Chapter 1

How the first peoples of Washington governed themselves

Since time immemorial

In the long view of history, the state of Washington is pretty new.

Thousands of years before White, Asian, Latino, and African American settlers arrived, many different groups of Native peoples lived in this part of the world.

Native people were always changing: they moved around, learned new skills, invented new methods for fishing and hunting, fought with each other, and then made peace. They traveled; traded with other groups; gambled; held races, ceremonies, and celebrations; and created trails that crisscrossed what we now call Washington State. Those trails linked up to other trails that covered the entire continent.

Illustration by Nguyen Tran

The ways that tribes or nations lived, and the languages they spoke, were vastly different from one another. People who lived on the coast and on the rainy west side of our state lived in different ways from those who lived on the eastern side of the state, where it is drier, colder in the winter, and hotter in the summer.

All of them fished, hunted, and gathered wild plants for food. They made their homes, their canoes, their clothing, and everything else they needed from the materials that nature provided.

They knew how to harvest fish without harming future fish runs. They knew how to burn prairie lands to keep trees from growing there, so that the camas plant, whose roots they ate, would flourish. They managed the natural world, but they also considered themselves part of it.

During the spring and summer, they often traveled and camped where the best berries or the best hunting were. In the winter, they returned to their winter houses or longhouses, where they spent time indoors, making baskets, clothing, and other necessities, and telling stories around the fire. Telling stories was one very important way older people passed their wisdom on to younger people.

photo courtesy Gingko Petrified Forest State Park

No one knows how long ago these pictures were carved by Wanapum Indians near the present-day town of Vantage. They may be several thousand years old.

Indian or Native American?

The original peoples of the Americas were first called *Indians* in 1492 by Columbus. When he "discovered" America, he was really lost and thought his ships had reached India. Somehow, the name Indian stuck.

Now people sometimes wonder whether it's OK to call Native Americans Indians. Over the years, Native people have thought about this a lot. Naturally, they don't all have the same opinion.

But most are OK with either term—Indian or Native American. A lot of Native organizations, such as the National Congress of American Indians, use the word *Indian* in their names, and Native people commonly refer to "Indian Country" when they talk about reservations or the national network of Indian communities.

What most Native peoples really prefer, however, is to be identified as members of their own tribe. For instance, they would like you to say, "My friend Denny is Skokomish" rather than "My friend Denny is Indian."

image courtesy Washington State Archives, #AR-07809001-ph003379

This Makah woman is drying fish in the sun at Neah Bay. The scarecrow at the end of the rack is there to scare away hungry birds.

image courtesy Tacoma Public Libray, #29889

In the winter, Skokomish people lived in cedar houses, but in the summer they lived in mat shelters they could move around easily to hunt and gather plants and berries. You can also see the baskets they made.

Throughout the year, Native peoples held special ceremonies to show that they were grateful for all that nature provided. They honored the spirits of the fish, the trees, the sun, and the moon. Their strong feelings about the spiritual nature of life were a source of strength and unity.

Who were their leaders?

Most groups of people chose different leaders for different purposes. For instance, one person might be the leader for a hunting trip, but a different person might take the lead in deciding where to build a village. If someone was needed to represent the group in dealing with another tribe (or later with explorers or settlers), that might be yet another person.

There were also spiritual leaders, and people who had special knowledge about how to care for people when they got sick. Sometimes, certain families provided special kinds of leadership for many generations.

People mostly looked to elders for leadership, because they had more experience and wisdom. In fact, elders were honored and held in high esteem. That's still true in Native societies today.

In these societies, no one owned land. They didn't have rules about who was a member of which tribe, either. They had networks for trading and visiting each other, and people from one band or tribe often married into another.

What happened to Indians when explorers, fur traders, and settlers came here?

Starting in the 1700s, tribal societies in Washington were radically changed by the coming of European explorers and fur traders, and by settlers who started

PEMCO Webster & Stevens Collection, Museum of History & Industry, 83.10.10.923.2

William Shelton, who lived from 1868 to 1938, was a Snohomish tribal leader. He was famous for carving huge story poles to help more people learn about Indian traditions and culture.

