

## Native American Indians in Georgia

Events that happened before history was written down are called prehistoric. Long before the state of Georgia existed, the land was here. Probably by fifteen thousand years ago, the first people to live in what is now the United States arrived from Asia. At the time, Earth was in the Ice Age. Because much of the world's water was frozen, the oceans became shallower. Land between Asia and what is now Alaska was exposed. Nomads, people who wander in search of food, crossed this land bridge. When the Ice Age ended and Earth got warmer, water again covered the land bridge. Today, it is the Bering Strait. This migration of people into North America, known as the Bering Land Bridge Theory, eventually brought the first humans to Georgia. They reached what is now the southeastern United States by 10,000 B.C.

### **Paleo Indians**

Before Europeans came to Georgia, prehistoric Native Americans experienced four stages of cultural development, or traditions. Anthropologists call the first tradition the Paleo Indian period. They are the first because they were the first group of people to inhabit North America by crossing the Beringia land bridge during the Ice Age from Asia (where the Bering Strait is today) as long ago as 10,000 BCE. Paleo means "ancient or very old", and the Paleo Indians were so ancient that we know little about them. We do know that they got what they needed to survive from nature. Paleo Indians hunted animals that are extinct today, such as giant bison and elephant-like mastodons. Hunting provided meat food, bones for tools, and skins for clothing and blankets. Stones were used as tools and shaped into spearheads. Paleo Indians did not build permanent homes because they were nomadic. They moved around in bands, or groups of about twenty, in search of food. Very little of Paleo-Indian civilization has survived. The only artifacts that archeologists have found are stone spearheads like the clovis point.

### **Archaic Indians**

The second tradition of Georgia's prehistoric people was the Archaic Indian period. Around 8,000 BCE, the earth began to get warmer. The animals Paleo Indians hunted disappeared due to climate change or overhunting. Archaic Native Americans hunted smaller animals, such as deer and rabbits. To make hunting easier, they burned down trees to create clearings that attracted animals. Archaic Indians differed from Paleo Indians in other ways as well. They ate a wider range of foods, including nuts and shellfish. They left large piles of shells, called middens, near the coast. Perhaps their biggest innovation was the use of a specially designed spear handle called the **Atlatl**. This allowed the Archaci to throw the spear more accurate as well as faster at the prey. Archaic also used stone bowls to hold food. This suggests that they moved around less than their ancestors, since it would be hard to travel with many stone bowls, however, they were still nomadic as they did not live in permanent villages, but instead moved during each season. Another common artifact from the period is the stone axe used to clear forests and plant seeds for crops. This was the early stage of horticulture that would become more advanced in the Woodland and Mississippian periods.

### **Woodland Indians**

The third tradition of Georgia's prehistoric people was the Woodland Indian period. This period began around 1000 B.C. and lasted some two thousand years. Unlike their ancestors, Woodland Native Americans were not as nomadic. They built villages, with houses meant to last. They also developed agriculture. Woodland people cleared fields and planted seeds, growing corn and beans. Woodland hunters began using **bows and arrows**. Because of these changes, they had a bigger food supply than earlier Native Americans, so the population grew and tribes began to form. Woodland Native Americans began forming tribes, large groups of people with similar languages and religions led by chiefs. They also began to build mounds of earth and stone, in different sizes and shapes. Some mounds were parts of villages; others were religious or burial sites. Examples of Woodland period mounds are Rock Eagle and the Kolomoki mounds. These mounds suggests that the Woodland Indians used religious ceremonies to honor their dead and believed in an after-life because of the items buried in the mounds.

### **Mississippian Indians**

The fourth prehistoric tradition, the Mississippian Indian period, began around A.D.700. Mississippians relied on agriculture even more than their ancestors and celebrated during the Green Corn Festival. They also raised livestock. With more food, the Native American population increased further. As a result, Mississippians built permanent villages. Many villages had public squares and protective outer walls known as a palisade. Houses were usually made of wood and clay, a method called wattle and daub. Mississippians even built cities. Tribes grew larger in the Mississippian period. Two tribes in Georgia were the Creek and later the Cherokee. As the tribes grew, a chiefdom had one leader and might cover many villages. Within tribes, groups of relatives formed clans. Both Creek and Cherokee tribes were matrilineal (ancestry traced through mother's side of family). We know more about the Mississippians than about their ancestors because they left behind more artifacts. We know that villages and tribes from as far away as the Great Plains, Mexico, and Guatemala traded with each other. Artifacts such as pipes and jewelry show that the Mississippians were religious and artistic. Mississippians left behind many flat top mounds. On top of the mounds were buildings, used as houses or temples. The mounds were also burial sites, holding shell and copper artifacts. Many mounds still stand in Georgia, including the Etowah Indian mounds in nearby Cartersville. This period was the high point of prehistoric civilization in Georgia. When Europeans arrived in the 1500s, the germs they brought killed many Native Americans.