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A History of New Hampshire

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Introduction

New Hampshire, one of the thirteen original colonies, stands as a testament to the resilience, adaptability, and independent spirit that have shaped its people for millennia. Nestled in the heart of New England, bordered by mountains, forests, and a slender stretch of Atlantic coastline, New Hampshire's history weaves together stories of ancient Indigenous civilizations, daring colonial ventures, revolutionary fervor, industrial innovation, and an enduring commitment to the ideal of liberty.

The land now known as New Hampshire bears the footprints of human habitation going back thousands of years, long before the arrival of European settlers. The earliest inhabitants—Paleoindians and, later, various Algonquian-speaking peoples—developed communities and cultures intimately connected to the forests, rivers, and lakes that define the region's geography. Their beliefs, social organization, and methods of survival left a lasting imprint, reflected in the place-names and traditions that endure to this day.

The coming of Europeans, beginning with tentative explorations in the seventeenth century, marked a period of profound transformation, opportunity, and conflict. Early English settlers, enticed by the area's rich resources, established the first permanent communities from coastal fishing stations to upriver trading posts. Their new settlements were shaped by both the challenges of the natural landscape and by the complexities of colonial governance, shifting between periods of relative autonomy and control by distant authorities in Massachusetts and England.

As tensions with European powers and neighboring colonies simmered and flared, New Hampshire's inhabitants dealt with conflict, adaptation, and a growing sense of identity. This identity played an increasingly significant role during the lead-up to the American Revolution, as the independent-minded people of New Hampshire became among the earliest to stand in defiance of British rule, charting a path toward self-governance even before the Declaration of Independence was signed. In the centuries that followed, New Hampshire would continue to help shape the nation's destiny—as a manufacturing powerhouse, a player in monumental national and international events, and crucially, as the site of the first-in-the-nation presidential primary.

Throughout each era, New Hampshire's economy, population, and political culture have evolved. Waves of immigration and industrialization transformed its cities and towns, while the natural beauty of its forests and lakes drew conservationists and tourists alike. The state's motto, "Live Free or Die," remains emblematic of New Hampshire's fiercely held tradition of individualism and limited government, resonating with citizens and observers far beyond its borders.

This book traces the full arc of New Hampshire's story—honoring its Indigenous past, exploring the nuances of colonial life, recounting acts of protest and statesmanship, examining the forces of industry and innovation, and celebrating the diversity and energy of a state forever rooted in its granite foundation yet always open to renewal. The history of New Hampshire is not merely a chronicle of events; it is the ongoing narrative of people and ideas, shaped by the timeless landscapes and persistent dreams that continue to define the Granite State.

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CHAPTER ONE: Ancient Beginnings: The First Peoples of New Hampshire

Before the name "New Hampshire" was ever conceived, before European ships traced its coastline, the land was alive with the presence of people whose history stretched back across vast epochs, long before written records began to capture the passage of time. This deep history, etched in the soil, riverbeds, and archaeological sites across the state, speaks of ingenuity, adaptation, and an enduring connection to the natural world. It is a story measured not in centuries, but in millennia.

The earliest chapters of human history in what would become New Hampshire unfolded in the wake of the last great ice age. As the colossal glaciers that had sculpted the landscape began their slow retreat, they left behind a transformed terrain of rugged mountains, vast lakes, and newly formed river valleys. It was into this challenging, Tundra-like environment, perhaps as early as 11,000 to 13,000 years ago, that the first people arrived. These were the Paleoindians.

Imagine this ancient world: sparse vegetation clinging to the newly exposed ground, large mammals like caribou potentially roaming the landscape, and a climate far colder than today. These early inhabitants were highly mobile hunter-gatherers, following the movements of game and exploiting the resources available in a newly accessible territory. Their lives demanded a deep understanding of the shifting environment and the behavior of the animals they relied upon for sustenance, clothing, and tools.

Archaeological evidence provides glimpses into the lives of these Paleoindians. Stone tools, particularly distinctive fluted projectile points designed for hunting, have been found at sites across the region, including locations in northern New Hampshire like the Nevers Site and the Potter Site in Randolph. These artifacts, often crafted from high-quality stone sourced from distant quarries, indicate that these early groups traveled widely and likely maintained networks across the broader Northeast. The Potter Site, for instance, suggests intermittent use as seasonal hunting and fishing camps.

