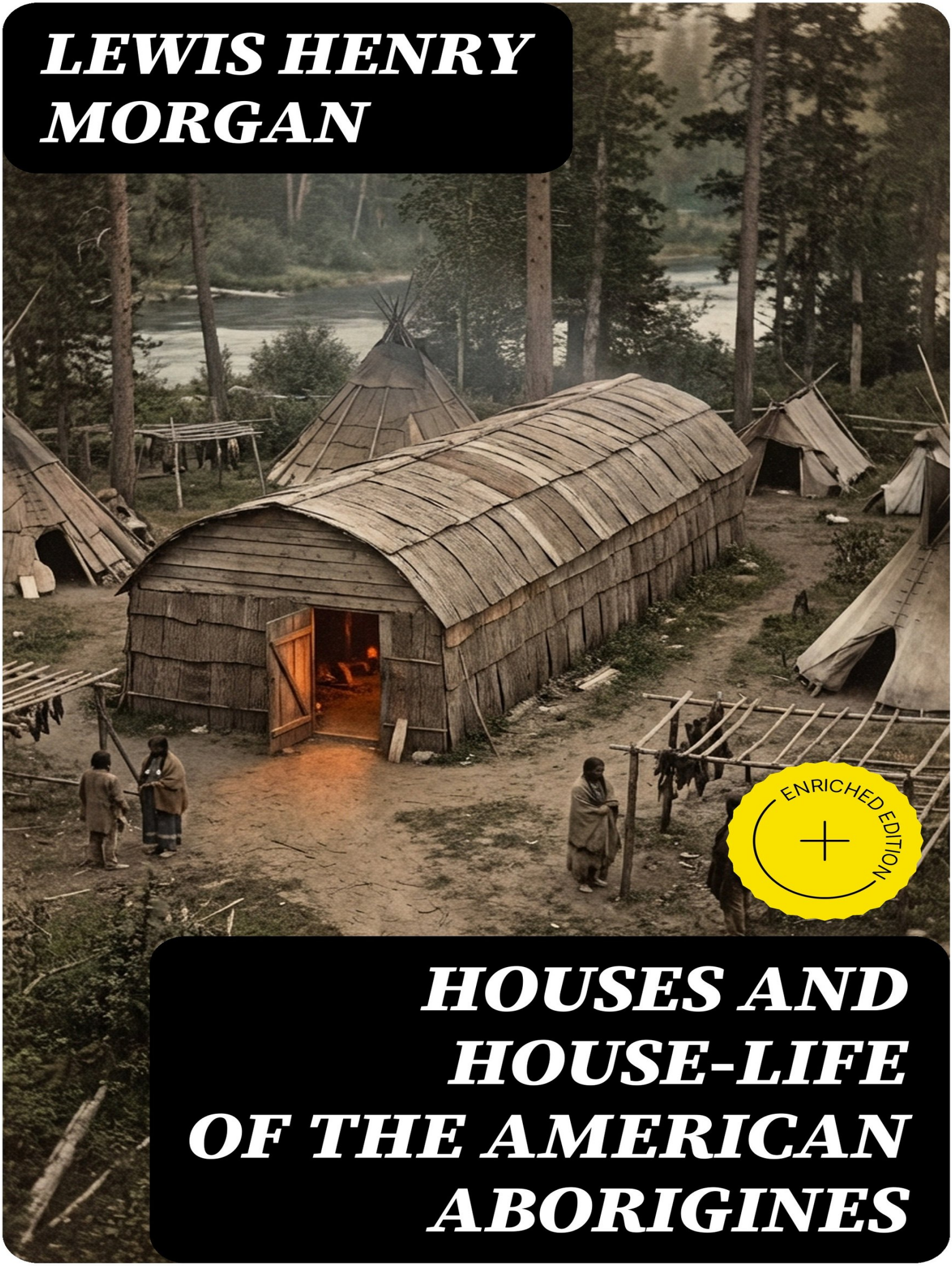
LEWIS HENRY MORGAN



HOUSES AND HOUSE-LIFE OF THE AMERICAN ABORIGINES

Lewis Henry Morgan

Houses and House-Life of the American Aborigines

Enriched edition.

