



Native Peoples before Carolina – Prehistory to 1540

Educator Content Introduction: Woodland and Mississippian Cultures and Lifeways

Archaeologists divide the people who lived in the American Southeast, including the area of North Carolina, prior to European colonization into two broad cultural traditions: **Woodland** and **Mississippian**. They do this by using **artifacts**, or objects produced by people in the past, and other traces on the landscape they leave behind that reflect shared cultural practices and ways of living or lifeways. Most Native peoples living in North Carolina between 1000 B.C. and the time of European colonization are considered Woodland societies. The other cultural tradition named by archaeologists the Mississippian developed after approximately A.D. 1200 in western North Carolina and the southern Piedmont.

The Native peoples of pre-colonial North Carolina were diverse. Groups living in the Piedmont region, for instance, often differed from people living along the coast. Differences in cuisine, tool making styles, craft production, and artworks reflect people's group identities. Clothing, jewelry, hairstyles, tattooing, and body painting signaled information about the person wearing them, such as what group they belonged to and their position within that group. The architecture and arrangement of homes, other buildings, and communal spaces within a village or town also varied based on a group's customs and traditions and the different ways people organized and governed their communities.

Most Native societies in the Southeast were (and many continue to be) **matrilineal**, meaning that kinship was largely traced through the mother's side of the family. While it is common for children in America today to have their father's last name, Native children would have been known as members of their mothers' extended families. Native women held important roles in society, sometimes including the highest leadership positions. Elders were and continue to be held in high esteem among Native peoples, and these folks would have had special roles in their communities as wisdom-keepers, teachers, healers, and decision-makers.

As with numerous towns and cities in North Carolina today, many early Native communities were located near rivers. Rivers are a life-source; they provide water, food, and an avenue for travel. Rivers contain ecosystems of fish, reptiles, amphibians, and invertebrates like mussels and crawdads. Rivers enrich the soils of their floodplains, supporting plant life and creating ideal environments for humans to grow crops. Native peoples had many land routes they followed to travel to visit loved ones, gather with other communities for celebrations, trade, to conduct diplomacy, and many more activities. However, the quickest way to travel was by boat. Rivers were a sort of highway system, connecting people across vast distances. Without tools like compasses, people navigated based on their extensive knowledge of the landscape and the stars.



Woodland Culture and Lifeways

Woodland peoples initially lived in small semi-permanent villages and scattered homesteads, but as they relied more on growing corn, they began living in larger, more permanent settlements. Woodland societies were **egalitarian**, meaning that leadership roles were achieved by people selected by the community. Woodland cultures made pottery that consisted of simple bowls and jars with pointed bottoms. They created these vessels by stacking coils of clay to build the walls, and then smoothed the coils together with a wooden paddle. At the same time, paddles were used to decorate the surface of pottery, and were either wrapped with cordage or textiles, or carved with patterns, like cross-hatched lines. Patterns of pottery-making changed gradually over time, but old styles and techniques persisted alongside new ones (Ward and Davis, 1999, p. 79).

Woodland societies relied on both wild and cultivated food sources. Natives had one domesticated animal—the dog. Dogs were raised to help people hunt, protect the community, and provide companionship. Woodland peoples initially hunted using a weapon called an **atlatl**, or a spear thrower that could be used to launch spears a long distance and at high speeds. By the first millennium AD, they used a bow and arrow to hunt several wild animals, including deer, bear, and turkey, and devised traps to catch rabbits, squirrels, and other small animals. Woodland peoples collected shellfish and small animals from nearby rivers and used woven nets to catch fish. In some places Natives would construct **fishing weirs**, which involved using rocks to shape where fish can swim in the river. Fish would be routed to shallow areas or into traps where they could be easily caught. They also gathered a wide range of wild foods, including nuts, seeds, fruits, greens, and roots. Natives used fire for a number of uses, including hunting and the management of wild food resources. They would set low-intensity fires to clear the undergrowth around nut trees to make it easier for people to gather nuts in the fall. They also set V-shaped fires into which they could funnel deer, making hunting easier than in an open woodland (Fritz, 2019, p. 18; Hammett, 2000).

