**Original Inhabitants**

Archaeological evidence seems to suggest human habitation in the area that became [North Dakota](http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1520.html) as far back as 20,000 years ago. Little is known about those people, but they left behind stone implements that indicate they were big game hunters who seem to have disappeared from the area around 5000 BC.

In the years between 1100 and 1300 AD, tribes migrated from the east, including the Hidatsa and Mandan. They built extensive villages, developed agriculture and hunted and traded over a large area. By the 1600s, the Cheyenne had become temporary residents of the area, following the great herds of bison. They, along with the Lakota Sioux and Assiniboine, profited immensely by domesticating wild horses of Spanish origin.

At the time of the white incursions into the region in the early 1800s, major native groups included the following: the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara along the Missouri River; the Ntonai Sioux in present-day southeastern North Dakota; the Lakota, the most numerous and powerful of the tribes, in the southwest; the Ojibwa in the northeast and the Assiniboine in the northwest.

**European Claims and Exploration**

In 1679 René-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle explored the upper Mississippi River and on the basis of that exploit claimed the entire drainage basin for his native France. However, it was not until 1738 that French Canadian Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, Sieur de La Vérendrye, acted on the claim. He searched the area unsuccessfully for a [Northwest Passage](http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h515.html), but noted the abundance of fur-bearing animals. He developed a friendship and lived among the Mandan in the area near today’s Bismarck.

In 1762, near the close of the [French and Indian War](http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h608.html), France rewarded its ally Spain by granting them the area known as Louisiana in payment for their assistance. The major European influence at the turn of the century was Canadian, primarily through the activities of the North West Company. David Thompson explored north central North Dakota in 1797 and drew maps of his findings. The region did not long remain in Spanish hands, however, and it was ceded back to France in 1800. The rapid territorial exchange was completed in 1803, when France sold the area to the fledgling United States in what is known as the [Louisiana Purchase](http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h476.html). This acquisition provided about two-thirds of the territory that today is North Dakota; the remaining portion was obtain from Britain in the [Convention of 1818](http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h254.html).

**Early U.S. Exploration and Settlement**

Relations between the Indians and the occasional white explorers and settlers were generally peaceful in the early decades of the 19th century. The fur trade changed native life, bringing guns, metal implements and cloth. Contact with the whites also introduced disease and the Mandan and Hidatsa in particular were hit hard by smallpox in 1837.

By the 1840s, two major changes were occurring. First, the seemingly unlimited number of fur-bearing animals was being exhausted, reducing a major source of income for many of the tribes. Second, surrounding areas were developing rapidly; Iowa achieved statehood in 1846 and Minnesota gained separate territorial status in 1849. Spillover from those areas increased the white population of the Dakota regions, which aggravated a number of the Indian tribes that resented incursions onto their homelands.

During the 1850s, organized efforts were made by land companies to entice settlers. Sioux Falls was founded in 1856 and over the next few years Yankton, Bon Homme and Vermillion (site of a former military installation) followed. The increased population led to the establishment of the Dakota Territory immediately before [Abraham Lincoln](http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h837.html) took office in March 1861. The new jurisdiction included present-day North and South Dakota, plus portions of Montana and Wyoming. Yankton served as the first capital and William Jayne the first territorial governor. Montana was separated in 1864 and Wyoming in 1868. The white population in the Dakotas, however, grew very slowly, due in part to the challenging climate and the remote location. Also inhibiting growth was the widely held perception in much of the United States that the northern Great Plains area was devoid of anything of value; maps and atlases of the day labeled the region “The Great American Desert.”

Indian problems also dissuaded many settlers from considering the Dakotas as a possible home. In 1862, the Santee Dakota in Minnesota had staged an uprising and then fled into the Dakota Territory. They were pursued by the [U.S. Army](http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1963.html), which began to construct a series of forts across the territory to provide protection for settlers and travelers. The presence of the army also served to stir up tensions among the resident tribes, the Sioux in particular.

