
THE EARLIEST INHABITANTS AND SITES IN THE SOUTHEAST

When people first arrived in the area now known as the southeastern United States is unknown, but it was at least 13,000 years ago, as indicated by the first evidence for widespread settlement across the region in the form of sites and assemblages characterized by highly distinctive Clovis projectile points and an array of other tools of stone, bone, and ivory. These first peoples have come to be known as Paleoindians since they are assumed to be the ancestors of the Native peoples encountered by European explorers on the North American mainland in the sixteenth century.

By scholarly convention, Paleoindian occupations are assigned to the Pleistocene epoch, or the Ice Age, which ended about 11,500 years ago with the conclusion of the last major cold phase of the most recent glaciation—a time known as the Younger Dryas, from around 12,850 to a little more than 11,500 years ago. Ice sheets in the Northern and Southern hemispheres advance and retreat over cycles of about 110,000 years. The most recent glaciation reached its maximum about 21,000 years ago, but global temperatures began warming and ice began to retreat dramatically shortly after 15,000 years ago, with occasional reversals to colder climate. The last of these colder intervals within a general warming pattern is known as the Younger Dryas period. The end of the Younger Dryas marks the onset of the modern era or the Holocene, a time of comparatively warm and stable interglacial climate.

The Late Pleistocene Southeast had a dramatically different natural environment than at present, occupied by a wide array of plant and animal species of kinds and in combinations not seen in the modern world. The presence of ice sheets to the north, even retreating ones late in the period, meant that plant and animal communities accustomed to colder weather extended much farther south. Coniferous forests were present into the mid-South, while mixed hardwood forests occurred further to the south. Much of the currently submerged continental shelf was exposed due to the massive amounts of water locked up in the northern ice sheets. As these ice sheets melted after 15,000 years ago, the seacoast moved slowly inland, flooding terrain formerly habitable for animals and people alike. In addition to modern animal species, much larger or more unusual animals were prominent on the southeastern landscape, including mammoth, mastodon, bison, elk, giant ground sloths, tortoises, beavers,

and fearsome predators like the dire wolf, the saber-toothed tiger, and the giant short faced bear. Many of these species went extinct at the end of the Pleistocene, before or during the time of the Younger Dryas. The reasons remain unknown, although the dramatically changing climate, the widespread appearance of human populations, and a great many other factors—such as introduced disease or fire, and even a comet impact—have all been suggested as possible contributing factors.

Human beings arrived in the New World, and in the Southeast, sometime during the last glacial period, perhaps well before the ice sheets began to retreat some 15,000 years ago. Paleoindian sites in the Southeast are typically placed into one of three periods by archaeologists, depending on their age and the kind of artifacts and other materials found on them. These are the pre-Clovis or Early Paleoindian period, prior to about 13,500 years ago and extending back to whenever first entry occurred, something still unknown; the Clovis or Middle Paleoindian period, from about 13,500 to 12,850 years ago; and the post-Clovis or Late Paleoindian period, from 12,850 to 11,500 years ago. Conveniently, the two latest periods can be identified by common and readily identifiable artifacts, such as Clovis and post-Clovis projectile point forms, while sites of the earliest period are currently much more difficult to find and recognize.

A number of sites dating to the Early Paleoindian period have been found in recent years. These include Cactus Hill in southern Virginia, where a number of stone tools, chipping debris, and two small triangular points were found in deposits dating to about 17,000–18,000 years ago, stratigraphically below a Clovis assemblage. Also in Virginia, at Saltville, stone flakes and a probable modified bone tool were found in deposits about 15,000 years old. In the Southeast, at Page-Ladson in Florida, an underwater site in the Aucilla River, a cut elephant tusk and a number of pieces of debitage were found in deposits some 14,500 years old. At the Topper site in South Carolina, probable chipped-stone artifacts have been found at depths of up to several meters below a well-defined Clovis assemblage, in deposits dating from 16,000 to as far back as 50,000 years ago. Topper is a major chert (a very fine-grained stone often used for chipped-stone tools) quarry, which would have long attracted human populations looking

for workable stone for their tools. Other possible Early Paleoindian sites in the region include Johnson near Nashville, where hearths dating to about 14,000 years ago have been found eroding from a river bank; and Little Salt Springs in Florida, where an apparently butchered giant tortoise was found in underwater deposits in a sinkhole dating to about 14,500 years ago.

