

Preserving the Past



Thousands of Years of Indian Culture

When European explorers arrived in North America, they encountered native peoples who already had spent 12,000 years on this continent, adapting to changes in the climate and creating new technologies and complex cultures. Today, only fragments of those prehistoric cultures remain. Stone tools, bits of broken pottery, ornaments, refuse, and traces of ancient buildings must speak for the people who made them. Archeologists study these remains, using them as clues to interpret the lifeways of the early inhabitants of this land. In broad terms, archeologists group the cultural adaptations and developments of Indian people into five major time periods.

Paleoindian (11,500–9500 BC)

The first people arrived in North America from Asia near the end of the Ice Age, when climates were much different from what we know today, with greater extremes in temperature and much wetter conditions. The plants common in Arkansas at that time included species that now live near the Canadian border, such as spruce and pine, along with hickory and oak.

During the Paleo period, small family groups worked together to produce warm skin clothing and weather-tight shelters. They could have gathered some plant foods, such as nuts, and hunted small animals, such as rabbits and squirrels, but they are most noted

for hunting the giant Ice Age mammals that included mammoths and mastodons. They produced finely crafted stone spearpoints, exhibiting a high level of skill, as well as tools of bone and ivory.

Archaic (9500–650 BC)

The Archaic period was a time of great climatic change. As the Ice Age ended, the cold and wet weather gave way to dry and warm conditions, until modern climates finally stabilized about 5000 years ago. As the large Ice Age animals disappeared and different plants and animals thrived, people adapted to these changes in order to survive. They gathered berries, seeds, and especially nuts. They hunted deer, bear, elk, and smaller animals. They sought food at the rivers and lakes by fishing, collecting mussels, and hunting waterfowl. The typical social group was probably composed of several families living in seasonal camps, wherever ripening plants or animals were abundant.

The tools of the Archaic people reflect these changes in their lifeways. They had mortars and grinding stones for crushing seeds and nuts. They carved bone fish hooks, harpoons, needles, and awls. They ground stone into axes, adzes, and gouges to work wood. In addition to utilitarian items, they also spent many hours grinding and polishing beautifully colored or patterned stone into objects such as beads shaped like animals or insects.



By the end of the Archaic period, the intensive gathering of grains and seeds led to the domestication of plants. In hunting-and-gathering cultures, women usually gather plant foods while men hunt. After many generations of observing the ways of plants, perhaps some women began to help their favorite plants thrive by spreading seeds, weeding out competitors, or providing water in dry times. Thus the stage was set for the beginning of farming.

Woodland (650 BC–AD 1000)

Although gathering plant foods and hunting wild game continued to provide food for the people of the Woodland period, gardening acquired new importance. Squash and sunflowers were grown in this period, as well as plants such as maygrass, knotweed, and lamb's quarters, which today are considered weeds but were valued by the Indians for their highly nutritious seeds used to make flour and porridge. Corn from Mexico was also added during this period.

Many people began to live in small, settled farmsteads and developed new technologies, such as pottery, providing new ways to cook and store food. They created new expressions for their spiritual beliefs, honoring some of their dead by burying them in mounds and importing—through vast trade networks—exotic materials, such as Gulf coast marine shell and Lake Superior copper, to place in their graves. By A.D. 500, they had developed the bow and arrow, a superior weapon for hunting game.

Mississippian (AD 900–1541)

Life increased in complexity for the Mississippian peoples as populations grew. In the Delta region of Arkansas, people settled in large towns that were centers of government and religious life. Like town squares that once served as a focus of business and government, Mississippian towns were built around a central plaza that included one or more large flat-topped mounds on which to display special buildings. The people's lives were led by powerful chiefs and priests who controlled trade and alliances, made peace or waged war. When Hernando de Soto's army

marched across Arkansas in 1541–43, they encountered large towns just of this sort.

Intensive corn agriculture, supplemented with beans and squash, provided a surplus of food that could be stored and traded, while the highly efficient bow-and-arrow was used to hunt game, especially deer. The society supported craft specialists, who worked in clay, shell, stone, and other materials to create artistic objects. Advances were made in pottery technology; some vessels depicted effigies of animals or people, and some were covered with intricate engraved or incised designs.

The Caddo, who lived in southwest Arkansas, also grew corn, but were much less dependent on it, continuing to rely on hunting, fishing, and gathering. They built ceremonial centers with mounds, but lived in small, dispersed farmsteads. They traded salt and powerful bows made from the wood of Osage orange trees.

Contact (AD 1541–1840)

Over a million people were living in the Southeast when the first Europeans arrived, with cultures as varied as any in Europe. Unfortunately, the native peoples did not fare well with these newcomers. Archeological evidence and documentary accounts indicate that European diseases, land-hungry immigrants, and an advanced technology eventually drove the Indians from their homes and lands.

Although reduced in numbers, the Native Americans still thrive. The inheritors of this ancient legacy who once lived in Arkansas—the Quapaw, Caddo, Tunica, and Osage—are survivors in our modern world and contribute to the rich multicultural landscape of America today.

How Old Is It?