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Sadie Whitlock

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Introduction

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At its core, Houses and House-Life of the American Aborigines advances the claim that domestic architecture is a key to social organization, proposing that the placement of hearths, the scale of rooms, and the logic of circulation encode kinship, labor, subsistence, and governance, and that by comparing the dwelling traditions of diverse Indigenous communities across North America, one can trace how collective values take built form while also witnessing how alterations in houses accompany, reflect, and sometimes propel transformations in everyday life, cooperation, and settlement, making each structure not merely a shelter but a durable record of relations continuously made and remade.

Lewis Henry Morgan’s study, first published in 1881, belongs to nineteenth-century ethnology and social theory and focuses on the Indigenous peoples of North America as observed through their dwellings and settlements. Written by a researcher known for comparative methods, the book surveys house types across regions and compiles information from field observations and published reports available to its author. Its scope is architectural in emphasis yet sociological in ambition, situating houses within the material conditions of subsistence and travel. As a product of its era, it speaks from within the scholarly frameworks then current, while striving for systematic description and analysis.

The premise is straightforward yet expansive: examine how houses are built and inhabited, then infer how people live together. The reading experience is one of methodical argumentation, with careful descriptions of plans and arrangements paired with comparative reasoning that seeks recurrent patterns without losing regional distinctions. The voice is confident, didactic, and empirical in tone, prioritizing observed detail and clear categorization. Morgan guides readers from the interior of rooms outward to village layouts, aligning shelter, storage, and circulation with social roles and obligations. The prose favors clarity over flourish, aiming to make concepts legible through concrete examples and orderly contrasts.

Across its chapters the book dwells on recurring domestic forms that encouraged collective living, such as multi-family houses, earth-covered lodges, and pueblo compounds organized around shared spaces and resources. The emphasis falls on the practical choices that shape communal routines: where to situate the hearth, how to apportion sleeping areas, why storage is centralized or dispersed, and how entries regulate movement and privacy. These decisions are read alongside subsistence strategies and travel patterns, allowing readers to see how climate, materials, and mobility intersect with kinship to generate distinctive yet intelligible arrangements that support cooperation, ritual, hospitality, and defense without reducing diversity to a single template.

Several themes emerge with cumulative force: the house as a social institution; the interdependence of technology, ecology, and design; the continuity between domestic space

and political organization; and the resilience of communal forms under pressure and change. By tying architectural details to household economies and lineage structures, the book asks readers to consider how built space stabilizes memory and practice across generations. It also illuminates how adaptations occur—through repairs, extensions, and relocations—when environments shift or needs expand. Rather than treating buildings as inert artifacts, Morgan presents them as negotiated accommodations that anchor cooperation and transmit norms through daily use.

For contemporary readers, the study remains instructive in at least three ways. It models how to relate architecture to social life without collapsing one into the other, offering a vocabulary for linking plan, use, and custom. It foregrounds communal provisioning and shared infrastructure, themes that resonate with current debates about housing, sustainability, and collective care. And it invites respectful attention to Indigenous knowledge embodied in domestic practices and settlement design. Although some analytical frameworks reflect nineteenth-century assumptions and require critical distance, the empirical focus on lived arrangements supplies enduring insights for anthropology, architectural history, Indigenous studies, and anyone considering alternatives to privatized domestic space.

Approached today, the book rewards a careful, contextual reading that distinguishes durable observations from concepts tied to its time, noting that its terminology and classifications belong to a historical scholarly discourse. Its lasting contribution lies in demonstrating that to understand a society one must study where and how people

dwell together, because houses marshal materials, labor, and meaning into stable yet adaptable forms. In showing how domestic life organizes cooperation and care at multiple scales, Morgan offers a foundation for comparative inquiry that remains relevant to designers, historians, and social scientists seeking to interpret the bond between habitation and human association.