Early Paleoindian sites are extremely rare in the Southeast, suggesting that only small numbers of people were present. Given the widely varying ages of the sites that have been found, some of these groups may well have died out, with permanent sustained settlement not coming until the end of the period or in the ensuing Middle Paleoindian period. A generalized foraging adaptation is assumed to have been in place, with peoples using a wide range of plant and animal species, and perhaps occasionally targeting larger animals. Projectile points appear to have been made by some of these peoples, as indicated by the early triangular points found at Cactus Hill. Other probable Early Paleoindian points have been found at Meadowcroft Rockshelter in Pennsylvania, and at Page-Ladson and other sites in Florida. None of these points exhibit the fluting that is the hallmark of subsequent Middle Paleoindian Clovis points. Unfortunately, some of these points, like the early triangular points from Cactus Hill, resemble much later point types found in the region, making them hard to recognize in artifact collections. That is, while we have already undoubtedly found Early Paleoindian artifacts in surface and other contexts, we don't know how to recognize them for what they are yet.

Middle Paleoindian sites and artifacts are much more common across the Southeast and are identified by the presence of Clovis projectile points and some of the specialized stoneworking debris from their manufacture. Clovis points are lance-like in shape and up to several inches long, with parallel to slightly expanding bodies, a flat to slightly indented base, and, most characteristic, one or more wide flake scars running upward from the base a third or more the length of the blade. Because these flake scars resemble the grooves, or flutes, in classical Greek and Roman columns, they have come to be known as fluted points. Sites producing Clovis points have been dated across North America to between 13,500 and 10,800 years ago, although most sites appear to date to a much narrower time range, between about 13,100 and 10,850 years ago. These peoples or at least their technology appears to have emerged somewhere and spread rapidly over the landscape, moving long distances in a short time.

In western North America Clovis points have been found with the killed and butchered remains of large animals like mammoth or mastodon. As a result, Clovis peoples are assumed to have targeted large game animals, although how much of their diet actually came from hunting, much less from large game, is unknown. In the Southeast no large animal kill sites have been found associated with Clovis points, although tools of bone and ivory from a number of now extinct Late

Pleistocene species have been found, primarily in Florida's springs, sinks, and rivers. Some level of exploitation of large game is thought to have occurred, even if these peoples were for the most part generalized foragers, eating whatever plants and animals were readily available.

Clovis points have been found in large numbers across the Southeast, particularly along the major interior river systems or near major stone sources, leading a number of archaeologists to suggest that the technology and associated culture may have arisen in the region or perhaps in the nearby southern plains. Many points occur as isolated finds or in small numbers, perhaps representing sites where short-term activities, visits, or hunting incidents took place. The largest Clovis sites and assemblages found to date occur at outcrop or quarry/workshop sites, where suitable stone, typically the highest quality to be found in a given area, was gathered and worked into points and tools. Major Middle Paleoindian sites in quarry/workshop settings in the Southeast include Carson-Conn-Short, Nuckolls, and Wells Creek Crater in Tennessee; Topper in South Carolina; Hardaway in North Carolina; and Thunderbird and Williamson in Virginia. At these locations, not only was stone mined and worked, but it is likely that the peoples remained for appreciable periods of time; if not permanent residents, they regularly revisited these locations as their movements took them elsewhere.

Middle Paleoindian peoples in the Southeast did sometimes range up to several hundred miles from the locations where they quarried stone. They probably did this for a number of reasons, such as to find new sources of food, stone, and other useful materials, and also to find other people with whom they could exchange information and obtain marriage partners from outside their local group. Given that populations were still small and widely scattered over the landscape, a great deal of effort likely needed to be invested in maintaining ties between human groups over large areas. Meetings between differing groups were likely planned rather than fortuitous, and probably took place at resource-rich areas such as major stream crossings or at quarries, where materials critically important to the manufacture of their tools could be obtained. The well-made tool kit of the Clovis peoples—and especially the elaborate fluting on their projectile points, requiring a kind of stoneworking expertise never seen in the subsequent human occupation of the Americas—was undoubtedly a critically important and shared aspect of Middle Paleoindian culture across the region and beyond. As such, the impressive Clovis tool kit not only was of functional utility, but also almost certainly helped to promote ties between groups by demonstrating common values about what was considered an appropriate level of craftsmanship in the tools they used.