Some stability was brought by a treaty in 1868, in which the U.S. pledged to keep settlers out of specified areas. In return, some of the Sioux, but not all, agreed to remain on reservations west of the Missouri River. The coming of the railroads and the discovery of gold, however, would again ignite warfare in the region.

**Economic Growth**

*Railroads.* Survey parties had visited North Dakota in the 1850s to scout for the most favorable route for transcontinental rail lines. In 1864, the wartime Congress provided a major boost to these dreams by establishing lavish land grants to help railroad companies finance their ventures and attract settlers to remote western locations. The [Northern Pacific Railroad](http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1812.html) availed itself of this assistance and built westward from [Duluth](http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h2126.html), reaching the Dakota territorial line in 1871. Soldiers were needed to protect the workers from angry Sioux. New towns sprang up along the route, including Fargo on the Red River and Bismarck on the east side of the Missouri.

*Gold.*The discovery of gold in the Black Hills (present-day South Dakota) in 1874 brought a flood of prospectors in violation of the prevailing treaty agreement. [Crazy Horse](http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h3755.html) of the Oglala Lakota (Sioux) and [Sitting Bull](http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h3771.html) of the Hunkpapa Lakota led the resistance. Most of the fighting occurred in today’s Montana, including the victory over [Custer at the Little Bighorn](http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1531.html) in 1876. Sitting Bull and his followers fled into Canada, but surrendered in northern North Dakota in 1881.

Native life was also negatively impacted by the tremendous slaughter of the bison herds that occurred on the Great Plains in the 1870s. With their prime means of subsistence endangered, many Indians were forced onto reservations.

*Agriculture.* Farms developed first in the areas near the Red River, but their numbers remained few because of frequent clashes with Indians. In the immediate post-Civil War period, some growth occurred, but under what resembled a colonial system — the Dakotans produced grains and other products that were shipped east for processing and sale; in return, more expensive manufactured goods were sent to the frontier. Many Dakotans barely eked out an existence, while people living elsewhere profited more handsomely from the farmers' efforts.

Congress passed the Homestead Act of 1862, which provided 160 acres of public land to heads of families who would live on the land for five years and pay only a modest registration fee; alternatively, a more affluent settler could pay $1.25 per acre and receive title to the land after only six months’ residence. This liberalized federal land policy attracted settlers to the Dakota area in the late 1860s.

The 1870s were a time of prosperity for many farmers. Some large operations, known as “bonanza farms,” hired hundreds of workers to farm thousands of acres in eastern North Dakota. Fortunes were made from the sale of hard spring wheat, but the great bonanza came to an end in the depression of the [1890s](http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h792.html).

*Cattle.* The availability of railroad transportation to major markets in the 1870s made cattle production attractive to ranchers. Young [Theodore Roosevelt](http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h959.html), who was grieving from the loss of his wife, spent two years on ranches on the Little Missouri River and his writings did much to dispel the myths about the Dakotas. The years 1886 and 1887 were the turning point for the cattle industry. The summer was exceedingly dry and was followed by a brutal winter. Huge numbers of underfed and weakened cattle perished. Those conditions were exacerbated by intense competition from other areas that resulted in plummeting beef prices. The nature of the Dakota cattle industry changed — smaller ranches became the norm; areas were enclosed by fences and the era of the open range passed.

**North Dakota Statehood**

During the territorial phase, the northern and southern Dakota regions had limited contact. The railroad tracks ran east and west, directing the settlers’ attentions in those directions. Alexander McKenzie, a lobbyist for the Northern Pacific, was the behind-the-scenes Republican Party kingmaker who led conservative forces in calling upon businessmen and financial institutions to solve the area’s problems. He was instrumental in the change of location of the territorial capital from Yankton to Bismarck in 1883.

A boundary acceptable to both north and south was fixed in 1887 and two years later Congress enacted [enabling legislation](http://home.u-s-history.com/pages/h1451.html#area) that set the path for the admission of the Dakotas, Washington and Montana. North Dakota became the 39th state to join the Union and South Dakota the 40th, both on November 2, 1889. John Miller was elected the first governor and contended with the pressing issues of the day — [prohibition](http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1085.html) and a lottery.

