

Native Americans in Prehistoric Tennessee

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Essential Question: How did Native American societies change over time?

The earliest inhabitants of Tennessee were hunter-gatherers who moved into the region near the end of the last Ice Age. These people, known as Paleo Indians, used caves and rock shelters as temporary campsites. Paleo Indians were hunter gatherers who hunted now-extinct animals such as mastodons. At the Coats-Hines site in Williamson County, the remains of a mastodon with cut marks on the bone were discovered. Thirty-four stone cutting tools were also found at the site. The presence of stone tools and cutting marks provides evidence that Paleo Indians lived in Tennessee.

As the climate warmed, the Archaic Indians, descendants of the Paleo Indians, began to move into river valleys and eventually began small scale farming. Chenopod, or lambsquarters, sunflowers, and a type of squash were grown by Archaic farmers. Archaic people continued to gather hickory nuts, acorn, and other plants as well. Archaic people hunted white-tailed deer using an atlatl, or spear thrower. The simple tool served as a lever which gave spears increased distance and speed.

During the Woodland period, settlements and agriculture evolved and high quality pottery was created. The Woodland Indians were the first to use bows and arrows for hunting in this region. As more crops were grown, populations expanded and large settlements were created. Pinson Mounds and Old Stone Fort are sites created during the Woodland period. The Pinson Mounds site in Madison County is made up of seventeen mounds surrounded by an earthworks enclosure. While at least three of the mounds were used for burials, the majority seem to have served a ceremonial purpose; also, the lack of everyday items such as pottery shards and stone tools suggests that the area was not a permanent settlement, but an area that was visited for specific ceremonial purposes. There is some evidence that the mounds were laid out according to the cardinal directions and in alignment for the summer solstice.

The Old Stone Fort site in Coffee County seems to have had a similar ceremonial purpose. The structure was initially assumed to have been built for military defense. However, later excavations proved this assumption to be false as the structure was built over several hundred years and the walls were too low to provide protection. Also, the

large structure would have needed a large defensive force which most Woodland tribes did not have. While Woodland tribes grew some crops, they still depended on hunting and gathering for much of their food supply, so they could not support a permanent defensive force in one location.

The Mississippian period, which lasted from roughly 900 to 1600 CE, saw the creation of larger ceremonial mounds, the development of chiefdoms, large scale farming, and increased warfare. Mississippian people grew corn and beans to feed the large populations in towns. Social rank was determined by family ties. The chief, his family, and related families led privileged lives. The mounds were often used as burial sites for high ranking individuals as well as ceremonial centers. The Chucalissa site in Memphis is the best known Mississippian mound site in Tennessee. While archeological digs have contributed a great deal to our knowledge of these civilizations, none left written records on which modern historians depend.

Sources:

Jefferson Chapman. "Prehistoric American Indians in Tennessee." McClung Research Notes, Number 28, 2009. <https://mcclungmuseum.utk.edu/2009/01/01/prehistoric-american-indians/> Accessed 12 June

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Charles Faulkner, *The Old Stone Fort: Exploring an Archaeological Mystery* (Knoxville, Tenn.: University of Tennessee Press, 1971)

Student Activity

Directions: Read the statements below. Match it to the Native American group it describes.

- _____ 1. Created the Old Stone Fort in Coffee County
- _____ 2. Hunted mastodons
- _____ 3. Built mounds for burials and ceremonial purposes
- _____ 4. First to use bows and arrows
- _____ 5. Created the Coats-Hines site
- _____ 6. Hunted with atlatl
- _____ 7. Practiced large scale farming
- _____ 8. First to practice small scale farming
- _____ 9. Created Chucalissa site in Memphis
- _____ 10. Created Pinson Mounds

Student Activity Answer Key

Directions: Read the statements below. Match it to the Native American group it describes.

Woodland 1. Created the Old Stone Fort in Coffee County

Paleo 2. Hunted mastodons

Mississippian 3. Built mounds for burials and ceremonial purposes

Woodland 4. First to use bows and arrows

Paleo 5. Created the Coats-Hines site

Archaic 6. Hunted with atlatl

Mississippian 7. Practiced large scale farming

Archaic 8. First to practice small scale farming

Mississippian 9. Created Chucalissa site in Memphis

Woodland 10. Created Pinson Mounds