

## Before Americans: Life and Culture of Navajo and Mescalero Apache People

### Fort Sumner Historic Site/Bosque Redondo Memorial



### Essential Question

**What were the lives of Navajo and Mescalero Apache people like before colonization?**

What is colonization? Colonization is defined as “the action or process of settling among and establishing control over the native people of an area.” Colonial history often begins with contact and conquest of the Native Americans, but all peoples have their story, where they come from. So how did these people live? What did they believe?

### Objectives

After completing this lesson, students will be able to:

1. Describe how the Navajo and Mescalero Apache people lived prior to colonization.
2. Describe how Navajo and Mescalero Apache people were different or alike from one another.
3. Describe where they lived and their basic cultural beliefs

## Background

When covering Native American cultures, most history books begin when the Americans or Europeans came into contact with the tribe. That gives us a sense that the people really didn't have a history before colonization, but every tribe and culture has history and story before contact and that is no different for the Navajo and Mescalero Apache people. So before studying what happened to these people once they were in conflict with the westward expanding nation, it's important to explore the rich cultures that they had. Also every culture has a story of origin and scientific story of settlement and growth. For example, Greek mythology is the way the Greeks pictured their world and the story of settlement and conquest shaped those stories.

Both the Navajo and Mescalero Apache people had very different lives before the Americans came and afterwards. They came to the southwest centuries ago and believed to have migrated from northwestern Canada and eastern Alaska where most speakers of Athabaskan language live. There are enough similarities in language that it may be possible for Navajo speakers to be understood by those living in the northwest according to the First Peoples' Cultural Foundation.

Once the Navajo and Apache migrated into the southwest, their paths diverged. The Navajo settled in the four corners region encircled by their four sacred mountains and the Apache had a larger area in eastern New Mexico, west Texas and northern Mexico. Not only did they settle in different areas, their lifestyles and culture developed very differently.

The Navajo settled into a more horticulture culture. They grew a variety of crops – corn, squash, beans, and peaches and raised Churro sheep and goats which they got from the Spanish in the 1500's. The women wove the wool on upright looms for blankets, rugs and clothing. The Spanish described the Navajo as prosperous. Because of their more sedentary lifestyle, they lived in hogan structures in family bands called clans.

The Mescalero Apache were nomadic hunters and gatherers. They got their name from the mescal plant that the women would harvest for the fruit. They lived in temporary and moveable brush shelters called wikiup. They were considered warriors and they raided much like the Comanche. According to their own website, "No other Native Americans in the Southwest caused the terror and constant fear in the settlers as the Apaches did throughout their existence." ([mescaleroapachetribe.com/our-culture/](http://mescaleroapachetribe.com/our-culture/)).

Religion, like all cultures, was an important part of both Navajo and Mescalero Apache people's lives. Both tribes had four sacred mountains and deities. But instead of reading about

it in a history lesson, let the people tell you themselves.

To learn about Navajo culture, read from the Navajo Nation website:  
<https://www.discovernavajo.com/navajo-culture.aspx> or through YouTube:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yMVRXtfjYuE>.

To learn about Mescalero Apache culture, read from the tribal website at:  
<https://mescaleroapachetribe.com/our-culture/> For a story about origin go to:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KznR8XaYjYk>

## Activities

K-4- Drawing: My Family Story

5-8- Reading Comprehension/Map of Glittering World

9-12- Writing Assignment: My Family Story

## New Mexico Content Standards

<https://webnew.ped.state.nm.us/bureaus/instructional-materials/new-mexico-content-standards/>

### K-5<sup>th</sup> Grade Standards

#### **STRAND: History**

**Content Standard I:** Students are able to identify important people and events in order to analyze significant patterns, relationships, themes, ideas, beliefs, and turning points in New Mexico, United States, and world history in order to understand the complexity of the human experience.

**K-4 Benchmark I-A**—New Mexico: Describe how contemporary and historical people and events have influenced New Mexico communities and regions.

#### **K-4 Grade Performance Standards**

**(2nd Grade)** 1. Describe how historical people, groups, and events have influenced the local community.

**(3rd Grade)** 1. Describe how the lives and contributions of people of New Mexico influenced local communities and regions.

**(4th Grade)** 1. Identify important issues, events, and individuals from New Mexico pre-history to the present.

## 5<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Standards

### **STRAND: Geography**

5-8 Benchmark 2-B: explain the physical and human characteristics of places and use this knowledge to define regions, their relationships with other regions, and their patterns of change:

#### **5-8 Grade Performance Standards**

5th Grade) 1. describe human and natural characteristics of places.

(6th Grade) 1. explain how places change due to human activity.

(7th Grade) 1. select and explore a region by its distinguishing characteristics; 2. describe the role of technology in shaping the characteristics of places.

(8th Grade) 1. describe how individual and cultural characteristics affect perceptions of locales and regions; and 2. describe political, population and economic regions that result from patterns of human activity, using New Mexico as an example.

## 9<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> Grade Standards

### **STRAND: History**

**Content Standard I:** Students are able to identify important people and events in order to analyze significant patterns, relationships, themes, ideas, beliefs, and turning points in New Mexico, United States, and world history in order to understand the complexity of the human experience.

**9-12 Benchmark 1-A. New Mexico:** analyze how people and events of New Mexico have influenced United States and world history since statehood:

#### **9-12 Performance Standards**

2. Analyze the geographic, economic, social and political factors of New Mexico that impact United States and world history, to include: d. role of the federal government (e.g., military bases, national laboratories, national parks, Indian reservations, transportation systems, water projects).

### **Additional Resources:**

1. Websites with more information about Navajo culture (sites previewed for relevance):  
<https://www.navajo-nsn.gov/history.htm>, <http://navajopeople.org/blog/navajo-culture/>
2. Websites with more information about Mescalero Apache culture (sites previewed for relevance):  
<https://mescaleroapachetribe.com/>, <https://newmexiconomad.com/mescalero-apache/>