Native peoples in the eastern United States began cultivating a suite of small-seeded plants domesticated long before Woodland cultures developed. As farming was the primary responsibility of Native women across the eastern U.S., it is likely that innovative women were the ones who domesticated these plants. **Domestication** happens when humans intentionally or unintentionally alter the physical appearance and genetic makeup of a plant or animal so that it can coexist with people. This entails people selecting for characteristics that are useful to them, such as bigger seed sizes in plants, or more docile animals. The eastern U.S. is one of only seven places in the world where domestication took place without instruction from other groups who already had domesticates. Some of the plants you may recognize today that were domesticated by Native women in North America include some squash varieties, sunflower, and goosefoot (a relative of quinoa with a similarly shaped seed). Other plants in this suite of domesticates are knotweed, little barley, maygrass, marshelder (related to sunflower). Native domesticates were



largely replaced by corn as the primary staple crops around A.D. 1000. However, wild varieties of these plants continue to grow in our yards and roadsides today (Fritz, 2019, p. 29).

Corn, beans, and some squash varieties (like pumpkins and zucchinis) were originally domesticated by Native people living in Mexico and were brought to North Carolina through networks of trade through which Natives exchanged goods from one group to another. Corn, beans, and squash grow well when planted together, and are nutritious when eaten together. Natives held an annual celebration to mark the beginning of the corn harvest called the Green Corn Ceremony. The Green Corn Ceremony served to bring the community together, and involved activities such as feasting, singing, and dancing. As corn became more important to Woodland societies, people began living together in larger villages, and in more **sedentary** settlements as they continued living in the same place for longer periods of time.

By A.D. 1100 major changes started to take shape among Piedmont cultures. Some people continued to live in small, scattered settlements common among Woodland peoples. However, this period is when the Piedmont Village Tradition began to emerge, during which more people began living in larger, more compact villages. As they became more sedentary, they began to grow more food, and were able to produce extra food they could store away for the winter or times of other shortages. Extra crops were stored in **corn cribs**, or small buildings elevated off the ground by stilts. The reliance on more crop cultivation also required more agricultural lands, which may have led to more conflict between tribes trying to increase the size of their fields. As attacks from other tribes increased, people began to build **stockades**, or large, sturdy fences made of upright logs, around larger villages to keep invaders out (Ward and Davis 1999, 98).

One example of a Woodland-style village is the “Mitchum Site,” an archaeological site on the banks of the Haw River in Chatham County, NC, which dates to around the time of the earliest European interactions with Native people in the region. The people living at this site were probably Sissipahaw, a group who later became part of the Catawba. People living at the Mitchum Site built oval-shaped houses using wooden posts made from tree saplings, which were probably tied into a dome shape to form the roof and covered with thick tree bark or animal skins to form the walls. The village was encircled by a palisade (Ward and Davis 1993). Numerous clay pipe fragments were found at the Mitchum Site, indicating the importance of smoking tobacco (and probably other medicinal plants as well.)

Archaeologists also found part of what was likely a children’s toy at the Mitchum Site: the head of a dog molded out of clay with a small stone used for the eye, which had broken away from the body of the toy. One can imagine young Sissipahaw children playing with these kinds of toys outside their houses while their older family members sat nearby, talking, singing, and telling stories while they cooked, wove baskets, or did other daily tasks. Perhaps the children



created stories about the dogs the people of their village raised to help hunting parties when they ventured out to catch supper or to help carry supplies when they travelled.

Mississippian Culture and Lifeways

Around A.D. 1200, a new shared culture began to develop in the southern Piedmont and western North Carolina, the Mississippian. The new ideas and innovations of Mississippian culture came from outside of North Carolina, where powerful Mississippian chiefdoms had developed along the Mississippi River and in portions of present-day Alabama and Georgia. Archaeologists refer to the Mississippian peoples living in the southern Piedmont as the Pee Dee culture, named after the Pee Dee River. Pee Dee peoples lived in highly stratified societies called **chiefdoms**, with leaders who had **ascribed status**, or status based on birth. Mississippian/Pee Dee societies had multiple tiers of organized government, and leaders inherited their position through their mother's lineage. Mississippian people focused more on corn agriculture than Woodland peoples, who had a more diverse diet. Based on the shared practice of mound building, as well as shared symbolism in their artwork, Mississippian peoples across the Southeast and parts of the Midwest appear to have shared similar religious beliefs.

The archaeological site called Town Creek, located on a terrace above the Little River near present-day Mount Gilead in Montgomery County, North Carolina, was where Pee Dee culture was first identified by archaeologists. The site of Town Creek contains an 11-ft.-tall earthen **platform mound** on top of which were constructed temples and residences where their leaders lived. Archaeologists believe people lived at Town Creek for at least 250 years from A.D. 1150-1400. The central platform mound faced a large, open plaza where public meetings, ceremonial activities, and sports games likely took place. Sports at Town Creek likely included a version of the Native American game of stickball. Several buildings were built around the edge of the plaza. The town was encircled by a palisade, and some of the structures outside the plaza were fenced in as well.