The Late Paleoindian period, from 12,850 to 11,500 years ago, witnessed the appearance and replacement of an array of cultures across and in different parts of the Southeast. The period closely corresponds with the Younger Dryas cold

episode, and its sudden onset and its cold and somewhat variable climate is thought to be linked, in some way, to the ending of Clovis culture, the final extinction of Late Pleistocene megafauna, and the diversification of cultures that occurred about this time. Archaeological cultures extending over no more than a few hundred miles are recognized in a number of areas, primarily from the restricted occurrence of distinctive projectile point types. These are assumed to reflect areas within which people sharing a common stone tool manufacturing technology and style were in fairly regular interaction, leading to the manufacture of similar tool forms. Conversely, these peoples seem to have less interaction with those in areas where different projectile point types were being made. We don't really know, of course, how closely these different point forms matched different cultures or adaptations. Their restricted distribution does indicate, however, that group ranges or territories, and the amount of interaction over long distances, were apparently decreasing over time.

Fluting like that employed on Clovis points continued for a few centuries into the Late Paleoindian period, with a new emphasis on the production of flutes running the entire length of the blade, in some areas on points with more deeply indented or fishtail-shaped bases. Over time these more fully fluted forms, known by names such as the Barnes, Cumberland, Folsom, Gainey, or Redstone types, gave way to a range of nonfluted points, some with narrow bases and expanding blades, and others more traditionally lance-like in shape. These include the Beaver Lake, Hinds, Simpson, Suwannee, and Quad types. With their appearance, fluting disappeared from the region, never to return. These initial nonfluted forms were themselves replaced within a few centuries, and certainly by 12,000 years ago, by notched Dalton points, many of which were regularly and extensively resharpened from their use as both projectile points and knives. A great variety of Dalton point types or varieties, or closely related forms like the San Patrice, occur all across the Southeast during the last part of the Late Paleoindian period, and probably for a short time into the ensuing Holocene period. By the very end of the period, about 11,500 years ago, sidenotched point types were becoming increasingly common in some parts of the region. The appearance of notching, coupled with the extensive resharpening indicated on many points, probably reflects an increasing concern for their use as durable, multipurpose tools, involved in not only the killing but also the butchering of game animals and the processing of their hide, bone, and antler.

The Late Paleoindian period is more, however, than the story of changes in projectile point morphology. Although sea level and vegetational communities would not approximate those of the present for several thousand more years, these were the first peoples in the Southeast to exploit an essentially modern flora and fauna, albeit under the colder and more varied climatic conditions of the Younger Dryas. While there is some evidence for a population decline across the

region at the start of the period, indicated by the fact that there are far fewer immediate post-Clovis than Clovis point forms in most parts of the region, by the time fluting disappears populations appear to have rebounded. The increasing numbers of points and sites, in fact, indicate that populations were growing markedly over the region. While human adaptation to and familiarity with the resources of the Eastern Woodlands was assumed to occur slowly and gradually over the course of several thousand years during the subsequent Archaic period, it is now believed that much of this adjustment occurred during the Late Paleoindian period.

During the Late Paleoindian period, the first extensive use of cave entrances and rockshelters as living places occurs in the Southeast, and it is at this time that cemeteries appear in some areas, notably among the Dalton culture peoples of the central Mississippi valley and, apparently, in ponds and sinks in parts of Florida. People were becoming settled, living in smaller areas for longer periods of time, as reflected in the increasingly localized appearance of many tool forms and the increased use of readily available, lower-quality stone sources in tool manufacture. They may have still moved their residences a fair number of times over the course of a year, but these moves were within ever smaller and more socially bounded areas.

The end of the Younger Dryas marks the end of the Paleoindian period. By convention geologists and climatologists place the onset of the Holocene, and archaeologists the beginning of the Archaic period, a little after the end of the Younger Dryas, at 10,000 radiocarbon years before the present. We now know that this age calibrates to about 11,500 calendar years ago in real time. Radiocarbon dates typically become progressively younger than they should be with increasing age, although it has only been in the last decade that the amount of offset between radiocarbon and calendar ages during Paleoindian times has been documented. Anyone interested in understanding the changes occurring the Paleoindian era in the Southeast, or indeed anywhere in North America, must become adept at converting between one time scale and the other, and must note when radiocarbon years, as opposed to calendar years, are being used in the discussion.

