

North American Indian Tribes of the Great Lakes



Michael G. Johnson • Illustrated by Jonathan Smith

Men-at-Arms • 467

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THE GREAT LAKES REGION

The Great Lakes Region was dominated by water and forest. The thousands of interconnected lakes and rivers afforded the Indians the means to travel long distances by canoe, with short land journeys between by “*portage*” (the French term for carrying canoes from water to water). While the five Great Lakes drain the huge water system from the north and west, south of them tributaries drain into the two major river valleys of the Mississippi and Ohio.

Natural vegetation varies throughout the area. In the north, on the now-Canadian side, coniferous forests of spruce, fir, jack pine, tamarack and cedar gradually give way southward to mixed coniferous and deciduous woodland, adding maple, beech, birch, hemlock, and finally basswood, oak, hickory, cottonwood, willow and elm, with deciduous species predominating in the Ohio valley. Before European contact small tracts were no doubt cleared by burning, particularly on the

Prairie-Woodland borders where indigenous peoples practiced agriculture. From the early 17th century the ecology was increasingly disturbed by the arrival of Europeans, with the selective trapping of fur-bearing animals, and from the 18th century there was major and increasing forest clearance and drainage of land for lumber and European agriculture. The river and lake travel systems were also used by European explorers, missionaries and fur-traders, and by the early years of the 18th century the French had already linked their Canadian and Gulf of Mexico colonies by regular routes.

In the Great Lakes region four major subsistence patterns are identified: domesticated plants, hunting, fishing, and gathering wild rice. Domesticated Indian corn (maize), beans, and squashes were the basic foods of the tribes of the Ohio valley, lower Ontario (the Huron), New York (the Iroquois), southern Wisconsin and southern Michigan. Nevertheless, all the agricultural Indians also hunted, fished and collected wild plant foods. The major subsistence pattern was hunting. In the north, Indians were completely dependent upon moose, caribou, bear, beaver and fish. In the south, various deer, elk, buffalo (bison), bear, turkey and other species were important sources of food,

Photographed c.1900, this mature man is probably an Ojibwa (Chippewa). His headdress is a braided woollen turban with eagle feathers and V-cut ribbons. His multiple bead necklace is of Plains style; his woollen leggings are bound with woven beaded garters with fringed ties.