Archeologists use both relative dating and absolute dating to determine the ages of cultures, sites, and artifacts. The age of an object can be generally determined by how it “relates” to other objects of known age. For example, in a controlled archeological excavation, artifacts found at lower levels of a site are usually



older than artifacts found in levels closer to the surface. Scientific technologies permit archeologists to date sites more specifically. Radiocarbon dating measures the decay of carbon found in organic materials, such as charred wood or plant remains. Tree ring dating, or dendrochronology, uses the patterns of tree rings in certain species to create a visual timeline and can supply a calendar date from preserved posts at some sites.

Losing the Past: What Little Remains

Imagine it is 2000 years in the future and archeologists are studying the remains of what used to be your bedroom! Of all the things you used and enjoyed in that room, what will remain to reflect your lifestyle? No one will see the style of clothes you liked to wear, or the curtains or bedspread that decorated your room. The artwork that hung on your walls and the photos of friends and family will be gone. Your books and diary aren't likely to survive, nor will most of your wooden furniture.

There might be a few metal drawer pulls, parts of a plastic clock, pieces of a glass lamp. Not many clues to reconstruct the full picture, are there?

So it is for the Native Americans who called Arkansas home for thousands of years. We have a tendency to forget how much richer their lives really were, because most that remains—the sherds of pottery, flakes of stone, bits of copper, parts of bone tools—are just a tiny part of the whole.

We rarely see their clothing and fabrics, which could have been woven in brightly colored designs, or had fancy fringes and appliqués of feathers. They made baskets of various shapes, colored with natural dyes, and containers of bark or skin. Most of the objects they fashioned of wood are gone—the tool handles, carved posts, and figurines. Even though a few of these perishable items have been found in dry rock shelters in the Ozarks, giving tantalizing clues to the use of many raw materials, for the most part, we can only guess at what is lost. The knowledge and beliefs of these people are equally difficult to construct.



Preserving the Pieces

The many groups who lived in Arkansas over the past 12,000 years left traces of their lives in the land, not just in material remains, but also in the colors of the dirt—like shadows—that to a trained observer reveal the shapes of houses, areas of different activities, or storage pits. It is the combination of the material remains with the shadows in the dirt—the *context*—that tells us the most about the past. With so little that survives of the people who went before us, every site and artifact is precious for the clues it holds. Each clue is like a piece of a puzzle; the more pieces you can put together, the clearer the picture becomes.

Unfortunately, this priceless record of past lives is being destroyed at an ever-increasing rate. Any activity that changes the contours of the land also has the potential for destroying prehistoric and early historic sites. Earth-moving activities include machine intensive farming, construction of highways and buildings, and various kinds of land development. These are good things for our economy, but such growth comes with a price. Thoughtful and concerned planning can preserve the past while building the future.

Some individuals destroy the past when pursuing what they may consider to be a harmless hobby. By digging in the earth to find Indian artifacts or “relics,” either for a personal collection or to sell, this type of



collector destroys the shadows and the context, wiping out the evidence of centuries of human experience and beliefs. Many collectors just don't realize the harm they are doing; others care more about profit than preserving the past.

Ignorance, indifference, carelessness, and greed threaten the historic and prehistoric resources that belong to all of us. The record of past peoples is not just meaningful to the descendants of those people. Everyone's ancient ancestors lived through similar lifestyles. Archeological discoveries made in the Americas can lead to new ways of interpreting sites in Europe, Asia, or Africa—the past of any people is the past of all peoples.

You can decide the future of the past. Your concern, or neglect, will determine the fate of Arkansas's long history.

Conservation: the Wise Use of Resources

Caring about the past doesn't mean living in the past. It is not necessary to choose between the healthy growth and development of our communities and the remains of past communities. Instead, through knowledge, care, and planning we can celebrate the past and build for the future.

We are all linked to the past. This land we live on sustained our immediate ancestors as well as ancient peoples. Their beliefs, technologies, and hopes and dreams are intertwined with our own. To know ourselves, we must also know them. The past belongs to all of us.

How You Can Help

You don't have to be an archeologist or historian to learn from the past or help preserve the information it holds. There are many simple things we all can do to show our concern. Here are some ways to help:

Protect Indian or historical sites on your property.

There are state laws to support you. Contact the Arkansas Archeological Survey (address below) for information.

Contact your legislators. Let them know you think the past is important to record, study, and save.

Teach children to respect the places and things of the past. Take them to museums. Encourage their interest in history.

Never Dig for Indian artifacts. Digging destroys the clues to the full story.

Report people you see digging in unmarked graves or for artifacts. Their activities may be illegal. Call 1-800-482-9262 (AGFC).

Don't Buy artifacts. You may be encouraging others to vandalize sites for profit.

Support Native American artisans. Buy craftwork being made today that features traditional designs. Improve the future of Native Americans; don't destroy their past.

Get More Involved

If your interest in the past is even greater, you can learn more about the Native Americans who lived in Arkansas and can participate in the study of the past. The Arkansas Archeological Society sponsors lectures, hands-on work with artifacts, and annual excavations and training workshops. Write or call them:

Arkansas Archeological Society
2475 North Hatch Ave.
Fayetteville, AR 72704
479-575-3557
www.arkarch.org

For more information on preserving or learning about the past, you can also contact the Arkansas Archeological Survey at:

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2475 North Hatch Ave.
Fayetteville, AR 72704
479-575-3556
<https://archeology.uark.edu/>

