

Toltec Mounds, 650 BC - AD 1050: A Case Study

What is the Woodland Period?

The Woodland Period is a time in American Indian history between 650 – 900 AD. During this period, people domesticated plants and tended gardens. Woodland Indians used similar tools, lived in villages, and their communities were less egalitarian than the Archaic Indians before them.

What kind of food did Woodland Indians eat? How did they get their food?

Woodland Indians collected wild foods, such as blueberries, wild grapes, and hickory nuts, just like the Archaic Indians. But as Woodland Indians became more **sedentary**, or lived in one place most of the time, they started living in villages. They cleared the vegetation around their villages and exposed more ground area to sunlight. They also built up a lot of garbage nearby. Their garbage, which was mostly plant and animal waste, created rich soil with lots of nutrients. Some of the seeds of the plants they had been gathering for hundreds of years, grew into plants in the trash. People started using these plants more and more, and doing things to help them grow. They saved the best seeds to plant next year. Over many years of planting the best seeds, the plants began to change. They developed traits that made them easier to grow and better to eat. This is how Woodland Indians domesticated plants in Arkansas. **Domestication** takes place when changes in the traits of a plant are caused by the ways humans use them.

Woodland Indians cleared areas of land to grow these domesticated plants. Today, people don't eat most of the crops that Woodland Indians grew. You probably haven't eaten little barley, sumpweed, goosefoot, or maygrass. One plant that you likely have eaten that Woodland Indians farmed is squash. You may also have eaten quinoa, a plant much like goosefoot. Although archeologists know many of the plants Toltec people grew, archeologists have identified a seed from a plant that remains a mystery. The seed is from a domesticated grass and to this day archeologists have not been able to find which grass this seed comes from. Woodland Indians cooked seeds from these plants into stews and porridges.



A goosefoot plant.

They also hunted, trapped, and fished for meat.

What kind of tools did Woodland Indians make and use?

Woodland Indians used the animal bones to make tools and the skin to make leather. They made pottery bowls and jars by shaping clay and baking the shaped clay in a very hot fire. During the Archaic Period, people used baskets, leather bags, and containers made out of gourds or carved out of stone or wood. With pottery, Woodland Indians could cook their meals directly over fires. They often decorated their pottery in ways that showed which family or village made it.

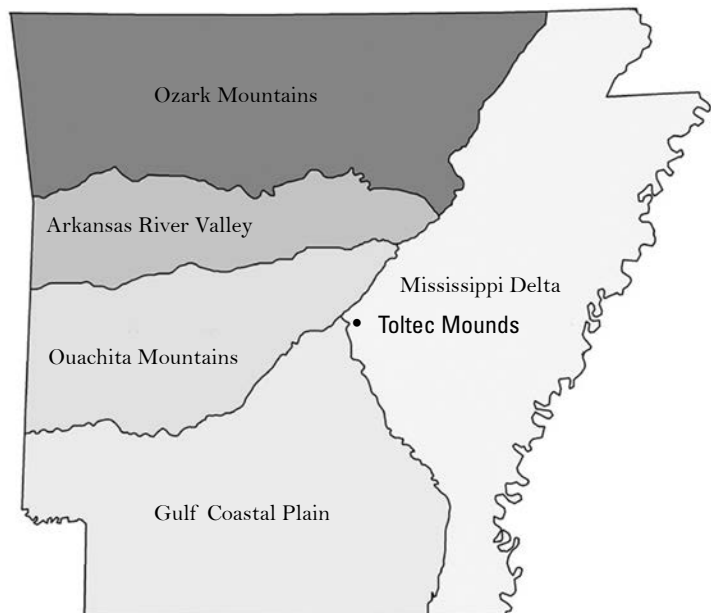
Arkansas Indians hunted using spears and atlatls, or spearthrowers. Beginning around AD 600, Woodland Indians started hunting with bows and arrows. A bow and arrow can shoot even farther and aim better than an atlatl.



Decorated pottery.



Bow and arrow.



Location of Rockhouse Cave in Arkansas.



Name _____

Date _____



Toltec Mounds. Photo by Elizabeth Horton.

What kind of sites did Woodland Indians create?