Synopsis

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Published in 1881 within the U.S. government's Contributions to North American Ethnology (edited under J. W. Powell), Lewis Henry Morgan's Houses and House-Life of the American Aborigines surveys Indigenous domestic architecture in relation to social organization. Drawing on his long-standing research among the Iroquois, comparative readings of travelers' accounts, and archaeological reports then available, Morgan assembles plans, typologies, and descriptions of dwellings across North America and parts of Mesoamerica. The book's central task is to show how forms of residence embody and reinforce communal arrangements, providing a material record of kinship, subsistence, and defense. Its approach combines ethnography, historical reconstruction, and evolutionary theory.

Morgan outlines a framework that links the household to the gens-based fabric of society. He argues that the house, rather than the isolated conjugal family, was historically the principal unit of organization among many Indigenous peoples, with residence patterns and resource sharing arranged along kin lines. He situates this claim within his broader evolutionary scheme, proposing that joint-tenement houses reflect stages of subsistence and political development. By comparing building materials, internal partitions, hearths, and storage with marriage and descent rules, he seeks to correlate architectural features with

patterns of cooperation, property, and authority, treating domestic space as a readable index of social structure.

In the Northeastern woodlands, Morgan focuses on the Iroquois longhouse as a paradigmatic joint-tenement dwelling. He describes its elongated timber frame, bark sheathing, central aisle with paired hearths, and bays accommodating multiple related families. Village fortifications and the arrangement of doors and public space are treated as practical adaptations to warfare and hunting cycles as well as expressions of collective life. He emphasizes the alignment of residence with matrilineal clan segments, the pooling of food, and the regulation of hospitality and labor. These observations ground his contention that architecture both reflects and sustains communal obligations, especially where descent and inheritance follow female lines.

Turning westward, the study contrasts mobile skin lodges with the fixed, earth-covered round houses of horticultural village peoples along the Missouri. Morgan examines Mandan and Hidatsa earth lodges for how construction methods, shared occupation of a spacious interior, and placement around central plazas relate to gardening economies and seasonal rhythms. He notes distinctive features such as roof openings, interior storage, and sleeping platforms, and uses these to discuss the balance between household autonomy and cooperative production. The comparative method highlights how shifts in mobility and subsistence narrow or widen domestic groups, altering the relationship between kin clusters, community governance, and defense.

In the Southwest, Morgan presents the pueblos as large, multi-storied joint-tenement houses formed of stone or adobe, with room blocks oriented around courts or plazas. He attends to ladder access, terraced roofs, small cell-like rooms, and communal food stores, arguing that defensive architecture and collective residence evolved together. Using maps and descriptions available to him, he interprets these settlements as intensifications of the communal principle under irrigation agriculture. He explores how room aggregation, narrow doorways, and limited interior hearths imply a coordination of cooking, craft, and ceremony that extends beyond single families, and he compares spatial clustering with kinship segmentation and village-level authority.

Extending the comparison into Mexico and parts of Central America through historical sources, Morgan considers whether similar joint-tenement principles underlay urbanized centers, while also acknowledging differences in scale and urban complexity. He integrates archaeological observations from the Mississippi Valley and the Southwest to speculate about earlier domestic arrangements, cautiously inferring household sizes and defensive planning from ruins and earthworks. Throughout, he treats house plans as evidence for changing forms of property, marriage, and residence, and he juxtaposes communal blocks with smaller, more individualized dwellings. The result is a layered panorama in which variations in materials and layout register broader transitions in social life.

In closing, Morgan argues that changes in house-life chart a movement from corporate kin groups toward smaller

family-based households, linking domestic forms with evolving property relations and political structures. Framed by the unilinear evolutionary perspective of its era, the book nonetheless centers empirical comparisons to illuminate how subsistence, defense, and descent patterns imprint themselves on dwellings. Its significance endures in two respects: as a detailed synthesis of Indigenous architecture and as an early model for correlating material culture with social organization. It continues to inform discussions about communal residence, kinship, and the interpretive reach and constraints of evolutionary explanations.

