
Early North America

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A Place Called America

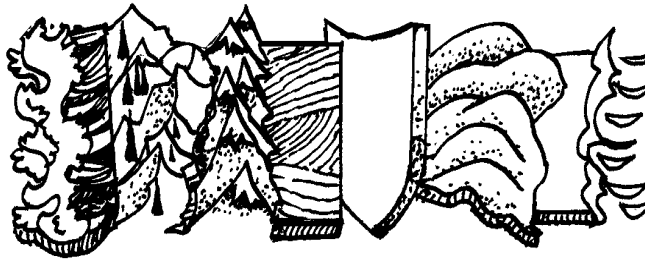
Just over 500 years ago, no one in Europe, Africa, or Asia knew of the existence of the place we call America. While ancient people, many thousands of years ago, had migrated to

North, Central, and South America, people on other continents had no direct connection or knowledge of such a place. They were unaware of its size, the scope of the land, or of the millions of people who had made their home in the Western Hemisphere. The term Western Hemisphere refers to the lands that comprise North, Central, and South America, as well as the islands of the Caribbean Sea.

Part of that land would one day become the United States of America. Today, the USA extends, as the song goes, “from sea to shining sea.” It is home to over 285 million people, many of whom migrated to America from other countries and continents.

People in the United States today live in a variety of places. Great cities, such as New York, Los Angeles, Houston, Denver, and Chicago, are home to millions of urban dwellers. Additional millions live in the thousands of smaller cities, towns, and villages that dot the American landscape. Still others live in rural areas, away from the hustle and bustle of city life. Many such people work as farmers, ranchers, and herders.

Americans have worked hard to make a home for themselves wherever they live. Today, people may be found everywhere in America. Some live near the oceans that extend along our western, eastern, and southern coasts. Others enjoy living in the mountains—from the Rockies to the Appalachians—that give shape and majesty to the nation’s landscape. Still others enjoy living in deserts or the frozen reaches of Alaska. The vast prairies and plains are home to others who are lured by a land that is spacious and uninterrupted—the “land of the big sky” as Montana is called.



A key to understanding American history is to first understand the landscape of America, or the geography of the United States. Not only does a nation’s geography

determine where people live, it also explains how they live. The story of the United States is one closely connected to geography.

Geography is more than just a study of the land. It examines the relationship between the land, the people who live on it, and how people use the land’s resources. As a result, geographers often ask more than one type of question about the places they study.

Naturally, geographers want to know where places are located and what places are called. It is important to a geographer who studies the United States to know where the Mississippi River is. But he or she is also interested in how the people who live along this great waterway use the river. Geographers are interested in understanding why people, thousands of years ago, came to live along the Mississippi in the first place and ask themselves questions such as why a city such as St. Louis came into existence along the river. Why there? Why along the Mississippi? Why in Missouri? Why not St. Louis, Vermont? Such questions illustrate the powerful interplay between geography and history—between people and place.

As with so many other aspects of life in the United States, the American landscape is one of stunning contrasts and contradictions. It is a vast nation, whose greatness is profoundly tied to its rich geographical diversity—lakes, swamps, rivers, and streams, as well as mountains, deep gorges, and gently rolling hills.

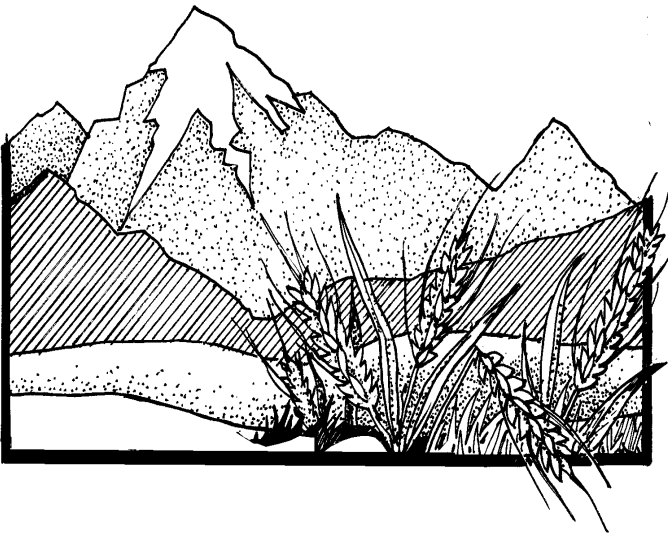
The United States is divided into seven major physical regions: Coastal Plains, Appalachian Mountains, Canadian Shield, Interior Plains, Rocky Mountains, Intermountain Region, and Pacific Coast.

The American Landscape

A family vacation to your favorite place in the United States can provide a person with special memories that last a lifetime. Who can forget their first visit to some of America's most breathtaking natural wonders: the roaring cascade of millions of gallons of water that form Niagara Falls; the snow-capped, jagged peaks of the Rocky Mountains; the yawning chasm, flanked by red and brown rock, called the Grand Canyon; the lush tropical paradise of Hawaii. Such places stand out as some of the most beautiful in all of America, even the world.

As we have noted, geography has helped determine the scope of the United States today and how its people live. A look at the seven physical regions of the United States will help us begin to understand how life has unfolded here from the past to the present. But first, let's look at the types of landforms found in these regions.