Further Reading: Anderson, David G., "Paleoindian Occupations in the Southeastern United States," in *New Perspectives on the First Americans*, edited by B. T. Lepper and R. Bonnichsen (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004), 119–128; Anderson, David G., "Pleistocene Human Occupation of the Southeastern United States: Research Directions for the Early 21st Century," in *Paleoamerican Origins: Beyond Clovis*, edited by R. Bonnichsen, B. T. Lepper, D. Stanford, and M. R. Waters (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2005), 29–42; Anderson, David G., and Kenneth E. Sassaman, eds., *The Paleoindian and Early Archaic Southeast* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1996); Fiedel, Stuart J., "Older Than We Thought: Implications of Corrected Dates for Paleoindians," *American Antiquity* 64 (1999): 95–116; Goodyear,

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ANCIENT EARTHEN AND SHELL ARCHITECTURE

Between 500 and 6,000 years ago, Native peoples in the Southeast built thousands of mounds from earth and shell. These were used as cemeteries; monuments; effigies; and platforms for domestic structures, elite residences, and ritual and ceremonial activities. Larger earth and shell works may contain numerous structures built by forming earth or shell into architectural features, such as individual mounds of various shapes and sizes, rings and other enclosures, walls, ramps, causeways, and elevated plazas, as well as excavated features such as borrow pits, ponds, canals, moats, cisterns, sunken plazas, and water courts.

Not all Southeastern groups constructed large-scale earth and shell architecture. It first appeared in the Southeast at points where migratory hunter-gatherers settled in one place and developed complex social organizations to manage their resources. Management strategies included marking territory and symbolizing kinship and historic authority with mounds, while other large-scale utilitarian architecture supported the mound complex. The forms this architecture took varied across the landscape and through time.

ARCHAIC PERIOD (4000–1000 BC)

In the lower Mississippi River valley, Archaic hunter-gatherers periodically met at riverine environments where subsistence resources were sufficiently abundant to support large aggregations of people. At least fifty Archaic mound sites are spread across the lower Mississippi valley at these points. These are among the earliest mounds in the Southeast, and most outwardly resemble the conical burial mounds of the Woodland and Mississippian cultures that would follow. However, few human remains have been found that would support the use of these early mounds for burials. Of these, perhaps the best case for funerary use is the 5-meter-high, 6,000-year-old Monte Sano mound in Louisiana, where the remains from a possible human cremation were identified below the mound.

While most early sites contain a single conical earth mound, some have multiple mounds. Among the earliest sites, at around 5,500 years ago, is Watson Brake in north Louisiana. There hunter-gatherers built ten earthen mounds

surrounding a central plaza 350 meters in diameter. Measuring between 1 and 6 meters high, the mounds were connected by an earthen ridge. Toward the end of the Archaic period at Poverty Point, the largest and most complex architecture of its time was constructed. Built across a 400-acre expanse, Poverty Point comprises conical mounds, a 20-meter-tall bird effigy mound, a series of parallel mounded "house" ridges, and a ball court. Equally famous for the abundance of exotic trade items, the site's existence is linked to its centralized location within a far-flung trading network. No earthen mound architecture of its size would be built again for another 2,000 years in the Southeast.

In Florida, distinctive Archaic mound-building cultural traditions arose, some of which included funerary functions. Around 5,400 years ago, along the St. Johns River, 175 burials were placed on a prepared surface beneath a low-lying sand mound at Tick Island. Similar sand burial mounds up to 2 meters high are found upriver at the Thornhill Lake and Orange sites. Common to the period, bannerstones (carved stones used as weights for *atl atls*, or throwing sticks) and numerous marine shell beads and tools were associated with these burials, indicating relations with nonlocal people. The limited number of exotic lithic items suggests that these cultures lay on the margins of Southeastern exchange networks.

Twenty miles east of the St. Johns River, another Archaic group built an extensive complex consisting of six earthen mounds along the Atlantic coast at around 2600 BC. These mounds also contained bannerstones and human remains. Unlike the burials at Tick Island, however, the remains were scattered rather than placed in prepared grave pits below the mound. However, subsequent to the mound construction, pits were dug into the mound and human remains placed in them.

Elsewhere in Florida and South Carolina, similarly shaped conical mounds are found at coastal shell ring sites. These mounds differ from those at Tomoka in that they are made predominantly of oyster shell. At the Bonita, Horr's Island, and Fig Island sites, the shell mounds served as cappings to smaller sand mounds. Although no evidence yet exists that these mounds were built for human burials, subsequent cultures used them as cemeteries.