

American Indians - Part 2: Before European contact ^[1]

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American Indians

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Part ii: American Indians before European contact



"Pottery making in North Carolina." Southeast Archeological Center, National Park Service.

^[7]The history of American Indians before European contact is broadly divided into three major periods: the [Paleo-Indian period](#) ^[8], the [Archaic period](#) ^[9] (8000–1000 b.c.), and the [Woodland period](#) ^[10] (1000 b.c.–1600 a.d.). The limited evidence available about the Paleo-Indian period suggests that the first Indians in the Southeast, as elsewhere, were nomadic, hunting and defending themselves with stone tools (knives and scrapers), clubs, and spears, which were at times tipped with wellcrafted, fluted stone points. During the Archaic period, basketry, bone tools, and finer stone tools appeared. Archaic peoples also began to develop more specialized knowledge of their local environments and the animals and plants that lived there. Though they did not generally travel far beyond these familiar environments, American Indians during this period did begin to establish trade and migration routes that brought the native peoples of the Carolinas in contact with other bands and tribes.

Scholars suggest that small-scale agriculture began to develop among American Indians in the Southeast around 1000 b.c., marking a slow transition to what is known as the Woodland period. During the early Woodland period, native peoples began to concentrate settlements near streams and rivers, where the rich soil allowed successful farming. This Woodland tradition took root among Indians in the Carolina region. Many Woodland people planted crops such as sunflowers, corn, pumpkins, squash, and beans and built permanent wooden homes. Nevertheless, Indians in the Woodland period still relied primarily on hunting, fishing, and gathering. Among the enormous variety of animal resources available, deer was a primary staple, providing food, clothing, blankets, and tools made of antler and bone. Fishing methods included the use of hooks, spears (sometimes poisoned), nets, traps, weirs, and dugout canoes. In most tribes, work was shared by men and women. Indian housing typically consisted of lodges made of bark or thatch, at times raised off the ground. Some Indians, including the [Cherokee](#) ^[11], also built earthen winter homes without windows. Homes were furnished with straw or cane mats, pottery, basketry, and wooden utensils. As family groups and larger bands formed around productive agricultural or hunting grounds, villages developed. Some villages were surrounded by protective palisades, and most included a council house for public gatherings.

Use of the bow and arrow probably evolved during the middle and late Woodland period; the oldest examples of arrow points in North Carolina have been located near the Yadkin River in the Piedmont. Tobacco pipes of stone and clay, beads, and other ornaments made of shell and clay also came into common use. Pottery began to appear, as did a clear concern for the dead, evidenced in some regions by burial or effigy mounds and earthen enclosures. In some cases, the dead were placed in round or oval pits and buried with grave goods.

The Woodland Indians of North Carolina, though scattered and in many ways diverse, shared a number of cultural traits.

Tribal societies were generally organized by leaders rather than rulers, governed by consensus rather than decree, and directed by a sense of community more than by individualism. Community rituals for marking the passage of time and seasons and for personal cleanliness and purification developed along with religious beliefs about the ability of individuals to tap into the supernatural world, which was seen as full of spirits.

Sometime around the middle of the Woodland period (ca. 700 a.d.), an important American Indian cultural tradition known as the Mississippian tradition [12] took shape along the Mississippi River and its tributaries. Over time, Mississippian tribal groups began to migrate into the Southeast, including North Carolina. While Mississippian peoples had many similarities to Woodland peoples, there were also important differences. Mississippian cultures were rooted more deeply in farming than were Woodland cultures, and Mississippians developed large town sites that served as hubs for religious ceremonies and trade. These towns often included large pyramid shaped mounds topped by temples and meeting houses, and the mounds were surrounded by public grounds for games and public rituals. Individual houses, often made of wood, surrounded these public grounds, and beyond the homes were often extensive cultivated fields. Town Creek Indian Mound [13], located in modern-day Montgomery County [14], is one North Carolina example of a mound that was at the heart of a town site built by Mississippian people.

Mississippian peoples also developed more formal systems of governance, called chiefdoms, and extensive religious rituals and ceremonies related to agricultural cycles of planting and harvest. One particularly important ritual was the Green Corn Ritual [15]. This rite celebrated the ripened corn crop in the late summer and served as a period for village members to cleanse their environment and start anew on a personal and spiritual level. Typically, the Green Corn Ritual involved the cleaning of the council house and family homes, fasting, bathing, forgiving past wrongs, and the symbolic extinguishing of old fires and the creation of new ones. The Indians' respect for their environment, and their vision of their community as grateful recipients of nature's bounty, was shown through the destruction of accumulated foodstuffs from the previous year.

The chiefdoms of the Mississippian tradition came to dominate American Indian culture in the Southeast as the time of European contact approached, and differences between Mississippian and Woodland Indians almost certainly sparked conflict as cultures met in North Carolina and elsewhere. But scholars believe that many Woodland people simply adapted Mississippian practices over time. Other Woodland tribes likely moved to more isolated lands and maintained their cultural practices, sometimes reclaiming their traditional territories when Mississippian tribes themselves relocated to new planting grounds. Certainly European explorers, when they began to encounter the native people of North Carolina, found groups practicing both Woodland and Mississippian ways of life.


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"Pottery making in North Carolina." Southeast Archeological Center, National Park Service. Online at <http://www.cr.nps.gov/seac/hnc/outline/04-woodland/index.htm> [16]. Accessed 11/2011.

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