Historical Context

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Houses and House-Life of the American Aborigines appeared in 1881, issued by the U.S. Government Printing Office as Volume IV of the Contributions to North American Ethnology sponsored by the Geographical and Geological Survey of the Rocky Mountain Region, directed by John Wesley Powell. It was produced in a United States rapidly professionalizing the study of Indigenous societies through institutions such as the Smithsonian Institution (1846) and, from 1879, the Bureau of American Ethnology. This institutional setting framed Morgan's architectural and social analyses as part of a federal, survey-driven project to document Native life, reflecting the era's drive to systematize knowledge.

Lewis Henry Morgan (1818–1881), a Rochester-based lawyer turned ethnologist, had built his reputation through sustained study of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois), aided by his Seneca colleague Ely S. Parker, later U.S. Commissioner of Indian Affairs. Morgan's League of the Ho-de-no-sau-nee, or Iroquois (1851) and Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family (1871) established his comparative method; Ancient Society (1877) advanced his influential, if now contested, stadial theory of social evolution. Houses and House-Life extends that program by relating dwelling forms to kinship and communal organization, situating architecture as evidence. The book

reflects Victorian anthropology’s search for universal stages grounded in material culture.

Mid- to late nineteenth-century U.S. policy toward Indigenous nations shifted from treaty-making to coercive control, producing forced removals, military campaigns, and reservation confinement across the 1860s and 1870s. Federal initiatives such as the establishment of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in 1879 signaled an intensified assimilation program. Simultaneously, western surveys and railroad expansion increased non-Native access to pueblos, plains villages, and Northwest Coast towns. This turbulence endangered communal lifeways that Morgan sought to describe, lending urgency to documentation. His work thus participates in a broader salvage impulse of the period, recording house types and social patterns amid rapid, state-driven transformation.

John Wesley Powell’s survey apparatus linked ethnology to exploration, channeling maps, photographs, and field reports into federal publications. The Contributions to North American Ethnology series aggregated materials from army officers, missionaries, and regional scholars, standardizing descriptions of languages, customs, and artifacts. Morgan, long practiced in correspondence-based data gathering, drew on that network while incorporating his own observations and earlier travelers’ accounts. The result reflects a comparative, document-heavy methodology typical of the period’s government science. By embedding his study within Powell’s survey infrastructure, Morgan aligned architectural analysis with state-sponsored

knowledge production aimed at comprehensive description of Indigenous societies.

Morgan’s focus on communal dwellings—Haudenosaunee longhouses, Southwestern pueblos, Plains earth lodges, and Northwest Coast plank houses—connected house plans to patterns of kinship, residence, and governance. He argued that ancient pueblo ruins and earthen mounds were products of ancestors of documented Native peoples, contesting popular nineteenth-century claims that a vanished 'Mound Builder' race erected them. Contemporary archaeological reporting from the Mississippi Valley and the Southwest provided comparative cases that reinforced this continuity. In insisting on Indigenous authorship of monumental and domestic architecture, the book helped redirect public understanding from romantic speculation to evidence-based history aligned with emerging anthropological standards.

Within the broader intellectual climate shaped by Edward B. Tylor’s Primitive Culture (1871) and comparative philology, Morgan treated material forms as indices of social evolution. He linked residence groups to the gens and phratries, borrowing classical terminology to describe clan-based organization observable in the Americas. Architectural layouts thus served as tangible correlates of descent, property, and governance. While this framework universalized development through ranked stages, it also foregrounded Indigenous institutions as coherent systems worthy of systematic study. The book exemplifies nineteenth-century evolutionary anthropology’s confidence in cross-cultural comparison, even as its hierarchical

assumptions reflect the period’s Euro-American intellectual conventions.

In the 1860s and 1870s, museum and survey infrastructures expanded repositories of Indigenous material culture, notably the Smithsonian’s collections and Harvard’s Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology (established 1866). Government reports increasingly paired text with plates, maps, and measured drawings. Morgan’s volume follows this practice, reproducing plans and sections of longhouses, pueblos, earth lodges, and plank houses to anchor arguments in visible form. The emphasis on diagram and typology mirrored contemporary scientific standards that privileged classification and comparative catalogues. The book’s visual documentation thus participates in a national project of archiving architecture as empirical evidence for social analysis.