Drawing by Peg Deam, Suquamish artist, image courtesy of Suquamish Tribe

Old Man House, built by Suquamish Indians, was over a thousand years old. People added to it over time so that it got longer and longer. In the 1920s, tribal leaders say the U.S. Army burned it down because they didn't approve of many families living together under one roof.

to move here in the middle of the 1800s. At first, tribes welcomed these new people, because Indians liked trading furs for iron pots, metal knives, and other new and useful things.

But then the settlers, backed by the U.S. government, took over most of the state and signed treaties with Native peoples that required them to give up most of their land. In the treaties they signed, tribes agreed to live on *reservations*—pieces of land that were tiny compared to what they had before. In the place of tribal self-government, the U.S. government took charge. Many of the promises that the government made in the treaties were broken.

The traditional ways that Washington people lived and governed themselves were changed forever. Those changes are explained in later chapters of this book.

University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections, neg NA684

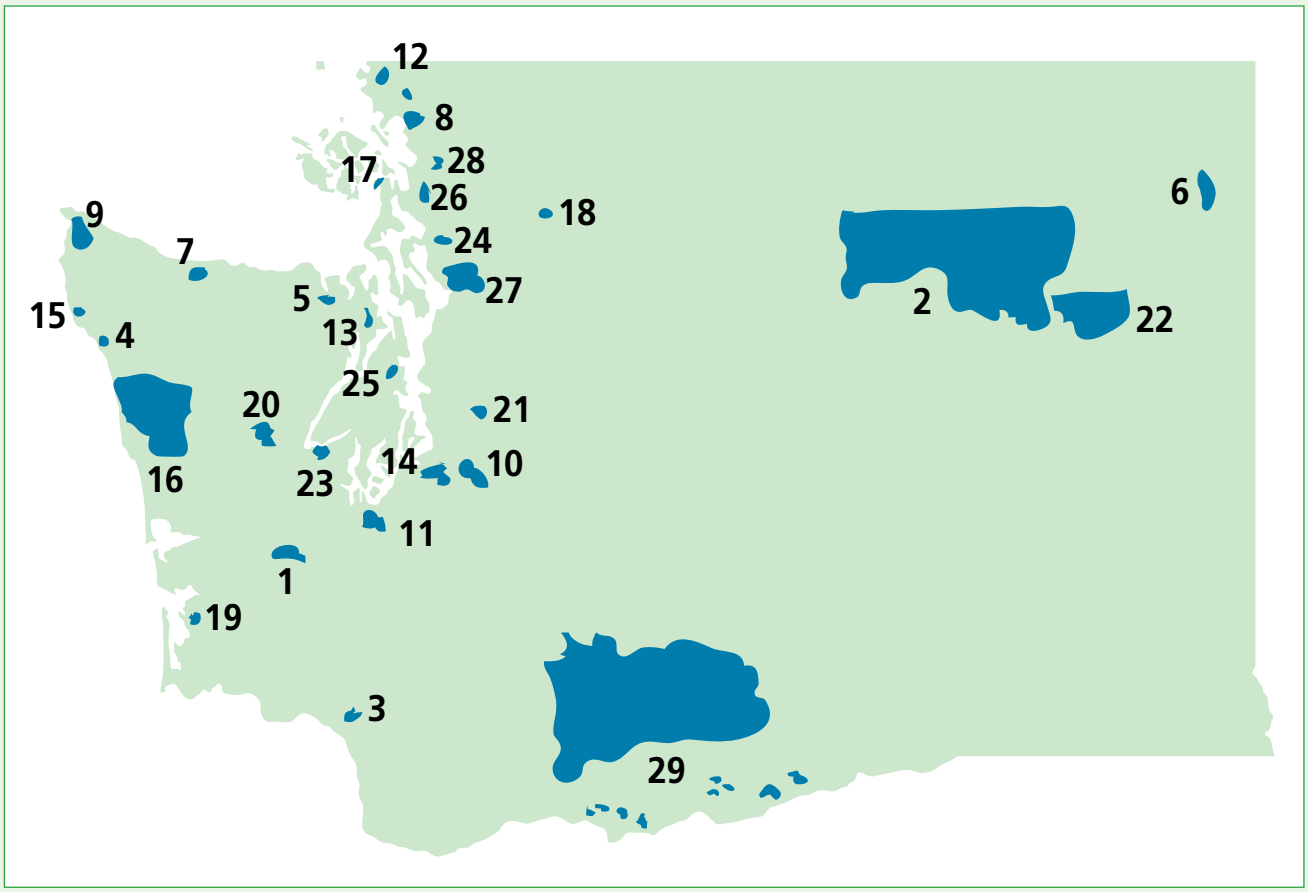
Ten Swinomish men stand next to a racing canoe in about 1895 near the town of LaConner.

