

## Who were the first soil scientists in America?

The first soil scientists in America are almost always assumed to be those men that completed the first soil surveys in the late 1800's. Lewis and Clark are often given credit for conducting the first soil surveys in the west. Some early white settlers are often credited with making contributions that led to the development of soil science.

What is often forgotten is that many American Indian tribes relied in part on farming for food. In New England, farming was a way of life long before the Pilgrims set foot on Plymouth Rock.

The Abenaki Tribe, which occupied a large portion on Northern New England, has a number of words in their language that demonstrate that they had a good understanding of principals of soil science. Some examples include (Gordon M. Day, Western Abenaki Dictionary, Volume 2: English-Abenaki):

- aki – earth, land, ground, soil, world
- asakwamki – grey soil under moss, a podzol soil
- asakwamimskagw – a moss swamp
- azeskojagw – muddy soil
- begwi – sand
- bidhomkitan – silt
- senomkol - gravel
- mazalopskw – clay
- megoakw – a swamp
- mekwakaa – red earth
- mkazawiki – black soil

From the early accounts of white settlement in New England it is clear that the local tribes were good farmers, most likely due in part to their understanding of soil science. In the beginning it was the American Indians who shared their harvest with white settlers who had little knowledge of farming. Undoubtedly, they also shared their knowledge of soils with the white settlers.

Other American Indian tribes who farmed the land must have also had a basic understanding of soil science. The evidence is there for the finding if you care to look beyond the history books.

Stephen Gourley  
State Soil Scientist - Vermont