

Quick Study

Paleoindian Period (before 8000 BC)

Paleoindians belong to the oldest known cultural period in North America. Archaeologists think they arrived in North America during the last Ice Age by crossing a land bridge connecting Siberia and Alaska. Called Beringia, this bridge was sometimes exposed when enough of the oceans' waters were locked into glaciers to drop sea levels.

Archaeologists aren't sure when Paleoindians first arrived from Siberia. But by 10,000 BC, they were living throughout North America. Some had made it to the southern margin of South America.

Within the Paleoindian period, North Carolina archaeologists recognize two main cultures: Clovis culture (9500 to 8500 BC) and Hardaway-Dalton culture (8500 to 8000 BC).

Paleoindians were nomadic hunters and gatherers who moved regularly through vast territories. In western North America, Paleoindians survived, at least in part, by hunting large, now-extinct animals called megafauna. They used spears to kill the mammoth and extinct forms of bison. They probably also ate a wide variety of other foods, but little evidence remains to say just what these foods were.

Archaeologists think Paleoindians in North Carolina and in other places east of the Mississippi River probably did not eat much "big game." Although the occasional mastodon or bison may have been hunted, by 8500 BC most megafauna species were extinct or quickly dying out. The Ice Age was ending and the eastern ecosystem was changing. Deciduous nuts trees were replacing straggly stands of cold-loving boreal forests, and modern animals like deer were becoming abundant. So eastern Paleoindians apparently ate a variety of nuts, wild fruits, and smaller, modern game.

Even though the Paleoindian period ended about 8000 BC, it laid the groundwork for subsequent cultural developments.

Key Characteristics

- The Ice Age (or Pleistocene) is in its last centuries. In North Carolina, the weather is wetter and cooler than today. But it is warming enough that deciduous, nut-bearing trees are replacing most remaining stands of cold-loving boreal forests.
- People migrate to North Carolina for the first time. Their ancestors came from Siberia, having crossed the now submerged Bering land bridge (called Beringia) into Alaska.
- People live in small family groups archaeologists call bands; they are nomadic.
- Subsistence comes from hunting and gathering wild foods.
- Local people do *not* depend on big game like mammoths for meat; by the time people arrive in the East, megafauna herds are small and quickly becoming extinct. Instead, people rely on deer and other small animals living in the deciduous forests.

- Spears tipped with stone points are the main hunting tool. In North Carolina, archaeologists find ancient people made two styles of spear point. One style dates to between 9500 and 8500 BC, and archaeologists call it Clovis. Slender, with a long channel (flute) chipped from the base for attaching a spear shaft, the Clovis point is what people living across North America then used to hunt. Presumably, the first people arriving east brought this style with them. But by 8500 BC, those who settled in North Carolina start making a differently styled spear point. This regional variety has no flutes, but has shallow indentations on each side of the blade near the base. Archaeologists call this point Hardaway-Dalton; people made Hardaway-Daltons until about 8000 BC.
- Baskets as well as leather and bark containers are used; there is no pottery. Possessions are lightweight and few, suited to a life on the move.
- Shelters are temporary, perhaps tents covered with hides or lean-tos made of brush.
- Archaeologists call these first people Paleoindians. They are the founding population for all later Indian groups.