Published the year of Morgan’s death, the study circulated as federal ethnology intensified and U.S. policy moved toward allotment, formalized by the Dawes Act of 1887. Subsequent Bureau of American Ethnology reports elaborated many of its topics while professional anthropology diversified its methods. Houses and House-Life preserves detailed records of communal architecture and argues for Indigenous authorship of ancient works, challenging pseudo-historical myths prevalent in the era. At the same time, its evolutionary scaffolding reflects contemporary hierarchies. The book thus both documents and interprets Native house forms through the prevailing scientific lens of its time, revealing strengths and limits of that framework.

Houses and House-Life of the American Aborigines

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CHAPTER XI.

PREFACE.

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The following work substantially formed the Fifth Part of the original manuscript of "Ancient Society," under the title "Growth of the Idea of House Architecture." As the manuscript exceeded the limits of a single volume, this portion (Part V) was removed, and having then no intention to publish it separately, the greater part of it found its way into print in detached articles. A summary was given to Johnson's New Universal Cyclopedia in the article on the "Architecture of the American Aborigines." The chapter on the "Houses of the Aztecs" formed the basis of the article entitled "Montezuma[3]'s Dinner," published in the North American Review, in April, 1876. Another chapter, that on the "Houses of the Mound Builders," was published in the same Review in July, 1876. Finally, the present year, at the request of the executive committee of the "Archaeological Institute of America[1]," at Cambridge, I prepared from the same materials an article entitled "A Study of the Houses and House Life of the Indian Tribes," with a scheme for the exploration of the ruins in New Mexico, Arizona, the San Juan region, Yucatan, and Central America.

With some additions and reductions the facts are now presented in their original form, and as they will now have a wider distribution than the articles named have had, they will be new to most of my readers. The facts and

suggestions made will also have the advantage of being presented in their proper connection. Thus additional strength is given to the argument as a whole. All the forms of this architecture sprang from a common mind, and exhibit, as a consequence, different stages of development of the same conceptions, operating upon similar necessities. They also represent these several conditions of Indian life with reasonable completeness. Their houses will be seen to form one system of works, from the Long House of the Iroquois to the Joint Tenement houses of adobe and of stone in New Mexico, Yucatan, Chiapas, and Guatemala, with such diversities as the different degrees of advancement of these several tribes would naturally produce. Studied as one system, springing from a common experience, and similar wants, and under institutions of the same general character, they are seen to indicate a plan of life at once novel, original, and distinctive.

The principal fact, which all these structures alike show, from the smallest to the greatest, is that the family through these stages of progress was too weak an organization to face alone the struggle of life, and sought a shelter for itself in large households composed of several families. The house for a single family was exceptional throughout aboriginal America, while the house large enough to accommodate several families was the rule. Moreover, they were occupied as joint tenement houses**[2q]**. There was also a tendency to form these households on the principle of gentile kin, the mothers with their children being of the same gens**[6]** or clan.

If we enter upon the great problem of Indian life with a determination to make it intelligible, their house life and domestic institutions must furnish the key to its explanation. These pages are designed as a commencement of that work. It is a fruitful, and, at present, but partially explored field**[1q]**. We have been singularly inattentive to the plan of domestic life revealed by the houses of the aboriginal period. Time and the influences of civilization have told heavily upon their mode of life until it has become so far modified, and in many cases entirely overthrown, that it must be taken up as a new investigation upon the general facts which remain. At the epoch of European discovery it was in full vitality in North and South America; but the opportunities of studying its principles and its results were neglected. As a scheme of life under established institutions, it was a remarkable display of the condition of mankind in two well marked ethnical periods, namely, the Older Period and the Middle Period of barbarism, the first being represented by the Iroquois and the second by the Aztecs, or ancient Mexicans. In no part of the earth were these two conditions of human progress so well represented as by the American Indian tribes. A knowledge of the culture and of the state of the arts of life in these periods is indispensable to a definite conception of the stages of human progress. From the laws which govern this progress, from the uniformity of their operation, and from the necessary limitations of the principle of intelligence, we may conclude that our own remote ancestors passed through a similar experience and possessed very similar institutions. In studying the condition of the Indian tribes in these

periods we may recover some portion of the lost history of our own race. This consideration lends incentive to the investigation.