Figure 1. Artist's illustration of Town Creek (<https://ancientnc.web.unc.edu/indian-heritage/by-region/southern-piedmont/town-creek/>).

In the 1300s, Mississippian settlements like Town Creek were in decline. Temple mounds were abandoned, and society went from being highly stratified with ascribed leaders to more egalitarian. Rule by public consensus became more common, and people began building large public council houses rather than priestly temples atop mounds. One theory held by archaeologists to explain this decline is that some cultures, like the Pee Dee, may have suffered from prolonged drought conditions that caused a significant decrease in agricultural production. The Piedmont Village Tradition of Woodland cultures continued throughout the 1300 to 1500s and represent the many tribal groups who interacted with Europeans in the sixteenth century (Anderson, 1994, p. 327; Ward & Davis, 1999, p. 131).

Native peoples did not have a written record and were observed by Europeans to move frequently, so it is difficult to establish connections between archaeological sites and specific tribal groups. Some Woodland cultures may be ancestral to the linguistic and tribal groups described by European explorers in the 15th and 16th centuries. In the central and northern Piedmont, Europeans encountered Siouan-speaking groups who were likely ancestral to the Sara, Eno, Shakori, and Occaneechi tribes. A little farther south was likely the Sissipahaw Indians, and in the northeast Piedmont are archaeological sites that were likely the settlements of ancestral Occaneechis, Tutelos, and Saponis (Ward & Davis, 1999, p. 99).



Possible Essential Historical Questions:

Middle grades

- How did Native peoples hunt, fish, and grow food?
- What did Native peoples' towns and villages look like in pre-colonial times?
- What kinds of things did Native people make and use in pre-colonial times?

High school

- What role did agriculture have in the rise and fall of Native cultures?
- What is the difference between egalitarian societies and chiefdoms?
- What were the two major archaeological cultures in pre-colonial North Carolina, and how were they different?

Keywords:

artifact: an object made by a human. Here, artifact is used to refer to objects made by humans in the past. Some examples include pieces of pottery, stone tools, and shell beads.

ascribed status: the status a person has in society is determined by birth.

atlatl: throwing stick used to propel a spear or dart.

chiefdom: political organization in which society is integrated through the office of chiefs.

corn crib: small building elevated off the ground by stilts where corn and other crops were stored.

culture: the material objects, ideas, values, attitudes, and behavior patterns shared by members of a society.

domestication: a process that leads to changes in wild plant or animal species that include alterations to their genes, physical appearance, and/or behavior. Domestication has resulted in many of the crops and livestock we know today.

egalitarian: form of political organization where leadership roles were achieved by people selected by the community.

fishing weir: a structure using rocks to shape where fish can swim in the river

matrilineal: a term describing kinship that was largely traced through the mother's side of the family.

Mississippian: a term describing Native societies, which lived during pre-colonial and into the very early colonial period who built platform mounds, had large-scale corn agriculture, had tiers



of organized government with leaders who inherited their position, and had shared systems of symbols and likely also religious beliefs with other Mississippian peoples throughout the Southeast and Midwest.

sedentary: settlement of a group where at least part of the population remains at the same location throughout the entire year.

stockade: large, sturdy fence made of upright logs placed around a village to keep invaders out.

Woodland: a term describing Native societies which lived during pre-colonial and into the very early colonial period who lived in towns and villages which were more autonomous than Mississippian towns and villages, who grew corn but also had a more diverse diet including other crops and wild foods, and who probably did not have inherited leadership.

Resources:

Ancient North Carolinians: A Virtual Museum of North Carolina Archaeology. Research Laboratories of Archaeology, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
ancientnc.web.unc.edu

References:

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- Fritz, G. J., (2019). *Feeding Cahokia: Early agriculture in the North American heartland*. University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa, AL.
- Hammett, J. E., (2000). Ethnohistory of aboriginal landscapes in the southeastern United States, in *Biodiversity and Native America*, edited by Minnis, P. E., & Elisens, W. J., pp. 248-299. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, OK.
- Ward, H. T. & Davis, R.P.S., Jr., (1999). *Time before history: The archaeology of North Carolina*. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC.