

## North Carolina's First Colonists: 12,000 Years Before Roanoke

Stephen R. Claggett  
Office of State Archaeology  
North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office

*Claggett 1996*

Four hundred years ago the English Roanoke colonists met numerous native inhabitants along the coast of what would become the state of North Carolina. Even earlier, during the 1540s, Spanish explorers under the leadership of Hernando de Soto "discovered" several Indian groups occupying the interior regions of the Carolinas. Today we know that the coastal Indians were part of a larger group occupying the entire mid-Atlantic coastal area, identifiable by a shared language and culture called Algonkian. The Native Americans whom de Soto met included Siouan, Iroquoian and Muskogean speakers, whose descendants are now recognized as the historic tribes of the Catawba, Cherokee and Creek Indians. Within a very short period of time--some 50 years--after those first contacts, the early European explorers of North Carolina had met, interacted with, and begun the process of significant cultural displacement of all the major native groups in the state.

What can we learn about those Indian groups from accounts of the earliest European explorers? Surviving chronicles from de Soto and the Roanoke colonists include many details of the land and its potential or imagined wealth. But with the notable exceptions of the John White paintings and Thomas Hariot's writings, we possess surprisingly little knowledge about the early historic Indians who lived in our state. Tantalizing bits of information can be gleaned from the early series of exploration accounts, but when the actual diversity and complexities of "Indian" culture are considered, we must conclude that their description by explorers was incidental to those for geography, searches for treasure, or daily hardships of the first European explorers.

The later colonial period of North Carolina history likewise exhibits an unfortunate lack of interest on the part of white Americans for details of Indian life. Although colonial government records included brief descriptions of military expeditions and political affairs involving Indian populations, detailed pictures of Indian culture elude modern researchers. Despite crucial involvement of the Carolina Indians in colonial economic ventures, as suppliers of skins for the enormously profitable deerskin trade, as military allies or, too frequently, as slaves, most knowledge we do have comes from unofficial sources. Only the observations of a few men like John Lederer, William Bartram and John Lawson give us even an incomplete view of declining Indian cultures, one roughly comparable to the purposely detailed accounts of White and Hariot. Indeed, it would not be inaccurate to say that the writings of Lawson and Hariot, supplemented by White's paintings, constitute the best history of American Indians in North Carolina until the nineteenth century, by which time much of Indians' culture was gone forever. Population estimates, locations and accurate names for various tribal groups, and clear descriptions of Indian political and social life unfortunately cannot be gained from historical documents alone.

And what about the ancestors of those historic period Indians? Where did they come from, and how do we know anything at all about their cultures? None of the native cultures in North Carolina had any sort of written language. They relied instead on oral traditions for their origins, myths and histories. Most of our knowledge of North Carolina's prehistoric inhabitants comes from the scant early historical accounts and, especially, the types of information that can be gained through archaeology.

Archaeology is the discipline which provides extensive time depth to studies of change in human societies, population distributions, and cultural adaptations in response to long-term environmental changes. Archaeology is the science (some would say an art) which provides us with answers to questions about the very first "colonists" in North Carolina. In the most general sense, archaeology is the study of human societies for which no or few written records exist, through the careful recovery and analysis of the material remains--the "artifacts"--of these extinct cultures. Archaeology is a branch of anthropology, which involves other types of humanistic and scientific studies of human cultures.

Archaeology is also a discipline with its own set of capabilities and limitations. Trained in methods of excavation, analysis and report writing, archaeologists devote considerable time to adapting the skills of many other disciplines to their own advantage. Application of scholarly techniques from zoology, chemistry, physics, botany, mathematics and computer studies enables archaeologists to explore the immense complexity of environments and cultures which

surrounded our ancestors.

Archaeologists trace the chronicle of Native Americans to at least 12,000 years ago. The earliest aboriginal groups reached North Carolina not long after people first crossed into the New World from Siberia during the final stages of the last Ice Age, or Pleistocene era. The distinctive fluted projectile points used by the earliest Indian groups show remarkable similarities across the American continents. The distributions of such artifacts suggest rapid population growth and movement of the initial colonizing bands of people through Canada and the Great Plains, and into the eastern woodlands of which North Carolina is a part.

PaleoIndians, as archaeologists call those first people, were well adapted, technologically and socially, to climates, vegetation and animal populations very different from those of today. The late Pleistocene era saw wetter, cooler weather conditions as a general rule for areas like the Eastern Seaboard, which was some distance from the southern reaches of the glacial ice. Now-extinct elephants (mastodons and mammoths), wild horses, ground sloths, camels and giant bison roamed the forests and grasslands of our area. Animals not extinct, but now absent from the Southeast, included moose, caribou, elk and porcupine. PaleoIndians preyed on these animals, using their meat, skins and other parts for food, clothing, tools and other needs. They also devoted considerable time to gathering wild plant foods and likely fished and gathered shellfish in coastal and riverine environments.

