

Parkin, 1350 - 1600 AD: A Case Study

What is the Mississippi Period?

The Mississippi Period is a time in Native American history between 900 – 1600 AD. Archeologists call this the Mississippi Period, because people shared similar ways of life. They lived in towns, farmed corn, beans, and squash, and built mounds. Their communities were organized into chiefdoms.

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

Like people in earlier time periods, Mississippian Indians gathered some wild foods to eat. The environment also provided lots of fish, shellfish, turtles, and other animals to eat. Unlike the Woodland Indians before them, Mississippian Indians farmed large fields of corn, beans, and squash.

Every year, Mississippian Indians planted a little more corn, beans, and squash than they needed for that year. This extra food is called a surplus. The chief stored the surplus of corn, beans, and squash for times when people needed extra food. You might think that with a food surplus, Mississippian Indians would be healthier than the Woodland gardeners and Archaic gatherers before them. But that is not true. If the plants did not do very well for a year or more, Mississippians would not have enough food to eat. Corn also contains a lot of sugar (look at the ingredients in a cola: corn syrup is one of the first ingredients). The large amounts of sugar in corn caused Mississippian Indians



Corn plant with seeds. Drawing by Jane Kellett.



Bean plant with seeds. Drawing by Jane Kellett.

to have a lot of cavities. Cavities are easy for a dentist to take care of today, but before there were dentists, cavities could develop into very serious health problems. People also had health problems caused by not having the right levels of nutrients in their bodies. Many Mississippian Indians did not have enough iron in their diets, because corn, beans, and squash do not contain very much iron. The lack of iron caused people to get sick. Working in the fields was hard work, and people often got arthritis from doing the same motions, like hoeing, over and over. Finally, there was more chance for people to catch an illness from other people because people were living close together during the Mississippi Period. Farming resulted in more food most of the time, but it was also hard work and provided a diet that was not always nutritious.

What kind of tools did Mississippian Indians make and use?

Mississippian Indians made tools for tending plants in their fields. They made hoes with large blades made from stone, mussel shell, or bone for weeding their fields. Mississippian people hunted many kinds of animals. Like their Woodland Period ancestors, they used bows and arrows for hunting. They made stone axes for cutting down trees when they needed to clear land to make fields for growing plants.



A hoe made of stone.

They also made stone adzes for carving and shaping wood into all kinds of things like tool handles or bows. Although they do not preserve for archeologists to find, the people of Parkin made and used baskets for gathering and storing plant foods. Like people living during the Woodland period, Mississippian Indians made fired clay pottery for cooking and storing food and water. They made more and different shapes of clay pots than their Woodland Period ancestors.



Parkin Punctate pot. Drawing by Jane Kellett.



What kind of sites did Mississippian Indians build?

Mississippian farmers lived in areas with lots of fertile soil. Flat land next to a river was best, because floods kept soil fertile. Archeologists find many Mississippian towns located along rivers and streams. People still traveled to nearby uplands to get wild plant foods, to hunt animals, and to get stone and other material for making tools. They just didn't live there.

- **Residential Sites:** Sites where people lived all year long. These sites are different from region to region in Arkansas. Some were small, single family sites (farmsteads), but there were also hamlets with several houses and towns with many houses and maybe a mound or two. Some very large towns had dozens of houses and a few mounds enclosed by walls or palisades. Since people got most of their food by farming, they lived near fertile land in the river bottoms that was good for growing crops. Sometimes Mississippian Indians buried their dead under or near their houses or in cemeteries.
- ◆ **Special Purpose Sites:** Special purpose sites include quarries, where people got stone for making tools or salt-making sites, where people made salt from salty water. Sites with stone tools where hunters butchered animals for food and hides are another example.
- ⊗ **Ceremonial Center:** Ceremonial centers, like Parkin, are the biggest sites built by Native Americans. They have many mounds. Ceremonial centers were the capitals of **chiefdoms**, where a chief lived along with many other people in large towns. The chief's house stood on a mound, and temples were built on other mounds. Mississippian Indians also buried some of their dead in the mounds. They built places to store grain from nearby villages and plazas for celebrations, ceremonies, and feasts. The ceremonial center was surrounded by a wall, or palisade, to protect it from their enemies.

Where is Parkin?

Parkin Archeological State Park is located along the St. Francis River in the Mississippi Delta, an area with forests and many lakes, wetlands, and swamps. During the Mississippi Period, around 650 years ago, Native Americans built the ceremonial center. Archeologists think that Parkin is one of several places visited by the Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto in 1541. The explorers wrote that the town was then called Casqui. They also wrote about the Indians, but because they stayed at Casqui for only a few days, they didn't write much.

In the 1960s, archeologists excavating at Parkin found two Spanish artifacts that date to the 1540s. One is a small brass bell from a horse harness. The other is a multi-colored glass bead. De Soto and his men traded these kinds of objects with Mississippi Indians. The artifacts found at Parkin suggest that de Soto visited in 1541.

What kind of site is Parkin?

Parkin is a large ceremonial center where Native Americans lived between 1350 – 1650 AD. Little Rock is the capital of Arkansas today, and back then Parkin was the capital for many nearby towns. Parkin had a wall, or palisade, around it. The palisade surrounded the mounds and neighborhoods with dozens of houses. Outside the wall, there was a moat, or large ditch, that was filled with water from the St. Francis river.



Location of Parkin in Arkansas.





An artist's drawing of what Parkin may have looked like.

The palisade and moat helped protect the ceremonial center from enemies.

The Parkin mounds are made of dirt, piled one basket load at a time. The largest mound is flat on top, like the one at Toltec. It is taller than six men standing on each other's shoulders. The chief lived on top of this mound. The area where people lived contained dozens of houses and other buildings for storing food and other items. There was a plaza, or open area, in the center of town where feasts and celebrations took place.

What did Mississippian communities look like?

During the Woodland Period, most Native Americans lived in small villages. Most Mississippian Indians lived in larger towns. Each town had leaders to make sure people cooperated with each other and lived peacefully. Some leaders, or chiefs, ruled over all the towns and villages in an area. People living in those towns gave the chief a portion of their food. The chief stored the extra food to give away when families ran short. People from nearby villages also traveled to Parkin for social and religious events.

Today we vote for our leaders, but Mississippian chiefs inherited the job, much like kings and queens of Europe. When a chief died, a close relative took over. People belonging to the chief's family enjoyed better food and own other valuable objects that identified their ranked positions. People not related to the chief were commoners. They did the farming and other hard work.

The Mississippian Garden at Parkin



Dr. Mel Harvey showing a filmmaker the cushaw squash (*Cucurbita moschata*) in the Parkin Mississippi Period Garden.

Mississippian Arkansans grew different plants for food and tools. Corn, beans, and squash, sometimes referred to as the "three sisters," were cultivated and created a balanced diet. Sunflowers were grown for the oil in their seeds and sunchokes were harvested as a starchy root vegetable. The wild grains, fruits, and nuts and the hunted and fished proteins enjoyed by the earlier cultures continued to be important in the diet. They also grew non-food plants like rattlesnake master for fiber (for sandals, baskets, nets, and mats) and gourds (for containers and musical instruments). Intensive corn agriculture is what set the Mississippian Indians apart from earlier cultures, and this is probably what allowed their civilization to grow to such heights. The Mississippian Garden at Parkin Archeological State Park features these plants.

You can visit Parkin Archeological State Park.

Learn more here:

<https://www.arkansasstateparks.com/parkinarcheological/>