The first chapter is a condensation of four in "Ancient Society," namely, those on the gens, phratry, tribe, and confederacy of tribes. As they formed a necessary part of that work, they become equally necessary to this. A knowledge of these organizations is indispensable to an understanding of the house life of the aborigines. These organizations form the basis of American ethnology. Although the discussion falls short of a complete explanation of their character and of their prevalence, it will give the reader a general idea of the organization of society among them.

We are too apt to look upon the condition of savage and of barbarous tribes as standing on the same plane with respect to advancement. They should be carefully distinguished as dissimilar conditions of progress. Moreover, savagery shows stages of culture and of progress, and the same is true of barbarism. It will greatly facilitate the study of the facts relating to these two conditions, through which mankind have passed in their progress to civilization, to discriminate between ethnical periods, or stages of culture both in savagery and in barbarism. The progress of mankind from their primitive condition to civilization has been marked and eventful. Each great stage of progress is connected, more or less directly, with some important invention or discovery which materially influenced human progress, and inaugurated an improved condition. For these reasons the period of savagery has been divided into three

subperiods, and that of barbarism also into three, the latter of which are chiefly important in their relation to the condition of the Indian tribes. The Older Period of barbarism, which commences with the introduction of the art of pottery, and the Middle Period, which commences with the use of adobe brick in the construction of houses, and with the cultivation of maize and plants by irrigation, mark two very different and very dissimilar conditions of life. The larger portion of the Indian tribes fall within one or the other of these periods. A small portion were in the Older Period of savagery, and none had reached the Later Period of barbarism, which immediately precedes civilization. In treating of the condition of the several tribes they will be assigned to the particular period to which they severally belong under this classification.

I regret to add that I have not been able, from failing health, to give to this manuscript the continuous thought which a work of any kind should receive from its author. But I could not resist the invitation of my friend Major J. W. Powell[2], the Director of the Bureau of Ethnology, to put these chapters together as well as I might be able, that they might be published by that Bureau. As it will undoubtedly be my last work, I part with it under some solicitude for the reason named; but submit it cheerfully to the indulgence of my readers.

I am greatly indebted to my friend Mr. J. C. Pilling, of the same Bureau, for his friendly labor and care in correcting the proof sheets, and for supervising the illustrations. Such favors are very imperfectly repaid by an author's thanks.

The late William W. Ely, M. D., LL. D., was, for a period of more than twenty-five years, my cherished friend and literary adviser, and to him I am indebted for many valuable suggestions, and for constant encouragement in my labors. The dedication of this volume to his memory is but a partial expression of my admiration of his beautiful character, and of my appreciation of his friendship.

LEWIS H. MORGAN

ROCHESTER, N. Y., June, 1881

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HOUSES OF INDIAN TRIBES NORTH OF NEW MEXICO.

35 A Spanish word for a municipal magistrate or mayor used in colonial administration; in New Mexico pueblos it refers to a local governor or judicial officer.

36 Spanish for a circular or semi-subterranean ceremonial and meeting room in Pueblo communities (archaeologists commonly use the term 'kiva'); these rooms were used for political, social, and religious gatherings.

37 A 16th-century Spanish legend of seven wealthy cities (Cibola) that spurred exploration of the American Southwest; the identity and locations of the places described by early chroniclers remain uncertain among historians.

38 Francisco Vázquez de Coronado, a 16th-century Spanish conquistador who led an expedition (1540–1542) into the present-day U.S. Southwest in search of Cibola and who encountered Pueblo communities.

39 A Spanish term for the large round wooden beams used as primary roof or floor timbers in traditional Southwestern and Pueblo architecture.

40 A clay-based mortar (made from pulverized local clay, sand, and sometimes organic additives) used to bind masonry in adobe and stone structures; unlike lime mortar, it is most durable in arid climates and does not set chemically like lime.

