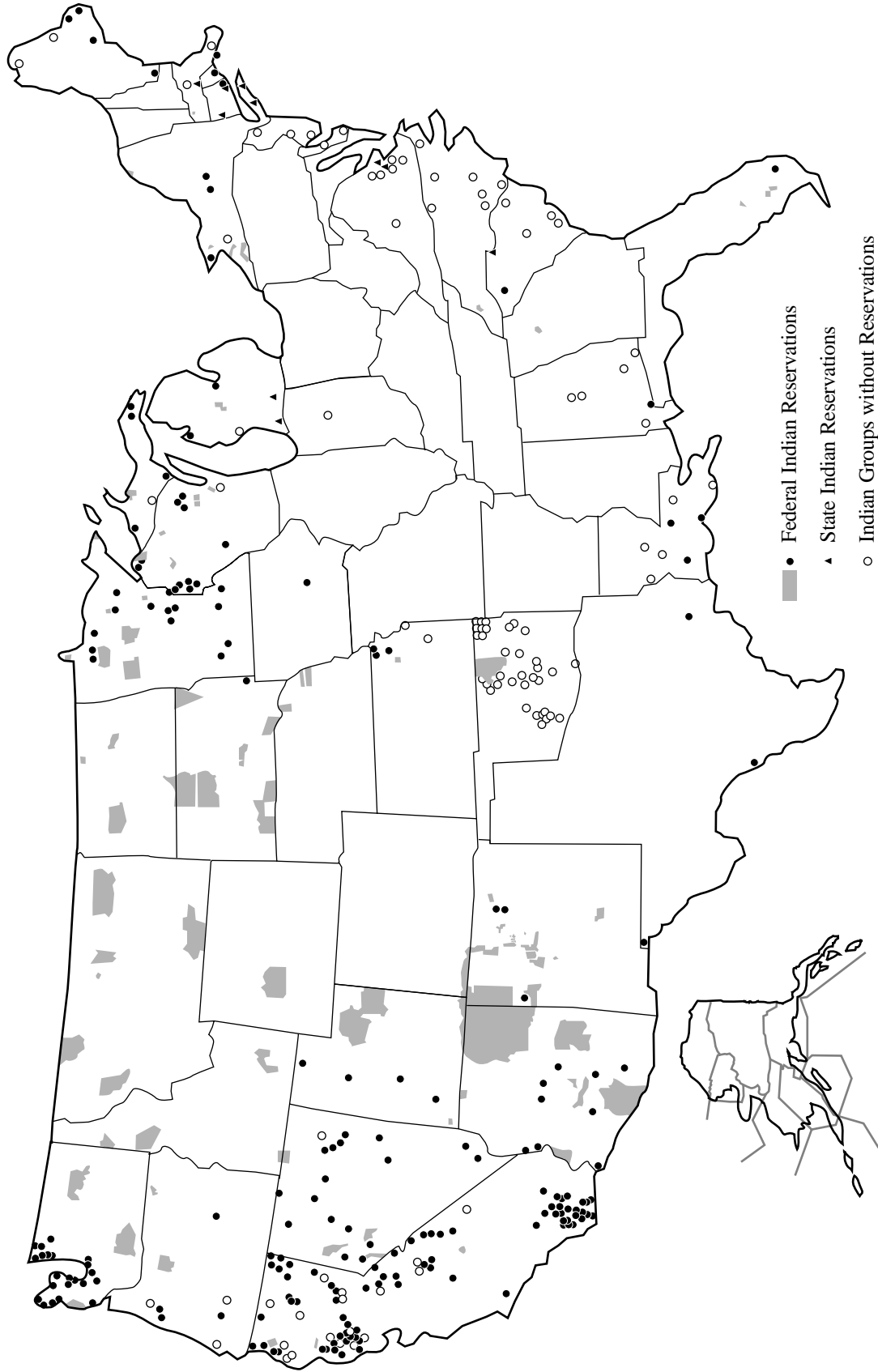
*The Peace Commission of 1868 engaging in treaty negotiations with the Sioux, Crow, Cheyenne and Arapaho at Fort Laramie, Wyoming. The commission hoped to put a permanent end to the Indian hostilities, restrict Indians to reservations and open up their land for newcomers.*

# Lands Transferred from Native Americans to European Americans, 1820–1864



Adapted from a map in *Handbook of North American Indians*, vol. 4, William C. Sturtevant, gen. ed., Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1988.

