I. The Earliest Americans

Cross-curricular Connections

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<td>• “The Hunting of the Great Bear” (an Iroquois legend about the origin of the Big Dipper)</td>
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At a Glance

The most important ideas for you are:

- The first peoples of North America are believed to have crossed from Asia into North America, either via a land bridge or by water, sometime in the distant past, perhaps between 30,000 and 15,000 years ago.
- As the first peoples spread across and throughout North and South America, their customs, traditions, and languages changed as they adapted to new environments and new ways of food production.
- Anthropologists, for purposes of study, categorize Native Americans into culture regions.
- In studying representative cultures, it is a good idea to note their geographical region, physical environment, methods of obtaining food, housing style, clothing, and religious beliefs.

What Teachers Need to Know

In Grade 3, students are beginning a more detailed and in-depth chronological investigation of topics in U.S. history. For students in Core Knowledge schools, some of the topics will have been introduced in Grades K–2, including ways of life of a few specific Native American peoples, early European explorations of the Americas, and life in colonial America before the rebellion by the English colonists.

A. Crossing the Land Bridge

Background

Scholars generally agree that the native peoples of North and South America migrated to this continent from Asia, but they disagree on when and how the first peoples crossed from Asia to North America. Estimates on their arrival range from as long as 50,000 years to about 1,500 years ago. It can be said with some certainty that not one, but many “waves” of people coming at different times, from different places, and by many different means settled the Americas in the distant past.

During that period, Earth was undergoing the last Ice Age. Much of Earth’s water was frozen in the form of snow and ice. As a result, the ocean levels were lower, and some land that is now submerged was then above water. During the
Ice Age, Asia and North America were connected by land. Archaeologists have long believed that the first Americans crossed a “land bridge” joining the eastern tip of Asia and what is now Alaska, and moved southward through a narrow ice-free corridor. However, in recent years this idea has been questioned. Some scholars believe that conditions would have been far too cold and difficult for a crossing in Beringia. Some even doubt the existence of an ice-free passage. Today, many scholars believe that the earliest settlers may have come to North America in boats, or by walking across frozen water, or by following the then-exposed continental shelf that bordered the Asian and North American Pacific Coasts. In any case, the movement east across Asia and into North America probably took place over thousands of years.

The first peoples to cross into North America from Asia were hunting prehistoric animals, such as the woolly mammoth and the bison. It may be that the first peoples followed these herds across the land bridge; or perhaps they arrived by other means and began hunting. Wherever the animals roamed, the hunting parties, probably made up of extended family groups, followed.

In discussing this subject with students, it makes sense to mention the land bridge hypothesis but also to mention other possibilities. It is not important for third graders to have a precise knowledge of the dates, which are still the subject of much debate among historians and archaeologists. Our knowledge of this time is very limited, and discovery of ancient artifacts and bones are our only clues to the nature and timing of the movement of peoples into North America. It will be sufficient if students understand that the migration, or migrations, took place long, long ago, thousands of years before the rise of ancient civilizations they have studied, like Greece and Rome.

### Spreading Throughout the Continents

As the Ice Age warmed, the hunters who were now in North America followed their prey. They moved south through western Canada, the Rockies, Mexico, Central America, and eventually, by about 10,500 BCE, all the way to the southern end of South America. Some groups branched east until, over time, people reached the east coast of North America and the rainforests of Brazil. All along the way, some groups dropped out of the wandering and stayed in places that seemed hospitable. It is important to remember that this movement of people occurred over thousands of years.

### Changing Ways of Life: From Hunting to Farming

As the ice disappeared, so did the prehistoric animals that the hunters relied on for their food, clothing, and shelter. The animals may have died out because of the change in temperatures or because the hunters killed too many mammoths, mastodons, and other large animals. The lack of these animals may be one reason that groups moved on. They were looking for the ever-scarcer big animals to hunt.

To make up for the lack of big game, hunters turned to smaller game, such as deer and rabbits, for their food. People also began to pick wild plants, nuts, seeds, and berries and to dig up roots to eat. It is probable that people were gathering wild foods as early as 15,000 BCE. Even when people hunted, it is also likely they gathered other types of food, depending on their availability.

### Teaching Idea

Make an overhead of Instructional Master 26, Native American Culture Regions, and use it to help students identify different Native American culture regions with geographic regions in the United States. This information will help them make connections to the explorations and colonization efforts of the French, Spanish, and English that they will learn about in Sections II and III of this grade. For this section, show students the areas of settlement of the Inuit, Anasazi, and Mound Builders. Note: This map shows only culture regions in the contiguous United States. Native Americans spread throughout North and South America.