Native Americans Prior to 1492

The first Americans are believed to have arrived in North America over 10,000 years ago. They crossed a land bridge that existed between Asia and North America in the area that is now the Bering Straits. The Native Americans developed individual groups or nations. It is estimated that when the first Europeans arrived in 1492 there were 15 to 20 million Native Americans living in the land. They spoke over 1,000 languages.

The Native Americans throughout North America had a number of similarities. Each group or nation spoke the same language, and almost all were organized around an extended clan or family. They usually descended from one individual. Each group had a series of leaders, in some cases the leaders inherited their roles in others they were elected.

Native Americans believed in the power of the spirits. The spirits were found in nature. Their religious leaders were called Shamans. Native Americans believed that people should live in harmony with nature. They did not believe that people should own land rather the land belonged to everyone.

There were a number of distinct groups of Native Americans:

**Northwest Coast**
The Native Americans of the Northwest had no need to farm. The land was full of animals; the sea was full of fish. Most of the villages were located near the Ocean. Wood was plentiful, and the natives of the areas used the woods to build large homes. One of the unique innovations of the Indians of the Northwest was large canoe that could hold 50 people. They were carved out of giant redwoods.

**California**
California’s natives were blessed with mild weather. Over 100 Native American groups lived there. Those that lived by the sea were able to live off fishing and native plant life. Those that lived inland like the Pomo hunted small game. They also gathered acorns and pound them into mush to eat.

**The Plateau**
The Plateau Native Americans lived in the area between Cascade Mountains and the Rocky Mountains. The area had many large Rivers and was the main source of food and travel. The area was cold in the winter and to protect them the Natives build homes that were partly underground. Approximately 20 groups lived in this area.

**The Great Basin**
The Great Basins is located in what includes all of Nevada and Utah, most of western Colorado. It was the home of the Shoshone, Paiute and Ute’s Indians. It was a land that was hot and dry. Those that lived there were called “diggers” since they were forced to dig for most of their food.

**The Southwest**
The Natives of the Southwest were divided into two groups some were hunter gathers and some were farmers. The Pueblos were the best known of the natives of the area. They
were skilled farmers and grew a many crops. The Pueblos used irrigations canals to bring water for their farming. The Apache and Navajo entered the southwest around 1500 and were hunter-gatherers.

**The Plains**
The Plains stretch from the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains. The areas had large herds of Buffalo and antelope, which provided abundant food. The Native Americans of the plains included the Sioux, Pawnee, Crow Cheyenne and Comanche.

**Northeast**
The Native Americans of the Northeast lived in an area rich in rivers and forests. Some groups were constantly on the move while others built permanent homes. The two main cultures of the Northeast were the Iroquois and Algonquin. For many years the Native Americans of the northeast were at war with each other.

**The Southeast.**
The Southeast was the most populated of all the regions of North America. It was home to the Cherokee, Creek Choctaw, Seminole, and Natchez. Many of the natives of the southeast hunted buffalo deer and other animals. The majority of the Native Americans of the Southeast were famers.

http://www.historycentral.com/Indians/Before.html