# Indian Lands, 1987



● Federal Indian Reservations

▲ State Indian Reservations

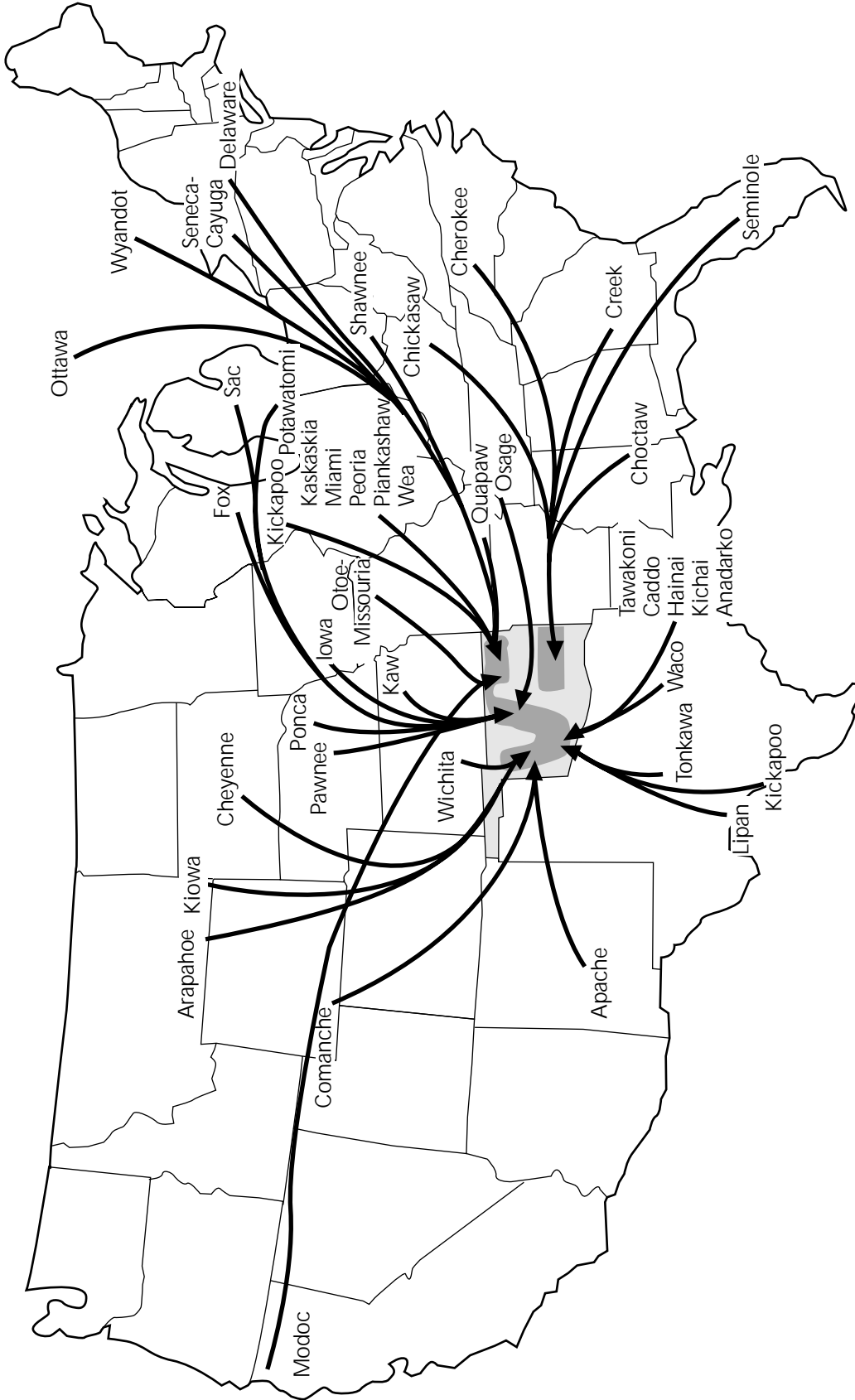
○ Indian Groups without Reservations

■ Alaska Native Regional Corporation Boundaries (Areas contain numerous federally recognized Indian and Inuit [Eskimo] communities inside Alaska.)

