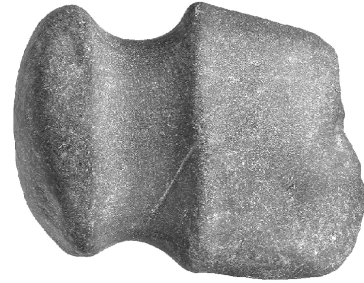


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## Lesson 3.2

# THE FOREST PEOPLE

## The Archaic Period, 8000 BC to 1000 BC



Polished stone axe from Nash County,  
North Carolina, 3000–1000 BC

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Paleoindian culture died out across North America by 8000 BC. Archaeologists say this was bound to happen. The Ice Age had ended, the megafauna were extinct, and the boreal forests faded as deciduous ones spread across the East in the warmer climate. Faced with significant environmental changes, the Native Americans adapted. Archaeologists call their way of life and the time in which they lived *Archaic*.

### Change in the Air

Archaeologists excavating a site in New York state in the 1930s first coined the term Archaic. They used Archaic, which in everyday language means ancient, to designate a nonagricultural, pre-pottery culture they unearthed that was a bit unlike anything they had found before. While clearly old and similar to Paleoindian culture, it had notable differences.

Like Paleoindians, these ancient people did not grow food or make pottery. They, too, were hunters and gatherers with no year-round villages. However, some of their tools, like spear points, had shapes quite different from those Paleoindians made. Pondering the finds, excavators wondered: Did the different technology mean changes in the kinds of animals those early New Yorkers hunted? What about *how* they hunted? Was their culture actually a local expression of the Paleoindian one? Or was it chronologically later, representing another lifeway emerging as the Ice Age slipped away? While archaeologists knew answers would take more digging and analysis, they did settle one issue. To distinguish between the ancient Paleoindian culture they knew about from the ancient one they wondered about, they decided to call the latter *Archaic*.

Soon it turned out the Archaic wasn't just in New York. In the 1930s, professional archaeology was getting started in many parts of the country. As excavations expanded, archaeologists found similar Archaic materials all over North America, including North Carolina. In the late 1940s, researchers began radiocarbon dating charcoal and animal bones associated with the stone implements. Such finds let archaeologists pinpoint when Archaic people lived, putting the start of their era coincident with that of the current geologic age, called the Holocene, which began around 8000 BC.

In North Carolina, the Archaic rolled forward 7,000 years and ended about 1000 BC. Archaeologists think Archaic Indians descended directly from Paleoindian ancestors. No evidence exists that waves of new people replaced those who lived here before.

Across the continent, the transition from Paleoindian to Archaic culture presumably happened because environmental changes at the end of the Ice Age forced people to adopt different lifeways. By the start of the Holocene around 8000 BC, North America boasted an immense

array of ecosystems, and people adjusted accordingly. For instance, while Paleoindians in much of the West lived in a rather homogenous Ice Age environment and focused on a few select species for food, their Archaic descendants had to adjust to varied menus served up by the Holocene. This led to a series of regional adaptations. A desert tradition based on the seasonal harvest of wild plants sprang up in the Southwest. The Northwest Coast saw the rise of whalers and hunters of seals. Bison hunters fanned across the northern plains.

In North Carolina, as in most parts of the East, the Paleoindian-to-Archaic transition was less dramatic. It was, actually, marked more by continuity than disruption. Unlike their western counterparts, eastern Paleoindians' lives were not turned upside down when one or two key resources, like mastodon, disappeared at the end of the Ice Age.

By the time Paleoindians migrated to North Carolina, climatic change had already fostered pockets of deciduous forests, along with the extinction or drastic decline of megafauna and other large game. As skillful adapters, the Paleoindians foraged efficiently, learning to take advantage of the broader variety of food. They found nuts laying on the ground, a variety of wild greens and fruits, deer exploring forest edges, and sometimes even bigger game. They developed a broad-based subsistence that laid the foundation for the subsequent Archaic people's versatile hunting and plant-collecting economy.

Because of similarities between Paleoindian and early Archaic hunting and gathering lifeways in the East, archaeologists draw the line between them by making a simple, but key distinction. Whereas Paleoindians lived during the Ice Age and sometimes bagged now-extinct Ice-Age animals (such as mastodons), Archaic people hunted *modern* animals and collected *modern* wild plant foods in the *modern* geologic age: the Holocene.