As the climate continued its gradual warming trend and the glaciers receded further north, the landscape of New Hampshire underwent significant changes. The Tundra gave way to forests of pine and eventually mixed hardwoods. This environmental shift brought new plant and animal species to the region, creating a richer and more diverse ecosystem. For the human inhabitants, this meant new resources to exploit and necessitated changes in their lifeways.

This period of environmental and cultural transition, beginning around 9,000 to 10,000 years ago, is known to archaeologists as the Archaic period. Lasting for several thousand years, the Archaic saw people adapting to a forested environment, developing new tools and techniques to harvest a wider variety of resources. Their diet became more diversified, incorporating more plant foods, smaller mammals, and a greater reliance on fish.

Evidence from Archaic sites in New Hampshire reveals the development of ground stone tools, woodworking implements, and a greater diversity of projectile points reflecting different hunting strategies. People continued to be mobile, moving seasonally to take advantage of ripe berries, nut harvests, and the crucial fish runs in the rivers. Campsites from this period, often located near waterways, show evidence of repeated use over generations, suggesting a strong connection to particular places within their territory. The Neville site in Manchester, situated near Amoskeag Falls, is a significant example of a Middle Archaic site, indicating the importance of fishing grounds.

Following the Archaic period came the Woodland period, beginning roughly 3,000 years ago and extending up to the time of European contact. This era is marked by further cultural developments, including the introduction and increasing use of pottery for cooking and storage, and the gradual adoption of agriculture. While hunting, fishing, and gathering remained vital components of their subsistence, the cultivation of crops like corn, beans, and squash began to supplement their diet, particularly in the more fertile river valleys.

The ability to grow and store crops facilitated the development of more settled communities, though seasonal movements to exploit various resources continued. Woodland period villages were often located near rivers and areas suitable for farming, sometimes showing evidence of semi-permanent structures. Trade networks also expanded during this time, connecting communities across the region.

By the time Europeans began exploring the coast in the early 17th century, the Indigenous peoples inhabiting the land that would become New Hampshire were primarily Algonquian-speaking tribes. These groups shared a common linguistic heritage and a deep cultural connection to the vast territory they called home, often referred to collectively as the Abenaki or "people of the dawnland," reflecting their location in the eastern part of the continent.

Within this broader linguistic family were distinct groups, including the Pennacook, who were a significant presence along the Merrimack River, with a central village in the area of present-day Concord. Other related groups in the region included the Winnepesaukee, Pigwacket, Sokoki, Cowasuck, and Ossipee. While sharing a common heritage, each of these bands or tribes had their own territories, customs, and leaders.

Life for these communities on the eve of European contact was intrinsically linked to the rhythms of the seasons and the bounty of the land and water. Their subsistence patterns followed an annual cycle, moving between different locations to access resources as they became available.

Spring brought the crucial fish runs, with species like salmon, shad, and alewife migrating upstream to spawn. Waterfalls and rapids became natural focal points for fishing, where techniques like using weirs – constructed traps in the rivers – allowed for efficient harvesting of large numbers of fish. Sites like Amoskeag Falls on the Merrimack were vital spring gathering places.

Summer was a time for cultivating crops in fertile river bottomlands, supplementing their diet with gathered berries, nuts, and other wild plant foods. Hunting continued throughout the year, targeting deer, moose, and other game. The forests provided not only game but also materials for shelter, tools, and transportation.

As autumn arrived, communities focused on the harvest of their crops and the gathering of nuts and other resources to store for the leaner winter months. Winter was often spent in more sheltered, sometimes more centralized villages, relying on stored foods and continued hunting and trapping. This seasonal mobility and diversified economy ensured their survival and reflected a profound knowledge of their environment.

Land, in their worldview, was not a commodity to be owned and divided in the European sense. It was a shared resource, utilized according to custom and need, with territories defined by kinship, language, and resource access rather than fixed boundaries. Their connection to the land was spiritual as well as practical, rooted in generations of lived experience and a deep respect for the natural world.

The history of these first peoples in New Hampshire is one of remarkable resilience and adaptation over thousands of years. They successfully navigated dramatic environmental changes, developed complex social structures, and built lives intimately connected to the specific landscapes they inhabited. Their presence shaped the land long before European names were given to rivers and mountains, leaving an indelible legacy that continues to resonate in the place-names and the enduring spirit of the region. This ancient foundation is the starting point for understanding the full history of New Hampshire.

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