A brief history of Native Americans in the present-day United States

The history of Native Americans dates back thousands of years to when the earliest ancestors of the people of North and South America came from Eurasia over what is now the Bering Straight. People began to enter North America around 8000 B.C. and slowly migrated down the Pacific Coast and inward.

These pre-Columbian societies were very sophisticated and developed their own agricultural and societal practices from coast to coast, growing up to 30,000 people — a number not equaled again in any city in the present-day United States until after 1800.They often depended on maize (corn) agriculture and chiefdom-style social organizations. Many tribes were nomadic, which led to land wars and displacement over the centuries.

Everything changed in the Americas after the 1492 European exploration and colonization. European diseases unfamiliar to indigenous peoples swept through their civilizations, wiping out millions of Native Americans. By 1800, the Native population had declined to about 600,000, often because of non-fatal diseases among Europeans that were much more deadly to Native Americans.

Native American tribes became more and more involved in English and French wars, along with growing expansion from the American colonies. Some prospered under the fur trade; others were disappointed by broken treaties early on. But both the Native American and European worlds benefitted from the trading of animals from both cultures, exchanging horses that were especially useful to Plains Indians.

During the American revolution, Native Americans typically sided with the British, hoping a potential defeat of the colonies' uprising would prevent further expansion into Native American land. But the United States was eager to push westward and initially sought to purchase Native American lands by treaties — George Washington was first to encouraging a "civilizing" process — and to assimilate them into the new American society.

The 19th century brought some of the biggest upheaval among Native American tribes in all of history. Intertribal war notwithstanding, Native Americans soon became the victims of forcible removal from their homelands to assigned territories under President Andrew Jackson, leading to the Indian Appropriations Act and the Indian Removal Act — the precursor to today's reservations. The government also forced Native American children to adapt to Christian ideals and enroll in boarding schools, where they were forbidden to speak their own languages and practice their own religions. Laws and federal departments were set up to monitor Indian Affairs, under which tribes were seen as sovereign nations but became U.S. citizens through additional legislation.

In the past century, Native Americans have become more urbanized, particularly after the wars, when many people moved to cities to find work and opportunities. President Dwight Eisenhower also enacted legislation terminating Indian reservations to force Indians to accumulate, but the law was repealed later. There have been several efforts by indigenous to reclaim their past — most notably the occupation of Alcatraz Island in 1969 and the

Wounded Knee incident in 1973. This activism has led more Native American welfare programs and the establishing of Native American studies programs at major universities.