Native groups who followed the PaleoIndians are called Archaic cultures by archaeologists. Those people occupied eastern North America during a long time period from about 9000 to 2000 B.C., and were the direct descendants of the PaleoIndians. Archaic Indians improved techniques of fishing, gathering and hunting for post-glacial (Holocene) environments, which differed from the Pleistocene. Forest types in the Southeast gradually became more like those of today, as weather patterns changed and the vast glacial ice sheets retreated from the margins of North America.

Archaeologists see Archaic cultures as very successful adaptations to the new forest communities and animal populations of those times. Archaic people made a wide variety of stone, wood, basketry and other tools, that reflect the varied subsistence patterns of generalized fishing, gathering and hunting of the many different species of plants and animals that shared their post-glacial environments. Archaic people possessed great knowledge of their environments and the potential food and raw material sources that surrounded them. Their camps and villages occur as archaeological sites throughout North Carolina, on high mountain ridges, along river banks, and across the Piedmont hills..

Archaic people did lack three things, however, that most people associate with prehistoric Indians. These cultural elements are: bows and arrows, pottery and plant agriculture. In fact, the acceptance of these elements into North Carolina's Archaic cultures marks the transition to the next cultural stage called Woodland.

No overnight change from a pre-ceramic, non-agricultural Archaic stage to Woodland times is recognizable in the archaeological record. Instead, there was very gradual and piecemeal adoption of these new traits into local groups' cultural patterns. For example, there probably were several "beginnings" of pottery manufacture by North Carolina Indians. Agriculture likewise underwent a long period of acceptance. Woodland Indians continued to follow most of the subsistence practices of their Archaic forebears, hunting, fishing, and gathering during periods of seasonal abundance of deer, turkeys, shad and acorns. Labor was committed to tasks of clearing fields, planting and harvesting crops like sunflowers, squash, gourds, beans and maize only when it was certain that those efforts could assure surpluses needed for winter and early spring months when natural food sources were sparse.

Bow and arrow equipment was also an innovation of the Woodland stage, although the ultimate origin of that hunting technology is unknown. Small triangular and stemmed projectile points, suitable in terms of size and weight for attachment to arrow shafts, are recovered for the first time on Woodland period sites. Prior to then, the hafted stone tools of Archaic and PaleoIndians were used for spears, knives and dart points (used with spear throwers, or *atlatls*). Use of bows and arrows probably led to shifts in hunting patterns among Woodland Indians, since the primary game animals like white tail deer could now be harvested efficiently by single, stalking hunters.

Despite the introduction of these new elements into prehistoric Indian lifeways, much remained the same. Woodland Indians continued patterns of seasonal exploitation of many game and plant resources. Archaeological sites from the period, which began some time around 2000 B.C., are found on all portions of the landscape, although there was a tendency to settle in larger, semi-permanent villages along stream valleys, where soils were suitable for Woodland farming practices utilizing hoes and digging sticks.

The house patterns, defensive walls (or palisades), and substantial storage facilities at some sites also demonstrate that Woodland Indians were more committed to settled village life than their Archaic predecessors. Distributions of ceramic (pottery) styles and other artifacts suggest to archaeologists that Woodland Indians began to recognize territorial boundaries. The more obvious boundaries may reflect early language groups of the Siouan, Iroquoian and Algonkian Indians later met by the Europeans. Intangible cultural elements cannot be recovered from archaeological deposits at any site, of course, so related questions about tribal affiliations, language or religious practices will remain unanswered forever.

Woodland cultures dominated most of North Carolina well into the historic period. Most Indian groups met by early European explorers followed Woodland economic and settlement patterns, occupying small villages and growing crops of maize, tobacco, beans and squash, while still devoting considerable effort to obtaining natural foods like deer, turkey, nuts and fish. A few cultural elements, however, suggest that some Indians had adopted religious and political ideas from a fourth major prehistoric tradition, called Mississippian. Archaeologists recognize certain patterns of artifacts, settlement plans and economics that distinguish Mississippian Indian culture from earlier or perhaps contemporary Woodland occupations.