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Adapted from a map in *Handbook of North American Indians*, vol. 4, William C. Sturtevant, gen. ed., Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1988.

# Migration of Indian Nations to Oklahoma



During the 1800s, many Indian nations were forced to migrate to the Indian Territory, which later became Oklahoma.

Courtesy of the Division of Indian Health, United States Public Health Service.



# Homelands of Some Major American Indian Tribes

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## Arctic

Aleut, Eskimo

## Basin

Bannock, Chemehuevi, Mono, Paiute, Shoshone, Ute, Washo

## California

Hupa, Karok, Maidu, Pomo, Tolowa, Yurok

## Indian Territory

Apache, Arapaho, Caddo, Catawba, Cherokee, Cheyenne, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Comanche, Creek, Iowa, Kansa (Kaw), Kickapoo, Kiowa, Missouriia, Modoc, Osage, Otoe, Ottawa, Pawnee, Peoria, Ponca, Potawatomi, Quapaw, Sauk and Fox, Seminole, Seneca, Shawnee, Tonkawa, Wichita, Wyandot

## Midwest/Woodlands

Illinois, Kickapoo, Menominee, Miami, Ojibwa (Chippewa), Potawatomi, Sauk and Fox, Winnebago

## Northeast

Huron, Iroquois

## Northern Plains

Arikara, Assiniboine, Blackfoot, Crow, Dakota (Sioux), Gros Ventre, Hidatsa, Iowa, Mandan, Northern Arapaho, Northern Cheyenne, Omaha, Pawnee, Plains Cree, Plains Ojibwa, Ponca

## Northwest Coast

Bella Bella, Bella Coola, Chinook, Clallam, Comox, Cowichan, Duwamish, Haida, Kalapuya, Kwakiutl, Makah, Nisqually, Nootka, Siletz, Tillamook, Tlingit, Tututni, Twana

## Plateau

Cayuse, Coeur D'Alene, Flathead, Kalispel, Klamath, Klikitat, Kutenai, Modoc, Nez Perce, Palus, Umatilla, Wallawalla, Yakima

## Southeast

Calusa, Catawba, Cherokee, Chickasaw, Chitimacha, Choctaw, Creek, Hitchiti, Huma, Powhatan Confederacy, Seminole, Timucua, Tunica, Tuscarora, Yamasee, Yuchi

## Southern Plains

Caddo, Comanche, Kansa, Kiowa, Kiowa-Apache, Osage, Quapaw, Southern Arapaho, Southern Cheyenne, Tonkawa, Waco, Wichita