41 A tributary of the San Juan River running through southwestern Colorado and northwestern New Mexico; the text refers to cliff dwellings and ruins found in its canyons and bluffs.

42 Refers to Taos Pueblo and the nearby town in northern New Mexico, an inhabited multi-storied Pueblo community

continuously occupied for centuries and documented by nineteenth-century observers.

43 Used to denote both the communal stone or adobe village architecture and the indigenous Puebloan peoples of the American Southwest who built multi-room, multi-story dwellings.

44 A river flowing from Colorado into New Mexico that is a tributary of the San Juan River; the valley and ruins described in the chapter lie along this watercourse.

45 A broad plain in southwestern Colorado (named in the text by a local resident) near the La Plata and Mancos drainages and the McElmo Canyon, noted here for dispersed Pueblo ruins.

46 A prominent mountain in the southwest corner of Colorado near the junction of Colorado, Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico; the name also references the Ute indigenous people historically associated with the region.

47 An older scholarly term for the principal Nahua/Nahuatl-speaking peoples of central Mexico (including the Aztecs/Mexica); the text groups several historic tribes under this designation.

48 A legendary ancestral homeland mentioned in Nahua traditions, often translated as 'place of herons' or 'place of cranes'; its exact geographic location is debated and remains uncertain.

49 A nineteenth-century term for various prehistoric Indigenous cultures in eastern North America noted for constructing large earthen mounds and embankments; their societies produced distinctive pottery, copper work, and earthworks predating widespread European contact.

50 A prominent conical burial mound near present-day Moundsville, West Virginia, long cited in 19th-century accounts and described in the text as about seventy feet high; modern scholarship generally attributes the mound to Early Woodland mound-building traditions, though precise dating remains uncertain within a broad ancient range.

51 Ephraim G. Squier and Edwin H. Davis, mid-19th-century American antiquarians who surveyed and published the influential report "Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley" (1848), a foundational work documenting mound sites and earthworks.

52 A historical name used in 19th-century sources for a Northern Plains Indian group or village (variants of the name appear in older ethnography); the label in period accounts refers to a plains community with visible village enclosures, but exact tribal identification can vary between sources.

53 Named here as a Seneca (Iroquois) village reported in historical sources about two centuries earlier and estimated to have had about a hundred houses; the brief reference in the text records the village as part of early ethnographic or historical reporting, while precise location and dating are not specified.

54 A Nahuatl term (rendered in the text as "tecpan") for an official communal or administrative house in Aztec society—a tribal or civic building used for public business and hospitality—rather than a European-style private palace.

55 From Nahuatl xicalli, meaning a cup or gourd-bowl; in early Spanish accounts of Mexico, "xicales" denotes vessels

used for serving water or beverages such as chocolate at feasts and ceremonies.

56 Likely refers to Bernal Díaz (del Castillo), a 16th-century Spanish soldier and chronicler who wrote an eyewitness account of the conquest of Mexico; the name alone can be ambiguous among historical figures named Díaz.

57 Hernán Cortés, the Spanish conquistador who led the expedition (1519–1521) that resulted in the fall of the Aztec Empire and Spanish colonization of central Mexico.

58 A term used in the text for an elective and deposable war-chief in Aztec politics; the form echoes Nahuatl words for a lord or leader and denotes a military office rather than a hereditary king.

59 A Franciscan friar and chronicler in colonial Mexico (17th century) who recorded local histories and customs; his writings are often cited for late-17th-century information about indigenous communities.

60 The Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology in Cambridge, Massachusetts (associated with Harvard University), which published reports and research on American archaeology and ethnology in the 19th century.

61 An archaeological site in the Yucatán Peninsula notable for large Maya structures such as the 'Governor's House' and terraced platforms; the site's occupation and construction phases span pre-Columbian Maya periods and exact dates vary by structure.

62 A major 'Great House' complex in Chaco Canyon (New Mexico) built by ancestral Pueblo peoples, containing hundreds of rooms and dated roughly to the 9th–12th