Mississippian culture can be described neatly as an intensification of Woodland practices of pottery-making, village life and agriculture. But much more was involved in the distinction, especially in terms of political and religious organization and associated militarism. Mississippian culture had few representatives in prehistoric North Carolina. Exceptions are the so-called Pee Dee Indians, who constructed and occupied the major regional center at Town Creek (Montgomery County), and ancestral mountain Cherokee groups. Mississippian-type town centers are more common to the south and west of North Carolina. Centers typically included one or more flat-topped, earthen "temple" mounds, public areas and buildings ("council houses") used for religious and political assemblies. Wooden palisades, earthen moats or embattlements were placed around many villages for defensive purposes.

Mississippian societies described by early French and Spanish explorers were organized along strict lines of social hierarchies determined by heredity or exploits in war. Military aggressiveness was an important part of Mississippian culture, serving to gain and defend territories, group prestige and favored trade and tribute networks. The surviving, and often flamboyant, artifact inventories from Mississippian sites reflect needs for personal status identification and perpetuation of favored lineages. Pottery vessels were made in new and elaborate shapes, often as animal and human effigy forms; other artifacts of exotic copper, shell, wood and feathers mirror the emblematic needs of the noble classes to confirm their status. Far-reaching trade and tribute networks were maintained at great expense to provide necessary items to the ruling classes of Mississippian Indian groups throughout the Southeast and Midwest.

The direct involvement of North Carolina Indians with those large, powerful Mississippian groups is difficult for archaeologists to measure. Minor elements of Mississippian culture may be found in various parts of our state, at least in the forms of pottery designs or ornaments connected with religious or political symbolism. Algonkian Indians met by the Roanoke colonists exhibited some religious ties with Mississippian practices more common in the far South. Cherokee religion and certain traits of pottery manufacture likewise may hint at more "elaborate" parallels in Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, and elsewhere in the heart of Mississippian territory. Ancestral ties of language or other cultural elements probably always linked North Carolina's Indians more closely with northern and western traditions, however, and such associations may have prevented the total acceptance of Mississippian cultural traits so pervasive in other Southeastern regions.

Through the 18th and 19th centuries, Native Americans in the eastern and central portions of North Carolina were largely displaced as the colony's and state's frontiers were populated by Euro-American and African-American colonists, farmers, slaves and townspeople. Some Indian "tribes" in the coastal and piedmont regions voluntarily relocated in advance of colonial frontier expansion. Painfully direct results of armed conflicts like the Tuscarora and Yemassee Wars included forced removals of native populations onto a few small reservations. More commonly, native populations were forced to join allied tribes in Virginia, Pennsylvania, New York and elsewhere.

Native Americans who avoided direct involvement in such situations nevertheless participated in larger systems of colonial politics, settlement and trade that produced far-reaching disruptions of their traditional cultural patterns. The historical effects of disease on native populations may never be precisely defined, for instance, but the aggregate effects included major population displacements, or splitting up and reconsolidation of populations (especially across the Piedmont).

The fracturing of social ties, group identities, and loss of native languages and other cultural elements during the 18th and 19th centuries persisted into the 20th. Some of these problems have been addressed through Federal and state government recognition of modern Indian tribes and communities, which began, for a variety of legal and social purposes, in the early 19th century and which continues today.

There are at present several modern Native American groups in North Carolina--direct descendants of prehistoric and early historic ancestors recognized in archaeological and historical records. Groups include: Indians of Person County; Haliwa-Saponi; Coharie; Cumberland County Association of Indian People; Lumbee; Waccamaw-Siouan; Guilford Native American Association; Metrolina Native American Association; and, the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. Some 70,000 Native Americans now reside in North Carolina and are represented by those tribal governments or corporate structures and through the North Carolina Commission of Indian Affairs.

Archaeological information is imperfect; archaeologists are limited in what they can explain by vagaries of preservation, modern destruction of sites, and the simple fact that many cultural elements leave no direct traces in the ground. But archaeology exists as the only science with the techniques, theories and evaluative frameworks for providing any information on the 12,000 or more years of human occupation which occurred before the "discovery" of the New World only 500 or so years ago. The inherent curiosity that we possess about things that are old, mysterious or simply unfamiliar expands quite naturally into a desire to truly understand how prehistoric North Carolinians lived, adapted and thrived. Archaeology provides us the means to achieve that goal.

---

Reprinted with permission from *The Ligature*©, NC Division of Archives and History (1986). Revised 15 March, 1996

---

***Further Reading:***

- [Intrigue of the Past: North Carolina's First Peoples](#)
- [The Prehistory of North Carolina: A Basic Cultural Sequence](#)



[North Carolina Archaeology Home](#)

