



Period Overview:

Native Peoples before Carolina – Prehistory to 1540

Native peoples have continuously inhabited North Carolina for more than 10,000 years and have been central figures in every era of North Carolina history, including the history that is unfolding around us today. The Native people living in this area during the 14th and 15th centuries are the ancestors of many Native people in North Carolina today. Today, North Carolina is home to more Native American people than any other state east of the Mississippi River. Numerous tribal nations and urban Indian organizations are rooted in North Carolina and the bordering areas of adjoining states including the Catawba Indian Nation, the Coharie Tribe, the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, the Haliwa-Saponi Indian Tribe, the Lumbee Tribe, the Meherrin Indian Nation, the Occaneechi Band of the Saponi Nation, the Pee Dee Indian Tribe, the Sappony, and the Waccamaw Siouan Tribe.

Prior to European colonization, the region that became North Carolina was home to many different communities of Native people, each with their own distinctive culture, or ways of interacting with one another through language, beliefs, customs, and practices. **Archaeology**, the study of people in the past through the **artifacts** and other traces on the landscape that they leave behind, is one way of learning about the past as we understand it in the present. We can also learn about the human past through written histories, oral histories, and art. Archaeologists divide the pre-colonial peoples of North Carolina into two broad cultural traditions, **Woodland** and **Mississippian**, based on some shared practices, like how their societies were organized and the ways they made things like pottery, clothing, and tools. Woodland peoples lived in small villages where everyone was relatively equal to one another, whereas Mississippian peoples had some very large villages with a chief as their leader and a social hierarchy based on kinship. Native Americans in these chiefdoms often constructed tall earthen mounds, on top of which a temple was built.

The Woodland and Mississippian cultural traditions are not the same as tribal identities, such as Lumbee or Coharie, because the terms used by archaeologists were not used by people alive during this time to describe themselves. We know what names some 14th and 15th century people used for themselves based on tribal knowledge and written records made after European colonization, but for most Native groups we do not.

The accompanying documents provide general knowledge about how Native peoples in present-day North Carolina lived prior to European colonization. These documents focus on the **pre-colonial period**, primarily the 14th and 15th centuries AD, to discuss how Native people lived before **colonization** (Woodland and Mississippian Cultures and Foodways) and how the collapse of Mississippian society transformed the region (Mississippian Collapse and Political Reconfigurations).