With this said, archaeologists caution that "modern" can be a misleading term when applied to the Holocene. The climate took a while to stabilize, and the Holocene threw Archaic people zingers like periods of unstable coastlines and climatic flux. Nonetheless, Holocene ecosystems were relatively uniform and cooperative, allowing North Carolina's Archaic Indians to live in all corners of the state. They thrived. By the middle of the Archaic's 7,000-year span, some groups became experts at fishing or shell fishing. They developed various other technological innovations: grinding implements to process nuts; a variety of differently shaped spear points; and polished stone axes. By the Archaic's end, people were carving bowls from a type of rock called steatite or soapstone. A few on the coast made the first wide-mouthed clay vessels. Artistry surfaced in intricately carved shell ornaments. A bone tool industry was in full swing. Trade was far-flung. Even horticulture, born from Archaic people's plant-collecting habits, had raised its head in the guise of locally cultivated seed plants, squash, and gourds.

North Carolina's Archaic was a time of great cultural growth and change. Yet throughout this long era, there was one continuous thread. Archaic folk remained true Forest People, dependent on the Eastern Woodlands' wild foods.

## **The Mountain and the Ridge**

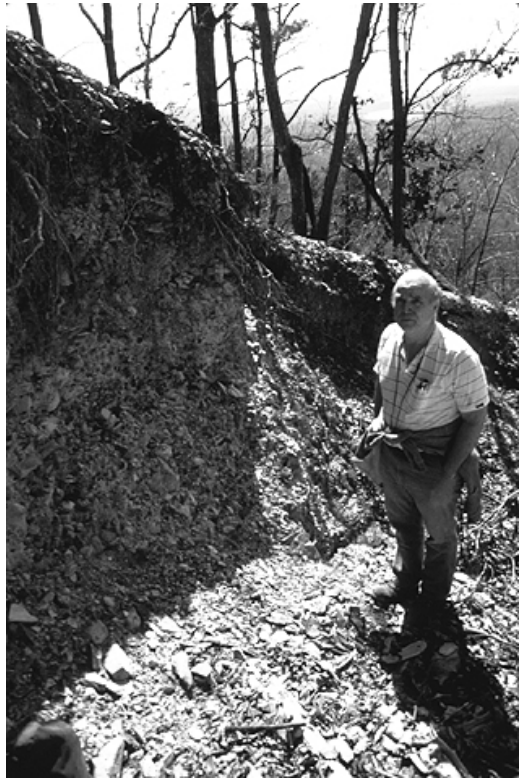
A huge quarry lies tucked in the Uwharries near Albemarle, North Carolina. From early Archaic times on, people across the Piedmont went to Morrow Mountain for a fine-grained rock called rhyolite they liked for making tools. Eventually, they pecked apart every rhyolite boulder in sight. Today the mountain face is smothered with heaps of rock debris. It hides under leaf litter or peeks out in erosional gulleys. It tumbles down slopes as scree.

Archaeologist I. Randolph "Randy" Daniel and geologist Robert Butler investigated Morrow Mountain while looking for rhyolite outcrops in the Piedmont. Daniel, now a faculty member at

East Carolina University but then a doctoral student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, had been studying Archaic stone tools for years. How, he wondered, could they speak about life then?

Daniel had the notion that if he could identify rock sources where bands of early Archaic people got stone for their tools, he could figure the size and shapes of their territories. He might also get a glimmer into why people put their scattered long-term camps in some places and not others. Also, if it turned out that Archaic bands from different territories used stone from the same quarries, Daniel could make some inferences about trade and interaction among these bands.

Butler, a faculty member in geology at UNC–Chapel Hill, joined Daniel’s doctoral advisory team. As a self-dubbed old-time field worker, Butler wasn’t content to limit himself to scholarly advice. While Daniel sorted dusty boxes of Archaic artifacts excavated as early as the 1930s from Piedmont sites and did a preliminary analysis of the kind of rock the tools were made from, Butler peeled thin slices from broken tools to peer at under a microscope. He verified the rock types and probed his recall about where outcrops of such rock existed. Whenever they could, Daniel and Butler tucked geologic survey maps into backpacks loaded with lunch and went in search of the outcrops. Some they verified locations for; some they mapped for the first time. Back in his lab, Daniel mapped paths between outcrops and Archaic sites with tools linked to those places.



Geologist Robert Butler investigating an ancient stone quarry.

The work seemed straightforward. But a glitch popped up. Rhyolite comes in a variety of flavors. Some have thin flow bands; some have small globs of crystalline impurities, called phenocrysts. Even rhyolite colors vary from dark to light gray. Each sub-variety sits in particular places. While most crop out of the Carolina Slate Belt running through the Piedmont in the Uwharrie Mountain region, Daniel and Butler found themselves bedeviled by a problem. Many early Archaic tools were made from a rhyolite for which they couldn’t find a primary source. Obviously, ancient people plied somewhere for it. Yet in their treks through the Piedmont, Daniel and Butler found just piddling patches that could not possibly account for the quantities of tools Archaic people made from it.