University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections, neg NA1036

Young Chelan women returning from a horse race in 1912

But all the traditions of Washington's first peoples weren't lost. Even though the new settlers' government banned many of the Indians' spiritual and ceremonial practices for a long time, they were kept alive, often in secret. On reservations and in Indian communities around the state, those traditions and beliefs continue to be passed from one generation to the next. Today, tribes blend ancient traditions with modern ways of governing.

Indians often credit their deeply spiritual traditions with giving them the strength to survive the overwhelming force of the settlers who took over most of their land, and the many twists and turns of U.S. policy toward Native peoples.



Federally recognized tribes in Washington state

1 Confederated Tribes of the Chehalis Reservation
2 Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation
3 Cowlitz Indian Tribe
4 Hoh Tribe
5 Jamestown S'Klallam Tribe
6 Kalispel Tribe of Indians
7 Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe
8 Lummi Nation
9 Makah Tribe
10 Muckleshoot Indian Tribe
11 Nisqually Indian Tribe
12 Nooksack Indian Tribe
13 Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe
14 Puyallup Tribe of Indians
15 Quileute Tribe
16 Quinault Indian Nation
17 Samish Indian Nation
18 Sauk-Suiattle Indian Tribe
19 Shoalwater Bay Tribe
20 Skokomish Indian Tribe
21 Snoqualmie Tribe of Indians
22 Spokane Tribe
23 Squaxin Island Tribe
24 Stillaguamish Tribe of Indians
25 Suquamish Tribe
26 Swinomish Indian Tribal Community
27 Tulalip Tribes
28 Upper Skagit Indian Tribe
29 Yakama Nation

Other groups of people are trying to get the federal government to recognize them as tribes. They have to be able to trace their history, which can be very hard to do.

How do Indians live now?

Today, Indian self-government, traditions, and culture are making a big comeback. After many years of hardship, Indians have won back many of the rights spelled out in the treaties they signed. Today, some tribal governments can do much more for their people than they could in the past because they can operate casinos and other businesses. They use the money they make to pay for health care, education, and to care for their elders. Still, many tribes that don't have casinos or other businesses struggle with extreme poverty. There is more about all of this in other chapters.

Tribal governments are important to all of us because they are leaders in the work to save wild salmon and other wildlife, and to protect the health of rivers, the ocean, the air, and the land we share. There's more about this in other chapters too.

photo courtesy Kalispel Tribe

The Whitford family of the Kalispel Tribe. Parents Shantel and Niki live on the Kalispel Reservation and work for the tribe to promote a strong, healthy community.

photo courtesy Squaxin Island Tribe

Squaxin Island tribal members baking clams and corn—getting ready to feed a lot of people!

Female House Post, left, and *Male House Post,* right, were carved by Squaxin Island/Skokomish artist Andrea Wilbur-Sigo and designed by Ruth and Andy Peterson, who are both Skokomish. These welcome figures are painted red and black to represent strength and the ancestral spirit of the Northwest.

Andrea Wilbur-Sigo is the first known Native American woman carver in many generations.