

# Native Americans: A History of the Sioux

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A painting of a Sioux war council meeting by George Catlin in 1848. Photo from Wikimedia Commons

Among the hundreds of American Indian peoples, perhaps the best known are the Sioux. They played a prominent role in U.S. history as the country expanded westward during the 1800s. Several Sioux leaders, including Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse, rank among the most famous Native Americans. Today, the Sioux are still one of the largest Native American groups.

The name Sioux is a shortened form of Nadouessioux, meaning "snakes" or "enemies." The label was originally applied to them by the Ojibwa tribe, who often fought with the Sioux.

The Sioux are not a single tribe. Actually, they are an alliance of tribes who all traditionally spoke related languages. There were three major language divisions among the Sioux peoples: the Santee spoke Dakota, the Yankton spoke Nakota, and the Teton spoke Lakota. The language names — Dakota, Nakota and Lakota — are also commonly used to identify the three tribal groups.

## The Sioux way of life

Before the mid-1600s, the Santee Sioux lived in the area around Lake Superior. There they gathered wild rice and other foods, hunted deer and buffalo, and speared fish from canoes.

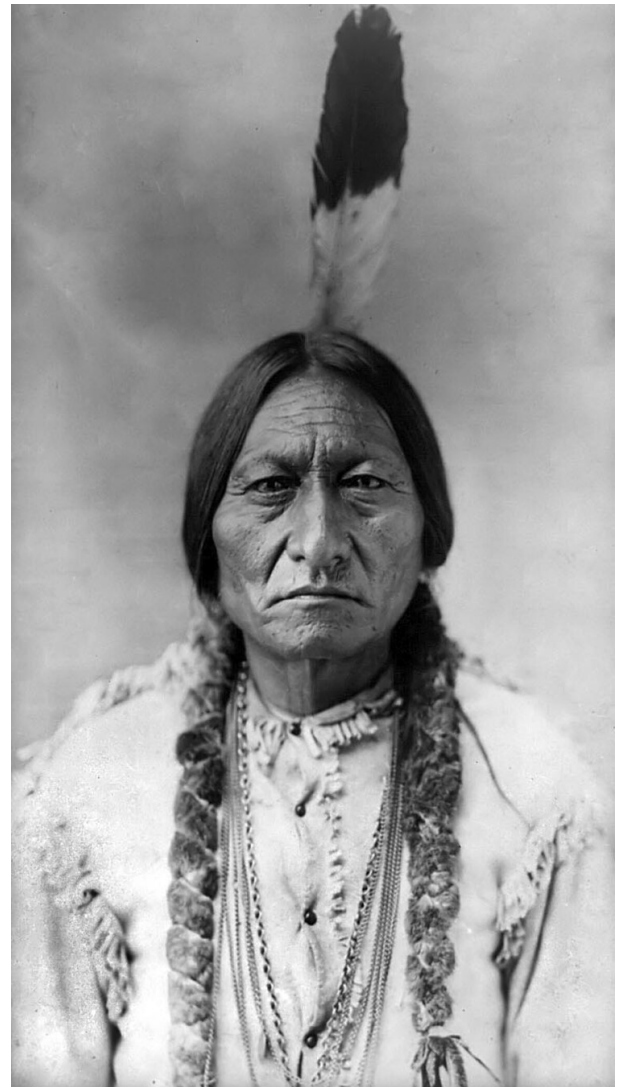
Warfare with the Ojibwa to their east drove the Santee into what is now southern and western Minnesota, at that time the territory of the agricultural Teton and Yankton. In turn, the Santee forced these two groups from Minnesota into what are now North and South Dakota.

During this period horses were becoming common on the Great Plains. Both the Teton and Yankton eventually abandoned farming in favor of a nomadic lifestyle of roaming the plains and hunting buffalo.

Traditionally, the Teton and Yankton shared many cultural traits with other nomadic Plains Indians. They lived in tepees, wore clothing made from leather or fur, and traded buffalo products for corn raised by the farming tribes of the Plains. The Sioux also raided those tribes frequently.