Woodland Indians were more **sedentary** than the Archaic Indians who lived before them. Where Archaic Indians lived in base camps in small bands, Woodland Indians lived in many small villages with a number of families. Some of the people who lived in the village were not closely related.

- ⊙ **Village:** Most Woodland Indians lived in a village year round. People built houses and grew gardens nearby. They built round houses with thin poles for wall posts. They tied the thin, flexible poles together at the top to make a roof, and covered it with hides, sheets of bark, or grass thatch. They built villages near river bottoms to provide good soil for gardening and close to places where they could hunt and gather wild plants, like nuts and berries. Deer and wild plant foods are most often found in the hilly upland areas.
- ◆ **Special Purpose Site:** Woodland Indians continued to use special purpose sites to do things they could not do at their home. A fishing camp near the river or the place they gather clay to make pottery are examples.
- △ **Cemetery:** People buried their loved ones in cemeteries. Some of the dead were buried in round earthen mounds.
- ⊗ **Ceremonial Center:** A ceremonial center is a place where people come together to celebrate special events and have religious ceremonies and feasts. Toltec is an example.

Where is Toltec?

Toltec is the name of an ceremonial center located to the southeast of Little Rock, Arkansas in the region called the Mississippi Delta. The Toltec name for the site dates to the 19th century, when people thought the impressive mounds must have been built by the Toltec Indians of ancient Mexico. Today, the site is protected as a state park where you can visit to learn more about the people who built and lived at Toltec. Woodland Indians created and used Toltec over a thousand years ago (between AD 650 and AD 1050).

What kind of site is Toltec?

Toltec is a large ceremonial center. When the Woodland Indians created the site, they built a wall made of soil around three sides of it. The wall was eight to ten feet high and over a mile long. There is a lake on the fourth side of the site. The wall had places where people could go in and out. They also built 18 mounds out of soil. You can see three of the largest mounds at Toltec Mounds Archeological State park today. The tallest mound is about four stories tall. Modern farming damaged the rest of the smaller mounds. They can no longer be seen, but archeologists know where they were.

One mound that you can see today is low with a rounded top. This was a new kind of cemetery. Another one of the mounds that still stands looks like a flat-topped pyramid. This mound had a building on top of it. The Woodland Indians built the mounds around a flat, open area called a plaza. They used the plaza for group activities like feasts, dances, and religious ceremonies.





Toltec Mounds from Plum Bayou. Photo by Elizabeth Horton.

Even though Toltec is a large site with many mounds, archeologists have found that few people lived there. Rather than living at Toltec, Woodland Indians visited this ceremonial center for big yearly or seasonal events for everyone living in the area. It was the gathering place for people from nearby villages to come together for celebrations. People held large feasts at Toltec. Archeologists know this because they have found areas of the site with a large amount of animal bones and decorated pottery. Archeologists think that many people brought food in their finest decorated pottery and prepared deer and other animals for a large meal. The large number of animal bones suggest that people came from all around to be a part of the feasts.

What did Woodland Period communities look like?

Growing population increased the size and number of villages. Trade between communities also increased. For example, Woodland Indians traded for copper from Michigan and marine shell from the Gulf Coast.

Ceremonial Centers, like Toltec, brought people from area villages for community celebrations. The celebrations tie people from many villages into a single community. Archeologists think the Woodland Indians were less egalitarian. The people buried in the mounds were highly respected members of the community. People gained respect and became leaders by their skill in hunting or success in trading. Leaders organized important social and ceremonial events and made sure people got along.



The Plum Bayou Garden at Toltec Mounds Archeological State Park. Photo by Elizabeth Horton.

The Plum Bayou Garden at Toltec Mounds Archeological State Park

Visitors to Toltec Mounds Archeological State Park can see how Woodland Indians used the land to create gardens. Before Arkansas Indians started growing corn as one of their main foods, they planted and tended crops local to Arkansas. These ancient crops included sumpweed, maygrass, little barley, sunflower, goosefoot, erect knotweed, squash, and bottle gourds. Indians of Arkansas grew and ate the kinds of plants grown in the Plum Bayou Garden for hundreds of years before people started farming mostly corn.

Learn more here: <http://archeology.uark.edu/learn-discover/current-research/plum-bayou-garden/>