Many farmers became increasingly unhappy with the state’s Republican leadership during the hard times of the 1890s. They looked for scapegoats and had no difficulty with locating two major candidates. The railroads clearly engaged in discriminatory practices by charging higher rates for Dakota grain traveling east than for manufactured items heading west. The banks also were the target of farmer ire and were accused of keeping the growers in perpetual debt through unfair lending practices.

An effort was made to rally collective action through such organizations as the Dakota Farmers’ Alliance, part of a [movement](http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h857.html) in the South and West that was designed to increase the farmers' economic and political clout.

More meaningful reform efforts came after 1900 during the [Progressive Era](http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1061.html). State laws provided an early form of workmen’s compensation and election reform, but efforts to change railroad practices were largely unsuccessful.

World War I brought a brief period of prosperity to North Dakota. A heavy demand for wheat and high prices cheered many farmers, but the bottom dropped out of the market again when European nations resumed production after the conflict. Grim as the [1920s](http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1564.html) were, the [1930s](http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1569.html) were worse. In addition to stiff competition and falling prices, the farmer was plagued by insects, drought, bankruptcies and foreclosures. Many were forced off the land, leading again to a consolidation of farms in the hands of fewer operators.

In 1915, Arthur C. Townley (1880-1959), a farmer and former state Socialist Party figure, was active in the founding of the Nonpartisan League (NPL), a group that avoided formal ties with the Republicans or Democrats, but did endorse sympathetic candidates. The NPL spread across the upper farm belt and fought for state ownership of cold storage facilities, grain elevators and mills.

Lynn J. Frazier (1874-1947) was a successful NPL candidate for governor of North Dakota in 1916. He supported programs helpful to farmers and backed the establishment of the state-owned Bank of North Dakota (1919). Scandal forced his recall in 1921, but he was promptly voted a Senate seat as a Republican and served there until 1941. The NPL went into decline in the 1920s when internal dissention and charges of disloyalty during World War I caused its collapse.

William “Wild Bill” Langer (1886-1959) helped to revive the NPL during his election as governor in 1932, but ran afoul of federal authorities for soliciting contributions from government workers. He was removed from office by the state supreme court, but was reelected in 1936. Langer backed a grain embargo during which farmers held their produce off the market in an effort to raise prices; the maneuver was a short-term success. He was later elected four times to the U.S. Senate.

Another prominent personality of the period between the wars was William Lemke (1878-1950), an attorney with early ties to the NPL. In 1932, Lemke was elected to the House of Representatives as a Republican, but was initially supportive of the New Deal. He later turned against Roosevelt and ran for president in 1936 on Father Charles Coughlin’s National Union for Social Justice ticket. Lemke’s bid attracted support in farm states only.

Gerald P. Nye (1892-1971) was a journalist and progressive Republican, and was the dominant North Dakota political figure of his era. He served 20 years in the U.S. Senate as a chief spokesman for [isolationism](http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1601.html), a position that represented many of his German-American constituents. Nye headed a committee in the 1930s that investigated the relationship between business interests and American entry into World War I.

New Deal relief programs were vitally important to many of North Dakota’s destitute citizens, and dam construction provided irrigation and power generation for many areas in the state. Agricultural agents introduced many farmers to the benefits of [dry farming](http://home.u-s-history.com/pages/h1451.html#dry-farm). Nevertheless, any real measure of prosperity did not return to North Dakota until [World War II](http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1661.html).

**Postwar North Dakota**

North Dakota repeated its pattern from a quarter of a century earlier — prospering from gain sales during wartime, but plunging into recession in its aftermath. Farming conglomerates picked up much land during hard times and the number of small family farms diminished. Some efforts were made to diversify the grain-based economy through the manufacture of ethanol (used in antifreeze, solvents and disinfectants) and pastas. Demand for wheat peaked in the 1970s with massive sales to the Soviet Union; many farmers bought new equipment and increased their acreage only to see prices drop a few years later.

