

Twenty Questions about Arkansas Indians*

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1. How did the first Indians get to America?

The first movement of people into the Americas was part of a global expansion of human populations at the end of the last Ice Age that resulted in the occupation of every major landmass in the world except Antarctica. Archeological finds suggest that some Asiatic hunting groups crossed a thousand-mile wide land bridge connecting Siberia with Alaska, while others traveled in boats across the north Pacific rim to reach North America sometime between 16,500 and 13,500 years ago (between 14,500 and 11,500 BC). These Paleoindians spread very rapidly across the continent, reaching the Mid-South/Arkansas region shortly after 11,500 BC.

2. What archeological periods are recognized in Arkansas?

The Paleoindian period represents the adaptations of those first people to occupy this region at the end of the last Ice Age, from 11,500–8500 BC. Paleoindians were nomadic (moving from place to place throughout the year) and lived mainly by hunting. Next comes the Archaic period (8500–650 BC), during which people gradually settled down in early Holocene (modern, post-Ice Age) environments. These people were hunters and gatherers, but around 5,000 years ago they domesticated the first garden plants and a few centuries later constructed the first monumental earthworks. The Woodland period (650 BC–AD 900) witnessed the expansion of gardening and the development of small farming villages. Woodland Indians buried some of their dead under earthen mounds and they also constructed large ceremonial centers, such as the Toltec Mounds site near Little Rock. During the Mississippi period (AD 900–1541), large agricultural towns developed in eastern and southern Arkansas.

3. How did Paleoindians live? What were their lives like?

Paleoindians were nomadic hunters who possessed a very effective weapon technology based on a multi-piece spear propelled by means of a throwing stick or “atlatl.” The animals they hunted—which included now-extinct species such as mammoths and mastodons as well as smaller game like bison, caribou, and deer—provided hides and other raw materials for making clothing and tents. Small groups moved frequently, but stayed close to other groups with whom they could exchange food and other materials, share information, and obtain marriage partners. Over time, many such groups began to settle down into regional territories. In eastern Arkansas, stylistic differences in Paleoindian projectile points found on either side of Crowley’s Ridge suggest the existence of two distinct groups in that part of the Mississippi Valley.

4. Which Native groups lived in Arkansas when Europeans arrived?

The first Europeans to set foot in what is now Arkansas were the Spanish conquistadors, led by Hernando de Soto, who crossed the Mississippi River in the spring of 1541. We are uncertain about the cultural identities of the many Arkansas tribes whom the Spaniards encountered, because the names written down by Soto’s chroniclers are very different from the names of tribes identified by subsequent explorers. When Marquette and Jolliet and La Salle reached what is now Arkansas in the late seventeenth century, they encountered Quapaw and Tunica Indians living in the eastern and central parts of the state. The Osages ranged into northwest Arkansas from villages located in southwestern Missouri. Caddo Indians occupied villages in the Ouachita Mountains and Gulf Coastal Plains of southwestern Arkansas.

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5. What did Native Arkansans eat?

Dietary information comes mainly from animal and plant remains preserved at archeological sites. Deer and bear were important sources of meat, along with smaller forest-dwelling animals such as rabbits, squirrels, and turkey. Ducks, geese, and other waterfowl were taken, as were many species of fish, shellfish, amphibians, and reptiles. Nuts and acorns (which were processed to remove the bitter tannins) were collected in great quantities, along with fruits and edible tubers. By 5000 years ago, Indians began to harvest the seeds of various plants, including maygrass, little barley, lamb's quarters, knotweed, and sunflower, and they cultivated several kinds of wild gourds and squashes. Corn, originally domesticated by Mexican Indians, replaced most of the locally domesticated plants after AD 1000 and, along with beans and various species of squash, became the mainstay of Southeastern Indian agriculture.