### **The beginning of the struggle for the West**

The Teton and Yankton eventually controlled a vast territory that encompassed parts of what are now Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Colorado and Wyoming. In the mid-1800s, an increasing number of white settlers passed through this territory as they traveled west.



In an effort to avoid conflict between the Native American groups and allow white settlers a safe passage on the Oregon Trail, the U.S. government negotiated a treaty in 1851 with the Sioux and other Plains peoples. The treaty assigned territories to each tribe throughout the northern Great Plains. The Santee Sioux gave up most of their land in Minnesota and accepted a reservation, in return for money.

The U.S government neglected its treaty obligations by failing to deliver the money and food it had promised. At the same time there was a decline in animals available for hunting. All of this led to starvation on the reservation.

In 1862, Santee warriors under the leadership of Little Crow rebelled. In what became known as the Sioux Uprising, more than 400 settlers and 70 U.S. soldiers were killed. As punishment for their roles in the rebellion, 38 Santee were hanged. After their defeat, the U.S. army moved the Santee to reservations in Dakota Territory and Nebraska.

The years following the Sioux Uprising saw continued conflict between Plains peoples and the United States military. From 1865-1867, the Oglala Sioux chief Red Cloud led thousands of warriors in a campaign to stop construction of the Bozeman Trail. The trail connected parts of Montana to the Oregon Trail. Pioneers and settlers looking for gold used the trail, and wanted it made wider for wagons. But Native Americans had been traveling on the trail for hundreds of years. In December 1866, Sioux warriors ambushed and killed about 80 U.S. soldiers.

## **The Battle of the Little Bighorn and the cessation of war**

In a treaty signed in 1868, the United States agreed to abandon the Bozeman Trail and granted the Sioux a large reservation covering what is now South Dakota west of the Missouri River. When gold was discovered in the Black Hills in the mid-1870s, however, thousands of miners swarmed onto the reservation. Their arrival led to another round of fighting.

At the Battle of the Little Bighorn in June 1876, Sioux and Cheyenne warriors annihilated Lieutenant Colonel George A. Custer and his 200 men. This stunning Indian victory brought a flood of U.S. troops to the area. The overpowered Sioux formally surrendered in October, after which most tribal members returned to their reservations. The chiefs Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse and Gall continued the fight, however. Crazy Horse surrendered in 1877 and was killed later that year. Sitting Bull and Gall escaped to Canada for several years, but finally surrendered in 1881.

Reservation life was difficult for the Sioux. White buffalo hunters had almost killed off all of the buffalo from the Plains, and crooked government officials often stole money and food intended for the Indians. In time, a new religious movement, the Ghost Dance, took hold among the Sioux. It promised the disappearance of white settlers and the return of the traditional Indian way of life.

Believing that the Ghost Dance religion threatened the uneasy peace, the U.S. government moved to squash the movement. In 1890, U.S. troops massacred more than 200 Sioux men, women and children at Wounded Knee, South Dakota. The attack ended Indian resistance to white settlement.

Today, there are more than 170,000 people of Sioux descent living in the United States. Many live on reservations in Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota and South Dakota.

## Quiz

- 1 Which section of the article highlights the idea that the Sioux came into conflict with white settlers?
- (A) Introduction [paragraphs 1-3]
  - (B) "The Sioux way of life"
  - (C) "The beginning of the struggle for the West"
  - (D) "The Battle of the Little Bighorn and the cessation of war"
- 2 According to the article, there is much diversity within the Sioux people.  
Which paragraph from the introduction [paragraphs 1-3] BEST supports the idea outlined above?
- 3 What was the MOST important reason why Red Cloud led a rebellion?
- (A) to prevent the U.S. from taking over a Sioux trail
  - (B) to prevent the U.S. from using the Sioux's natural resources
  - (C) to prevent the U.S. from destroying the Sioux religion
  - (D) to prevent the U.S. from arresting Sioux people
- 4 What is MOST likely the reason the author included information about the Ghost Dance religion?
- (A) because it related to the protection of the Bozeman Trail
  - (B) because it increased conflict between the Sioux and the U.S. government
  - (C) because it was the oldest religious practice in the history of the Sioux
  - (D) because it is still an important religious practice for the Sioux who live on reservations