Irrigation projects were launched to provide dependable sources of water, power and flood control. The Garrison Dam on the Missouri River was started in 1947, which backed up waters in Lake Sakakawea, a prime recreation area. In 1968, the Garrison Diversion Project was launched for the purpose of distributing water through a series of canals; environmental concerns halted construction for several years, but Congressional modifications in 1986 got the project back on track.

Improved water resources have enabled North Dakota farmers to diversify their efforts to include soybeans, sugar beets and seed potatoes.

Oil was discovered near Tioga in 1951, touching off a minor “oil rush.” Refineries have been developed at Mandan and Williston.

The melting of heavy winter snows in the spring of 1997 caused extensive flooding along the Red River and significant damage in Grand Forks and Fargo.

When European explorers first visited North Dakota, there were several Native American groups living there. The Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara lived along the Missouri River, farming corn, sunflowers, beans, and squash. The Sioux, Chippewa, and Assiniboine lived in the northeast and were mainly hunters.

During the early 1600s, France established trading posts in Canada. René-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle claimed all land surrounding the Mississippi River for France in 1682. This included the southern half of North Dakota, because the Missouri River flows into the Mississippi River. France also claimed the northeastern half of North Dakota, but in 1713 gave this land to Great Britain.

The first known explorer to actually visit North Dakota was French-Canadian Pierre La Vérendrye. He and his sons visited Mandan villages near present-day Bismarck. In 1762, France gave Louisiana to Spain. Spanish traders began traveling up the Missouri River to exchange goods for furs. In 1797, David Thompson explored English North Dakota, including the Turtle Mountains and the land along the Souris River. Alexander Henry built Pembina, the first permanent trading post of North Dakota, in 1801.

In 1800, Spain had given Louisiana back to France. The United States bought Louisiana from France in 1803. The following year, President Thomas Jefferson sent Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to explore this new territory and establish a trail to the Pacific Ocean. In October 1804, Lewis and Clark reached North Dakota and built Fort Mandan across from present-day Stanton. As they made friends with the Mandan and Hidatsa Indians they were introduced to Sacajawea, a young Shoshone woman who had been kidnapped years before by the Hidatsa. Lewis and Clark set out again in April 1805. With them were Sacajawea, her baby, and her husband, a French-Canadian fur trader.

In 1812, Scottish settlers from Canada established a settlement at Pembina. In 1818, Great Britain gave the United States the northeastern region of North Dakota. All of present-day North Dakota was then U.S. territory. Many of the Canadians moved north onto British territory and by 1823, all had left North Dakota.

Congress created the Dakota Territory in 1861. The territory included North and South Dakota, and a large part of Wyoming and Montana. The territory was open for settlement on New Year’s Day 1863. Settlers could receive free land if they improved it. However, few settlers came to North Dakota due to poor roads, harsh winters, and Indians attacks. In 1862, Sioux Indians massacred hundreds of settlers in Minnesota. Some of these then fled to the Dakota Territory. By 1870, North Dakota only had a population of around 2,400 people.

During the 1870s, settlers began to establish towns in North Dakota. Fargo and Grand Forks were begun in 1871. Bismarck was founded in 1872. That same year North Dakota’s first railroad reached Fargo, then Bismarck in 1873. Large-scale farming began in 1875 in Red River Valley. These farms earned such large profits, they became known as bonanza farms. Where there were trees, people built wooden houses. But, most people built sod houses by piling huge chunks of ground together.

During the 1880s, people in the Dakota Territory sought statehood. However, they wanted two states to be formed, as the north and south had very little in common. Congress divided the territories and North Dakota became the 39th state on Nov. 2, 1889.

North Dakota’s population grew rapidly following statehood. Farming increased as well. In the early 1900s, farmers grew angry at banks, railroads, and mills that were making a lot of money. In 1915, the Nonpartisan League (NPL) was established in North Dakota. It worked in behalf of the state’s farmers. The following year, the NPL helped to elect Lynn Frazier as governor. He opened state-owned businesses such as the Bank of North Dakota at Bismarck in 1919 and the North Dakota Mill and Elevator at Grand Forks in 1922. The bank gave low-interest loans and the mill gave farmers better prices. The state reduced farm taxes and more money was given to rural schools.