6. How did Indians hunt and catch fish?

For many thousands of years, Indians hunted with a multi-piece spear or dart. Sometime around AD 600, the bow and arrow was introduced and rapidly became the weapon of choice for most Southeastern Indian hunters. Indians used a variety of other devices, including snares, traps, deadfalls, nets, bolas, and slings. Indians caught fish using carved bone or antler hooks, nets woven of plant fiber cordage, and traps woven of wood or cane splints. Weirs made of stone and stick walls were set across streams and rivers to harvest larger catches during spawning seasons, often with the aid of nets and pronged fish spears.

7. How did Indians learn to domesticate wild plants?

As Indian groups began to establish more settled life-ways during the Archaic period, cleared areas surrounding their campsites were invaded by weeds—including maygrass, little barley, lamb's quarters, knotweed, and sunflower—that produce abundant quantities of nutritious seeds. Indians not only began to collect these seeds for use as food, they also began to manage the annual cycles of plant growth by eliminating the smallest specimens from stands of these plants and sowing the seeds of the larger, healthier plants. Such intervention introduced selective pressures favoring certain traits, resulting in the evolution of new plant species producing larger and more abundant and nutritious seeds. This process came with a cost: the newly domesticated species were now dependent on human cultivation. Plant remains preserved in dry Ozark rock shelter sites demonstrate (via radiocarbon dating) that Indians in this region succeeded in domesticating some of these plant species by 5000 years ago.

8. How did Indians make stone tools?

Stone tool making was an important element of ancient Indian technology. Many kinds of stone were used, though chert (a flint-like stone), which forms in limestone bedrock deposits, was by far the most important resource. Indians collected raw materials where they could, often extracting stone from bedrock sources at quarry sites or obtaining “exotic” materials via long-distance trade. Two stone tool-making technologies were used. Chipped stone tool making was used to make projectile points; cutting, scraping, and perforating implements; and chopping tools such as adze, axe, and hoe blades. In this technology, a hard hammer stone is used to break flakes away from a core, or large chunk of the raw material. Large flakes are then brought to a desired shape by striking off smaller flakes, using either a hammer stone or a “soft” hammer such as a wood or antler billet and finishing and sharpening the piece by pressing off very tiny flakes from the edges, using an antler tine or similar implement. The other technology is based on grinding and abrading. Various implements (ranging from hard stones to hollow reeds) are used with abrasive grits to shape and drill resilient stone into a finished form with the desired amount of polish. Axe and adze blades, stone mortars and pestles, tobacco pipes, and figurines were manufactured using these techniques. Both chipped- and ground-stone tool making require a great deal of knowledge, experience, patience, and dexterity.



9. Why did Indians build mounds?

Mound building is an ancient practice that began in the Southeast more than 5000 years ago. The oldest mounds in Arkansas were built around 3500 years ago. These early mounds were probably constructed as ceremonial centers to mark sacred places. A few centuries later, Archaic Indians in northeastern Louisiana constructed the famous Poverty Point site, consisting of six earthen mounds—the largest in the shape of a bird—along with six massive concentric earthen ridges on which hundreds of houses were placed. One interpretation suggests that the symmetrical, orderly layout of these earthworks provided the community with a sense of protection against malevolent supernatural forces. During the Woodland period (650 BC–AD 900), many communities built earthen mounds over the graves of deceased leaders and their relatives, thereby marking the landscape with physical reminders of a community’s ancestral legacy. Later in the Woodland era, Indians also began to construct platform mounds—pyramidal in shape with flat upper surfaces—that served as central places for religious activities. The premier example in Arkansas is the Toltec Mounds site near Scott (preserved as Toltec Mounds State Park), where Woodland Indians constructed 18 mounds in an area enclosed by a mile-long earthwork and ditch complex. These mounds were oriented on the landscape to provide observation points for tracking solar solstice and equinox positions. During Mississippian times (AD 900–1541), agricultural communities in eastern and southern Arkansas constructed large ceremonial complexes, some with several platform mounds on which temples and mortuary shrines were built. The first explorers in the Mississippi Valley witnessed the last uses of such mounds.

