



Fishermen at Celilo Falls, Columbia River

Northwest Museum of Arts & Culture/Eastern Washington State Historical Society

1 How the first people of Washington governed themselves

In the long march of history, “Washington” is a recent creation. For thousands of years before white settlers came, native people lived in this part of the world without creating the boundaries that define our state today.

The pattern of their lives was shaped by the natural world – by where the rivers flowed, where the berries grew, and where the best fishing spots were located. Washington’s first people didn’t plant crops or build factories; they fished, hunted, and gathered wild plants for food. They made their homes, 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 them open, 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 built summer camps where the best berries or the best hunting was. In the winter, they returned to their winter houses or longhouses, where they spent more time indoors, making baskets, clothing, and other necessities, and telling stories around the fire.

“Indians Fishing at The Dalles,” 1854, from a report published with the results of a railroad survey for the Northern Pacific Railroad.



drawing courtesy Governor's Mansion Foundation



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Colville encampment, Chief Joseph's village at pow wow honoring the Nez Perce battle of 1877 at Nespelem, Washington, 1900

Throughout the year, native peoples held special ceremonies to show their appreciation for the bounty that nature provided. They honored the spirits of the fish, the trees, the sun and moon. This powerful connection to the spiritual nature of life was a source of strength and unity.

There were important differences between people on the east and west sides of the Cascades – just as there are today. Much of the east side of the state is drier, more open land, and the climate is hotter in the summer and colder in the winter than the rainy, more heavily forested west side of the state. As you might expect, the people who lived near the coast or around Puget Sound ate more seafood – clams, oysters, and even whale meat, than people who lived on the other side of the Cascade mountains. People in different areas also spoke different languages. What all Washington's first people had in common, though, was that they were very good at catching and preserving salmon. Wild salmon were extremely important to all of Washington's first peoples.

Even though Washington's original cultures and traditions were shaped by differences in climate and location, the way people governed themselves was similar. They didn't write things down, so everything they did involved a lot of talking – and a lot of careful listening. In fact, listening was a very highly-developed skill. Adults taught young people the rules of good behavior by telling stories that gave specific examples of what happened when a person didn't behave the way they should. Young people learned by listening, and by really thinking about what they heard.

When a band or tribe needed to make a decision, they gathered around and talked about what to do. If there was a disagreement, people continued to talk about it until they found a solution everyone could agree on. This is called governing by *consensus*. Sometimes it would take a very long time to reach consensus on a decision, but it was more important for everyone to agree than to make a decision quickly.

Most groups of people had 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



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William Shelton carving a story pole, 1920

in dealing with another tribe (or with white explorers or settlers), that might be yet another person. People mostly looked to elders for leadership, because they had more experience and wisdom. In fact, elders were honored and held in high esteem. Sometimes, certain families provided certain kinds of leadership for many generations.

In these societies, no one owned land; that idea never occurred to them. They didn't have hard and fast definitions of 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. Although each tribal group had its own traditions, its own general territory, and its own ways of doing things, there was plenty of exchange that kept people from becoming isolated.



Chelan women on horseback, Chelan, 1912

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Tribal societies in Washington were radically changed by the coming of white settlers in the middle of the 1800s. In just a few years, 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 place of tribal self-government, the U. S. government asserted its authority.

The traditional ways Washington's people lived and governed themselves were changed forever. But the traditions of Washington's first peoples weren't lost. Even though many of the Indians' spiritual and ceremonial practices were banned for many years by the new settlers' government, they were kept alive, often in secret. On reservations and in Indian communities around the state, those traditions continue to be passed from one generation to the next. Today, many 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 white settlers, and the many twists and turns of U. S. policy towards native peoples.

Today, Indian self-government, traditions and culture are experiencing a dramatic comeback. A series of court decisions and changes in national and state policy have affirmed the rights spelled out in the treaties and stimulated the growth and development of tribal self-determination. These decisions were won by many years of determined effort by Indian people and their allies. Today, tribal governments are growing and changing, and taking on important new roles and responsibilities. Tribal governments have become more and more important not just to Indians, but to all of us, because they are involved in issues such as saving wild salmon, protecting the health of rivers and streams, managing urban growth, improving education, and creating jobs.



Swinomish men pose on the beach behind their racing canoe; La Conner, 1895

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