Shadows of a people

Archaeologists divide North Carolina's prehistory -- the time before contact with Europeans -- into four periods: Paleoindian, Archaic, Woodland, and Mississippian.

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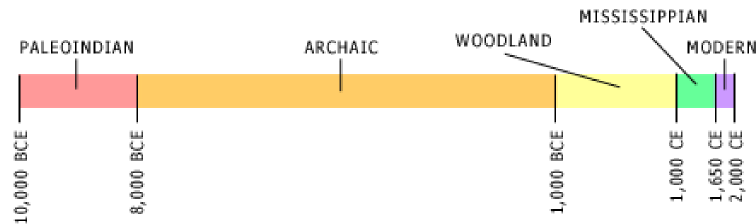

Figure 1. A timeline of North Carolina's past shows how long people have lived here — and how short is the time since Europeans arrived!

Change through time, according to archaeologist Joffre Coe, is one of the few constants in life. Everywhere and anytime, people change aspects of how they live—their tools, their foods, their houses, their art, their social structure, their world view and religion. Sometimes change is abrupt. Other times, it happens so slowly it seems imperceptible, visible only through the wide window of time.

Various factors affect change and the rate it occurs in people's lives. The environment, for example, can have tremendous effects. The slow climatic shift from Ice Age to modern weather that happened between 14,000 and 10,000 years ago overturned local ecology. In North Carolina, cold-loving boreal forests of jack pine and spruce became groves of deciduous nut trees and long-needle pine. Large Ice-Age mammals, such as the mastodon, died out. In their place, deer, bear, and other modern animals thrived.

People adjusted by changing not just what they hunted and gathered for food, but the tools they used. For example, as people came to use more and different plants for food, they created additional tools, like grinding slabs to process nuts and seeds.

Based on change over time, archaeologists identify four broad cultural periods in North Carolina before Europeans arrived. These periods are called Paleoindian, Archaic,

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Woodland, and Mississippian. Archaeologists constructed the story of each period by observing datable artifacts and other traces people left and then making inferences about how they lived. Generally, the transition from one period to another is marked by fundamental changes in things like technology (tools, containers, etc.), economy (subsistence patterns, etc.), or settlements.

Paleoindians

Figure 2. Hardaway spear point from Stanly County, ca. 8500 BCE.

The Paleoindian period is the oldest known cultural period in North Carolina. In fact, it is the oldest tradition for all of North and South America. The first Paleoindians crossed a now-submerged land bridge between Alaska and Siberia during the last Ice Age. Archaeologists find evidence Paleoindians were living in North Carolina between 10,000 and 8000 BCE. They were nomadic hunters and gatherers who, in the last centuries of the Ice Age, presumably used thrusting spears tipped with chipped stone points to kill prey. Other tools included portable, but useful items like stone hide scrapers, drills, and knives. Paleoindians in the eastern U.S. occasionally hunted big game, such as now-extinct mastodons and bison. But increasingly evidence suggests most Paleoindians, including those in North Carolina, ate a wide variety of smaller animals and used many plants for food and medicines.

Archaic Indians

The Archaic period is the second oldest known lifeway across the continent. In North Carolina this tradition dates from 8000 to 1000 BCE. Archaic Indians were direct descendants of Paleoindians. They, too, were wandering hunters and gatherers who had no year-round villages. Instead, they lived in camps; some of these settlements, called base camps, were relatively large and served as a “home base” for food-getting activities over a large area. Their shelters were probably tents made of wooden poles covered with hides that could be quickly built and dismantled. Possessions were few and portable.

Figure 3. Polished stone axe from Nash County, 3000–1000 BCE.

Archaic Indians lived in a climate much like that of today, and were surrounded by the same species of plants and animals that exist today (in other words, the Ice-Age flora and fauna were gone). To hunt, Archaic people used a spear-throwing device called an atlatl, which enabled them to propel spears farther and with more force. (Most archaeologists believe Paleoindians used the atlatl as well, but they have not found evidence yet to support this idea.) The white-tailed deer was the main source of meat for Archaic people. They also ate a variety of wild vegetables and fruits, and harvested wild seeds from a variety of plants that grew near riverside camps they regularly visited as they moved from place to place.

Over time, Archaic people adopted or developed new tools. They shaped grinding implements to process nuts from the spreading forests of deciduous trees and developed a technique to smooth and polish stone tools like axes. They carved bowls from steatite, a soft, soapy-feeling stone (also called soapstone). By the end of their 7,000-year period in North Carolina, some Archaic Indians were making crude, fire-hardened clay vessels. A

few were also digging small gardens, throwing in saved seeds from local seed-plants that grew around their camps.

Woodland Indians

Figure 4. Pottery vessel from Haywood County, ca. 300 CE.

The Woodland period follows the Archaic in North Carolina, beginning about 1000 BCE and ending by 1000 CE. The Woodland was a time of pottery-making, semi-permanent villages, and horticulture. These practices first showed up in the late Archaic among some people, but by the Woodland, they were widespread and common.

As horticulturalists, Woodland people gardened. They cultivated a variety of foods to supplement what they obtained from hunting and gathering. In their gardens, they grew many of the native seed plants their Archaic ancestors ate. Evidence suggests several of the local seed plants had been domesticated by Woodland times; specifically, some seeds' shapes had become larger and uniformly sized, indicating the plants required human help to reproduce and grow.

The Eastern Agricultural Complex is what archaeologists call the group of native plants that people cultivated in gardens. These include marsh elder, knotweed, sunflower, maygrass, and goosefoot. Many archaeologists think these crops give strong evidence that the practice of agriculture evolved independently in the Southeast.

