



The Indian tribes of North America

John Reed Swanton

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Excerpt from The Indian Tribes of North America

From the date of its first appearance in 1891 the Powell map of "Linguistic Families of American Indians North of Mexico" has proved of the widest utility. It has been reissued several times and copied into numerous publications. There has, however, been almost equal need of a map giving the location of the tribes under the several families.

To one familiar from his readings in early American history with the names and locations of our prominent eastern "tribes," such as the Delaware, Iroquois, Cherokee, and Choctaw, the preparation of a tribal map would seem to be simple, and it would indeed be so if all Indians had been grouped into bodies as clearly marked as those mentioned. But even in the eastern United States the term "tribe" is quickly found to have no uniform application. The Creeks were a confederation of a few dominant tribes and a number of subordinate bodies, each formerly independent. The name "Delaware" is commonly said to have covered three tribes or subtribes, but while two of these seem never to have been independent of each other, the third, the Munsee, is often treated as if it were entirely separate. The name "Powhatan" was applied to about 30 tribes or subtribes which had been brought together by conquest only a few years before Virginia was settled, and the term "Chippewa," or "Ojibwa," is used for a multitude of small bands with little claim to any sort of governmental unity. In the case of the Iroquois, on the other hand, the tribe was only a part of the governmental unit, the Iroquois Confederation, or Longhouse.

The northern Plains tribes present a certain coherence but farther south and west our difficulties multiply. An early explorer in Texas states that in that region, by "nation" was to be understood only a single town or perhaps a few neighboring villages, and in fact the number of tribal names reported from this section seems almost endless.

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