10. Did Natives have religion?

All Native peoples maintained beliefs about how the world was created, how people originated, and how people came to possess the commonly accepted principles that guide them through their lives. While each of more than 500 distinct American Indian societies that existed when Europeans first arrived in America had their own versions of such beliefs, there were some widely shared elements. Many Southeast Indian communities, for example, envisioned a three-layer universe consisting of: This World, inhabited by people, animals, and plants; Above World, populated by creative forces and various spirit beings including the souls of ancestors; and Below World, containing chaotic forces but also holding the promise of a better future. The role of humans in these belief systems was to perform rituals and other acts to maintain a balance between opposing spiritual powers so that favorable circumstances would prevail in This World.

11. Did Native tribes use writing?

North American Indians did not have alphabetic or phonemic writing systems before the arrival of Europeans, though many groups developed forms of picture writing with which they decorated architectural surfaces, clothing, and other material items as well as trees, natural rock surfaces, and other landscape features. Several Middle American writing systems developed in pre-Columbian times; the most well-known of these is the hieroglyphic form of writing developed by the Maya Indians of Mexico around 250 BC. A Cherokee Indian named George Gist or Guess, also known as Sequoyah, introduced a syllabic writing system for the Cherokee language in 1819, when he was living in the Western Cherokee settlement near present-day Dardanelle, Arkansas. The Cherokee “syllabary” or alphabet was used to publish books, newspapers, and journals and by 1830 nearly 90 percent of the Cherokees could read and write in their own language. The Cherokee system was adapted as a form of writing for numerous other North American Indian languages.

12. Did Indians produce art, and for what purposes was art used?

Art works played an important role in all Indian communities. A red ochre zigzag design drawn on the frontal bone of an extinct species of bison at an Oklahoma Paleoindian site may represent an early use of art in hunting rituals. Archaic-period Indians produced even more elaborate geometrical designs and also made small sculptures of animals, insects, and people to represent relationships connecting different communities of beings who share the earth. During the Woodland period, Indians decorated ceramics, engraved bone and shell, carved stone and wood, made copper and mica cutouts, and wove fabrics and basketry in designs to express their cultural identities and views of the world. Mississippian period Indians used these same media, plus others such as embossed sheet copper, to create elaborate designs and action scenes that reflected their identities, social institutions, and beliefs, as well as key scenes from important mythic narratives.



13. Did Indians enjoy good health?

Studies of Indian skeletal remains indicate that pre-Columbian Indians suffered none of the deadliest diseases afflicting modern civilizations, such as cancer, strokes, heart failure, and diabetes. This is because for most of their history Indians lived in small, relatively clean settlements and engaged in vigorous activities that among other things provided a healthy and varied diet. One negative consequence of this vigorous lifestyle, however, was an elevated frequency of skeletal joint ailments such as osteoarthritis. The shift to high carbohydrate diets that came with the advent of agriculture produced increases in dental caries (cavities) and, at first, poor overall nutrition. The health effects of poor diets were corrected as Indians learned to make adjustments in the consumption of agriculturally produced foods. For example, adding beans to corn-based diets provided a more complete nutritional balance. Concentration of populations into larger and more crowded towns during Mississippian times, on the other hand, led to increases in rates of infection and interpersonal violence. Longevity among all Indian groups was lower than life expectancy in modern societies, due mainly to high infant mortality rates and the lack of modern technologies that extend the lives of the seriously ill and injured. With the arrival of Europeans, Indians were exposed to Old World diseases to which they had no immunological defense. Consequently, in some areas of the New World, including parts of the Southeast, Indian populations declined by as much as 90 percent.

14. Did Indians enjoy much leisure time, and if so, how did they spend it?

Since the food quest and the production of necessary goods required only a few hours work per day, Indians enjoyed considerable leisure time. They devoted much of that time to philosophy, oral literature and the arts, education, and recreation. Many people, and especially the elders, spent much time pondering the origins of the universe and the natural and spiritual forces regulating life on earth. Making expert use of clues derived from careful observations of nature, Indians developed elaborate philosophies that enabled them to understand their place in the world. Such insights were often translated into stories that were handed down from generation to generation. Modern versions of these stories (recorded as “myths” by folklorists, historians, and anthropologists) are highly entertaining and involve the adventures, and sometimes the misadventures, of numerous characters and culture heroes. Indians devoted considerable time to producing art works illustrating their views of the world. Games and contests, in addition to providing great fun, were also used to instruct and to sharpen critical life skills.