Pottery-making became widespread and common at the start of the Woodland period. Some archaeologists think it may have gone hand in hand with gardening and a more settled life. The thinking goes that people needed clay vessels to cook and store food. The more they gardened and the more bulky items they possessed, the more they stayed put. As time went by, Woodland groups developed pottery with distinctive decorative and manufacturing styles.

Yet while gardens were important, Woodland people apparently did not rely solely on cultivated plants for food, and they did not stay in one place all year. Hunting and gathering still provided most of what people ate. Fishing and shellfishing were becoming important for some, especially coastal people. Even though Woodland Indians established small villages of round houses on or near fertile floodplains ideal for gardens, they periodically abandoned them. They spent weeks or months each year in seasonal camps, strategically situated within their territories to harvest or collect the wild foods key to survival. People timed the return to their semi-permanent village to the harvest of gardens.

As it did for people in earlier times, Woodland Indians' technology reflected their lifeway. Chipped stone or conch shell hoes for gardening appear in the sites archaeologists study. So do net sinkers and the first evidence of the bow and arrow. Archaeologists find triangular shaped points suited to tip arrows (not spears), literally pointing to a shift in hunting technology. Other evidence hints at how people organized themselves socially and politically. Some groups buried a few of their dead in earthen mounds and placed beautiful, elaborate items like pipes shaped as animals with them. Archaeologists think this special treatment hints at privileged people. Most other Woodland groups across North Carolina, however, buried their dead with few or no grave offerings, and may have been more egalitarian.

Mississippian Indians

Figure 5. Pottery vessel from Rockingham County, ca. 1200 CE.

The Mississippian period covers the span from 1000 CE until Europeans arrived and colonized about 1650 CE. Great cultural diversity existed among North Carolina's Indian people at this time. And this can be documented not just from archaeological evidence. Direct contacts, along with written accounts by early European explorers, chart three major linguistic and ethnic Native American groups. Algonkian speakers lived in the Coastal Plain's tidewater region. Tribes speaking Iroquoian languages lived on the inner Coastal Plain and in the Mountains. Siouan-speaking tribes occupied the Piedmont. Today, many of their tribal names are familiar. The Tuscarora, Nottoway, Meherrin, and Cherokee are Iroquoian; the Occaneechi and the Saponi are Siouan; the Lumbee emerged from various tribes finding strength when they banded together.

Despite the diversity, North Carolina's Native peoples between 1000 and 1650 CE shared several characteristics. Chief among them was corn agriculture. As early as 200 CE, a variety of corn had made its way across trade routes from the Southwest to the Southeast. At first, Indian people grew it in their small gardens, along with squash and gourd, using it as they did the other crops to supplement diets. But by 1000 CE, full-blown corn agriculture had taken hold. Small Woodland gardens gave way to larger fields and more intensive food production. By 1200 CE, people were also planting beans, which came along trade routes to North Carolina about then. When added to hills of squash and corn, beans formed the final member of what is sometimes called "the three sisters." Together, these crops provided a stable food base.

As farmers, tribes of this era flipped the subsistence equation. That is, where Woodland people used gardens to supplement what they hunted, gathered, or fished, Mississippian people used wild foods to supplement what they grew. Agriculture, thus, was dominant.

Not surprisingly, Mississippian populations increased, and people settled into permanent villages. Typically larger than Woodland villages, most had either above or below ground food storage facilities. House shapes varied according to region. Coastal Plain and Mountain people built square or rectangular homes, while those in the Piedmont constructed round houses. Some villages were strung-out hamlets while others had houses clustered together. Some of these clustered villages had protective stockades surrounding them. Constructed by putting posts side by side in a trench, the stockades may have been for protection. Evidence of conflict exists, perhaps caused by pressures for good agricultural soils.

Social structure was more varied and complex during the Mississippian period than it presumably was in earlier times. Chiefdoms, hereditary rule, priesthoods, and rule by consensus all existed in different places across North Carolina after 1000 CE. Ritual (or ceremony) also varied; its hints are left in traces of art and architecture. People made jewelry carved and etched from imported marine shell or bone, soft capes of turkey feathers, clay pottery decorated with geometric swirls of lines. These were just a few of the distinctive things people made besides their everyday tools like bone fish hooks and sewing awls, stone arrow points, hoes, wood gravers, and hide scrapers.

In the Mountains and southern Piedmont, people built ceremonial centers whose monuments were large earthen mounds topped with wooden buildings. In some, a few people were buried. In other places, the ceremony associated with death was very different.

Ossuaries, or mass graves, were common along the coast. Some Algonkian groups periodically buried community members in one grave, tending the bodies in charnel houses supervised by priests until mass burial occurred. Other groups, like some Iroquoian tribes living on the inner Coastal Plain, also had ossuaries at the edges of their villages. But they only placed family members in the grave. Piedmont tribes, on the other hand, preferred burying their dead singly in graves and often placed offerings with them.

Colonial and beyond

While the Mississippian period ends at 1650 CE, Native American society certainly didn't. It went through upheaval in tragic proportions as disease, warfare, and removal challenged Indian life. Many tribes died out, their names left only in the names of modern towns or rivers. Many other small ones lost their particular languages and habits as they joined together in federations like the Catawba or Lumbee to preserve what was left of their culture. But Native society is hardy. Today, more than 80,000 Indian people live in North Carolina. They share this state and enrich its society by the contributions their ancestral and current cultures make in terms as varied as the foods we eat, the medicines we take, and the placement of towns.

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