The landscape of the United States includes four basic landforms: mountains, hills, plateaus, and plains. Each varies according to elevation and how the land it includes is shaped. Mountains are the tallest landform in America. By definition, a mountain is a high, rugged region, rising to a height of at least 5,000 feet above the adjacent land. Typically, mountains are not heavily populated, since they are steep and rocky.



Next in elevation is the landform known as hills. Similar to mountains, hills are less steep, less high, and are typically less abrupt—rounder than mountains. By definition, they are less than 5,000 feet in elevation. Many of America's hills may have been mountains thousands of years ago, but slowly moving ice sheets, known as glaciers, wore the tops of the mountains down, eroding them into hills. More people live in hilly lands than on mountains, since the hilly country can be farmed and the environment is more hospitable.

Plateaus are defined as high, level lands generally rising to an elevation of 2,000 feet above sea level. Although such places are not exactly "level," the landscape of plateaus is fairly even, often featuring gently rolling prairies. Plateaus can provide good farming lands, depending on the amount of regular rainfall. Some plateaus are located between major mountain ranges, such as the Great Basin region of the West, a region that includes the modern-day states of Utah and Nevada. Surrounded by mountains, the Great Basin gets little rainfall.

Finally, the plains comprise broad areas enhanced by gently rolling lands. Typically, plains lie at a low elevation, not too much above sea level. Many people live in these areas, which make up almost half of the landmass of the United States. Places such as the Great Plains provide rich farm lands. Since the land of the plains does not rise or fall greatly, it provides ideal landscapes for building farms, roads, and cityscapes.

Mountain ranges dot the landscapes of western states from Alaska to California to Colorado and eastern states from the Canadian border to West Virginia. The Black Hills interrupt the western plains region of South Dakota, while the heavily wooded Ozark Hills lure tourists into southwest Missouri. From Ohio to Kansas, the Great Plains dominate the landscape of America's Midwest. Down south, the plains bordering the Gulf of Mexico help set the course of life for people from Texas to Florida.

America's Seven Regions

From mountain peaks to the lowlands of the plains, the United States is home to seven physical regions. These regions comprise the geography not only of the U.S., but of North America in general, including Mexico to the south and Canada to the north.

The seven regions include the Coastal Plains, the Appalachian Mountains, the Canadian Shield, the Interior Plains, the Rocky Mountains, the Intermountain Region, and the Pacific Coast. Individually, they each hold an attraction to those who migrated there, whether a century ago or 10,000 years in the past.

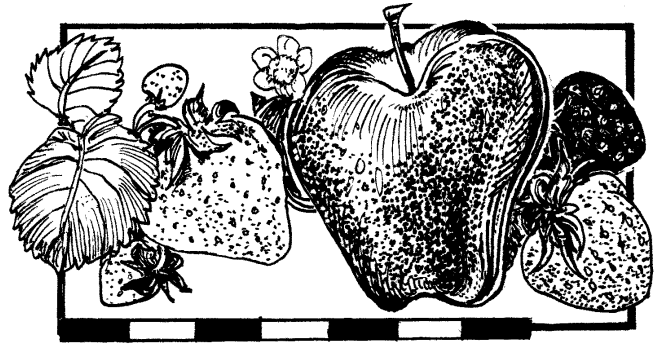
The Seven Physical Regions of the U.S.A.

The Coastal Plains. Lying along the eastern coast, this region includes the land between the Atlantic Ocean and the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. The region also includes the land along the Gulf of Mexico to the south. This expansive region runs from Maine in the northeast to Florida in the southeast then west to Texas. Prehistorically, much of this area was once underwater. Today, it is home to some of America's major cities, including New York, Atlanta, Boston, and New Orleans.

Appalachian Mountains. This narrow, but lengthy, mountain chain stretches from Newfoundland, Canada to the southern state of Alabama. It parallels much of the coastal plain region to the east. These mountains, rising to a height of 6000 feet or less, are lower than the western Rockies. The Appalachian chain of mountains includes several smaller ridges including the Green Mountains of the northeast, the Shenandoahs of Virginia, and the Great Smokies of Tennessee. Early European settlers sought routes through these mountains into the interior of North America.

Canadian Shield. Most of the Canadian Shield lies to the north, in Canada, but a portion of this region extends south into the Great Lakes region, including the states of Minnesota, Wisconsin, and

Michigan. The region was once mountainous, but over time glaciers wore away the high places, leaving a land of low plains and lakes. It is a region rich in minerals.



Interior Plains. Filling in the landscape between the Appalachians in the east and the Rocky Mountains in the west is the region known as the Interior Plains. The area includes the Central Plains to the east and the Great Plains of the west. In prehistoric times, much of the region was covered by a vast inland sea. The Interior Plains are rich farmland. Cities in the region include St. Louis, Chicago, Kansas City, and Dallas.

Rocky Mountains. Extending from Alaska into the American Southwest, this region is thinly populated. Home to the highest mountain chain in North America—some peaks rise 14,000 feet—the region was an impediment to western pioneers.

Intermountain Region. Lying between the Rockies and the western coastal mountains, the Intermountain Region is rugged, featuring desert basins, high plateaus, and deep gorges and arroyos. This arid region receives little rainfall and historically has supported a small population.

Pacific Coast. Paralleling the Pacific Ocean, the Pacific Coast region is noted for its inland mountains, including the Cascades and the Sierra Nevadas. In the north, dense forests mark the landscape, while in California, farming produces an abundant harvest of vegetables, grains, and fruits. Among the region's important cities are Seattle, Portland, San Francisco, and Los Angeles.