North Dakota became the country’s top barley producer in 1925. Sugar beets and red potatoes also became important. As farming diversified, new people came to the state. By 1930, North Dakota’s population reached 680,845 people.

The Great Depression (1929-1939) caused many in the nation to lose their jobs and their land. North Dakota experienced a drought during the 1930s as well. This led to a severe drop in farm production and population for the state. By 1936, almost one-half of North Dakotans were receiving government aid. By 1939, one-third of the state’s farmers had lost their land. During this time, the state and federal governments took steps to help North Dakota farmers. The North Dakota Water Conservation Commission was created in 1937. Other agencies worked to help provide irrigation methods and prevent erosion of the soil.

World War II (1939-1945) also helped North Dakota’s economy to recover. Farmers supplied large amounts of food for the armed forces. But, after the war farm prices fell and the increased use of machinery led many workers in search of employment elsewhere.

The Garrison Dam near Riverdale was completed in 1960. It is one of the world’s biggest earthen dams. The dam provides flood control, hydroelectric power, water for irrigation, and recreation on Lake Sacajawea. In 1951, oil was discovered in Tioga. By 1984, North Dakota had become a leading oil producer by generating 53 million barrels of oil a year.

In 1957, North Dakota founded an economic development commission that works to attract industry to the state. The state’s rate of industrial growth was the highest in the country from 1958-1969. The U.S. Air Force built bases in Grand Forks and Minot during this time. In 1968, the Garrison Diversion Project was started. It was designed to bring water for irrigation from the Missouri River to North Dakota. However, environmental concerns slowed the progress of the project until 1986.

During the 1970s, coal, oil, and natural gas production increased while the farming industry struggled. Blizzards and floods destroyed the animals and land. During the 1980s, heat and drought did the same. The number of farms fell from 45,000 in 1970 to 33,000 by 1993. Oil production also fell during the 1980s. Thousands of North Dakotans again left the state in search of better opportunities.

Today, North Dakota is a state where there is little air or water pollution. During the early 1990s, North Dakota gained 25,000 new jobs. Trade with Canada and Mexico is growing and tourism is increasing as well. State leaders still strive to broaden North Dakota’s economy that depends heavily upon agriculture. Increased industrial growth would raise the per capita income and create more job opportunities for North Dakotans.

|  |
| --- |
| **Timeline** |
| **1682**—France claims much of Northern America, including North Dakota  **1713**—England receives the northern part of North Dakota from France  **1738**—French explorer Pierre Vérendrye makes the first explorations in North Dakota  **1803**—The United States acquires North Dakota through the Louisiana Purchase  **1804-1806**—Meriwether Lewis and William Clark pass through North Dakota and meet Sacajawea, a Native American that travels with them on there expedition to the Pacific coast  **1812**—Scottish and Irish people from Canada attempt a settlement at Pembina  **1818**—The United States acquires the northern section of North Dakota  **1861**—Congress establishes the Dakota Territory  **1863**—The Dakota Territory is open for settlement  **1872**—Bismarck is founded and the first railroad reaches North Dakota  **1875**—Bonanza farms begin in the Red River Valley  **1883**—The University of North Dakota opens  **1889**—North Dakota became the 39th state  **1897**—The first public library of North Dakota opens in Grafton  **1915**—The Nonpartisan League was established to help the farmers  **1919**—The Bank of North Dakota is established at Bismarck  **1922**—The North Dakota Mill and Elevator opens at Grand Fork  **1937**—The North Dakota Water Conservation Commission is created  **1951**—Oil is found near Tioga  **1960**—The Garrison Dam is completed  **1968**—The Garrison Diversion Project is begun  **1978**—Theodore Roosevelt National Park is established  **1986**—The Garrison Diversion Project is modified and passed by Congress |