15. What happened to the Indians living in Arkansas? Where did they end up?

Tunica Indians moved out of Arkansas to Louisiana and Mississippi at the end of the seventeenth century, to take advantage of trade opportunities with French settlers in the lower Mississippi valley and along the Gulf Coast. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the United States government began to sign treaties with Cherokees and other Southeast tribes that forced them to vacate their homelands and move across the Mississippi River into what is now Arkansas. To make room for these immigrants, additional treaties were signed that reduced Caddo, Osage, and Quapaw land holdings. Within a few decades all Arkansas lands were opened for settlement by white Americans, so the Indians—indigenous and immigrant—were forced to cede their remaining lands and move to specially designated reservation areas in Indian Territory, which comprised parts of modern Oklahoma and Kansas.

16. What are Indians like today?

While some American Indians continue to live on reservations, most live like other Americans in big cities, small towns, and rural areas in the United States, Canada, and Mexico. Many Caddos, Osages, and Quapaws live in Oklahoma, while most Tunicas live in Louisiana. Some Indians are farmers or ranchers, while others are medical doctors, lawyers, school teachers, government or military employees, or work in business or industry. Many Indians participate in tribal activities that maintain and perpetuate ancient cultural traditions. There are today more than 17,000 people in Arkansas who identify themselves as Indians.



17. Where can I see Indian sites in Arkansas?

The Arkansas Department of Parks and Tourism manages two state parks at important archeological sites. Toltec Mounds State Park in Scott, Arkansas (near Little Rock) offers exhibits and tours of the mounds and earthworks that represent the premier ceremonial center in the central Arkansas River valley during Late Woodland and early Mississippian times (AD 650–1000). Parkin Archeological State Park, between Wynne and West Memphis, is the site of a large, fortified Mississippian town occupied from AD 1000 into the sixteenth century. Archeologists believe it was the town of Casqui that Hernando de Soto visited in 1541. Several rock art sites can be visited along hiking trails in Petit Jean State Park located between Russellville and Morrilton, Arkansas.

18. What should I do if I discover an Indian site or find Indian artifacts?

You should contact the nearest Arkansas Archeological Survey research station. The Survey's professional staff can identify the artifacts and determine if the site has been reported previously. While the Survey will not confiscate your collections, you should not purposely dig for artifacts, as this may violate a variety of state and federal laws. For a directory of research stations, consult the Survey's web site: www.arkansasarcheology.org

19. How can I find out what my Indian artifact collection is worth?

Professional archeologists and modern Indians discourage the buying and selling of artifacts. The commercial sale of artifacts promotes the destruction of archeological sites by looting, which is like tearing out the pages of history books thereby making it all the more difficult to learn about the past. Artifacts can help archeologists reconstruct history only when information is preserved about the contexts from which artifacts were removed. Trafficking in artifacts is even more disheartening for modern Indians, for whom artifacts represent the legacy of their ancestors. There are other risks involved in buying and selling artifacts; you may be offered artifacts that were stolen from private land (dug up without permission), looted from a grave, or removed from state or federal land (which is a felony). You may also end up paying a lot of money for fake artifacts.

20. How can I learn more about Arkansas Indians?

The Arkansas Archeological Survey publishes many books on Arkansas archeology and Arkansas Indians, including several written specifically for general audiences. Information on ordering these books is available on the Survey's website:

<http://www.arkansasarcheology.org/archinfo/publications.html>

The Survey also hosts websites featuring information on Indians of Arkansas and Indian rock art in Arkansas. You can find the websites at these addresses:

<http://arkarcheology.uark.edu/indiansofarkansas/index.html>

<http://arkarcheology.uark.edu/rockart/index.html>

The Butler Center for Arkansas Studies at the Central Arkansas Library System in Little Rock hosts an online Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture that contains a large number of well-written articles on Arkansas Indian topics:

<http://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/>