## Southwest

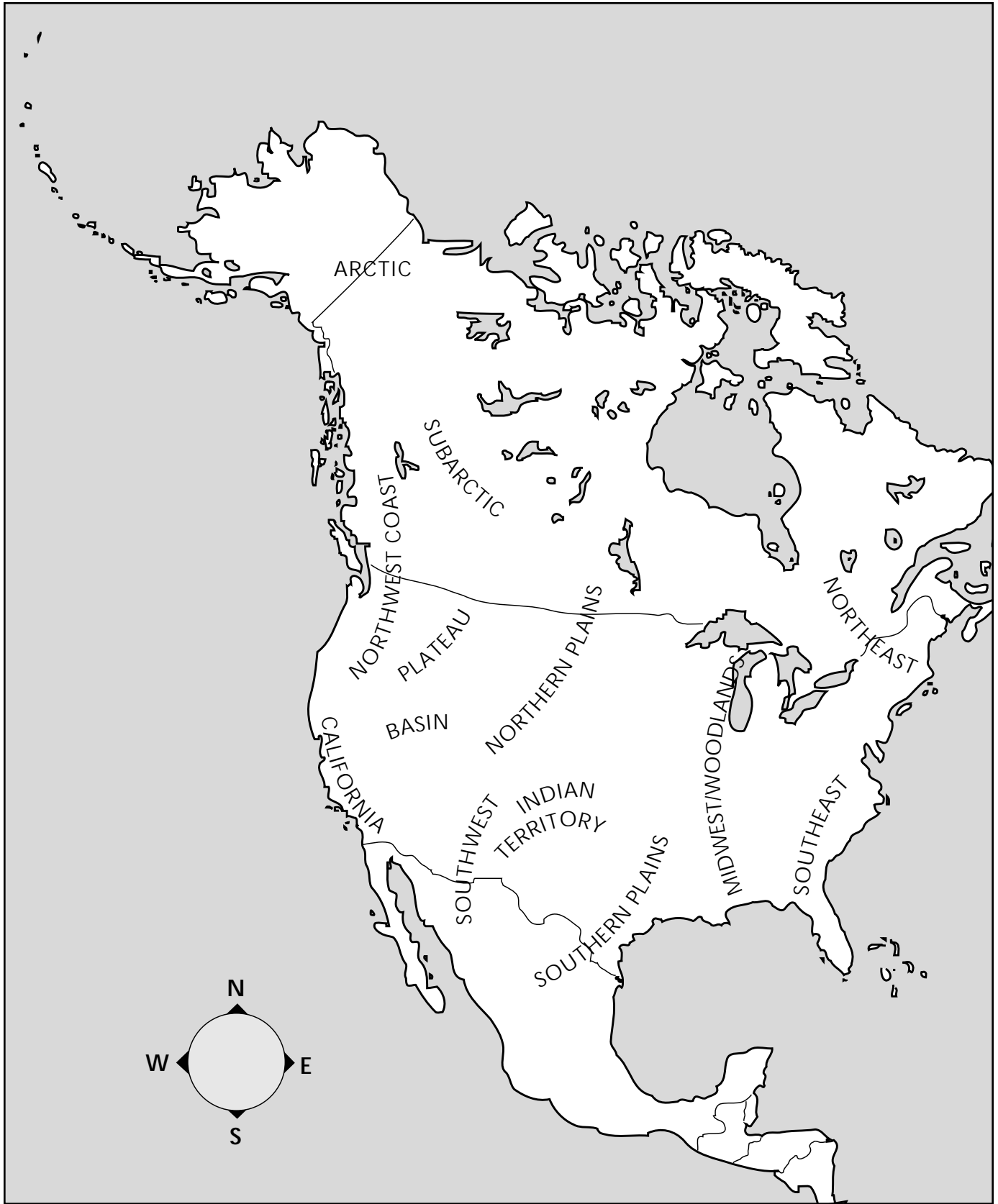
Acoma, Apache, Cocopa, Havasupai, Hopi, Isleta, Jemez, Maricopa, Mohave, Navaho, Papago, Pima, Quechan (Yuma), Seri, Taos, Tewa, Yavapai, Zuni

## Subarctic

Cree, Montagnais, Naskapi, Ojibwa (Chippewa), Salteaux

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This list of American Indian tribes follows the general guidelines of the National Geographic Society map *The Indians of North America* (1979), except that the Woodlands and Plains tribes have been further subdivided. Although it overlaps with the Southern Plains and the southeastern cultures, the Indian Territory has also been included as it became home to several tribes that were forcibly removed there. For the location of each area, refer to the map on the back cover of this book.



This map shows some of the major American Indian tribal groups listed on page 14 superimposed over a current map of North America. The boundaries shown follow the general guidelines of the National Geographic Society map *The Indians of North America* (1979). It is difficult to place these boundaries with precision because different time frames are represented, but this map identifies the general areas in which each nation lived.