Butler’s instinct told him the rhyolite had to be around Morrow Mountain, and Daniel agreed. At first the search was frustrating. They clambered up and down Morrow Mountain’s slopes, but nothing close to the rhyolite they looked for stuck out. Then one day as they walked long a ravine, Butler stopped abruptly. He ran his fingers over a rock lining the ravine’s side. He took his geologic hammer, knocked off a chunk and squinted at it through a hand-held lens. The stuff was, no doubt, what they were looking for. But where was the outcrop? Did it extend back into the ravine or angle down along the floor?

With their hands, Butler and Daniel traced the rock’s lines; it sloped groundward. As they scraped leaf litter away, they found scads of rhyolite chunks fanning out under their feet. Suddenly, they realized they had solved the missing outcrop puzzle. Quite simply, the outcrops

were gone. Ancient people had pecked the choice rhyolite boulders apart and worked the seams. Day after day, Butler and Daniel had been walking all over their chewed-up remains.

As happens in archaeology, one solved mystery cracked open doors to others. Daniel still had his questions to deal with—plus a few. His mapping indicated that archaeological sites containing tools made from the Morrow Mountain rhyolite were spread over an area of 30,000 square miles. This area of distribution cut north–south through the Piedmont and reached east–northeast across to the upper portions of the Cape Fear and the Wateree Rivers where those rivers spill into the Coastal Plain. Daniel speculated that during the Archaic’s first stretch, *bands* (family groups) sorted themselves out in a quilt-like pattern across this region, each having a territory covering over 100 square miles.

But did all the early Archaic bands actually *go* to Morrow Mountain, or did those living farthest away get rhyolite through trade? For those who made the trip, how often did they go? How long did they stay? Where did they stay? Did the visits serve other purposes, like casting eyes on marriage prospects? What, exactly, was rhyolite’s role in Archaic people’s overall ecological strategy? If, for instance, people preferred using this rock to make their tools and weapons, did Morrow Mountain act like a tether for their movements?

Archaeologists are still grappling with these questions. But, however Morrow Mountain figured in Archaic Indians’ lives, it’s certain they didn’t stay there. Usually people struck camps in places where they could satisfy basic human needs—accessible food, firewood, water, and level ground for shelters. Morrow Mountain is not ideal in this regard. In all the archaeological investigations there, no ancient camp sites were found. Just pocked areas where tons of chipped stone litter lay about.

Morrow Mountain did shed light, however, on a camp site 4 miles north of the quarry. Called Hardaway after a construction company, archaeologists had discovered the site decades earlier during the 1930s. Near the small community of Badin, Hardaway sprawls over several acres in the saddle of a high ridge overlooking the Yadkin River. Some archaeologists believe a spring once watered the ridge. The commanding view took in game coming to drink and, quite probably, human traffic as well.

Ironically, Hardaway had helped spur Daniel’s rock hunting quest that eventually led him to Morrow Mountain. Many of the Archaic era tools he searched rock sources for came from Hardaway. Other UNC archaeologists had excavated the site off-and-on between 1950 and the mid 1970s. Over the years and from soil layers 2 feet deep, they recovered more than 11 tons of human-worked stone. Whole, broken, and half-formed tools like spear points, drills, wood graters, and hide scrapers mingled with masses of manufacturing flakes and the rock cores the tools were shaped from. Hardaway had so much worked stone, some archaeologists quipped its weight was what formed the ridge’s saddle. Clearly, the place had been used—and used extensively—by countless generations of ancient Indian people. But until Daniel linked the rock chips to the quarry, nobody knew just where folks got the resource. Nor did archaeologists have even one good reason why people choose the spot to camp, time after time.

Daniel’s work was, however, a capstone; Hardaway already had archaeological fame. In the 1950s, Joffre L. Coe, a professor at UNC–Chapel Hill, supervised excavations there and used what he found to help build the first chronology of North Carolina’s ancient cultures.

Coe, like other Southeastern archaeologists working at that time, was confused by the hodgepodge of points and other tools they were finding. Making sense of them was like trying to piece together a million jigsaw pieces dumped on a table with no guiding picture. The root of the muddle was this: at the time, all the artifacts had been plucked from surface finds or dug with little or no scientific guidance. Coe had an inkling from excavations in other parts of the country

that some of the tools were thousands of years old. But did the dates hold for similar kinds found in North Carolina? What about all the differently shaped tools? Where they used at the same time? Everywhere in the state? If not, how did their styles evolve? In what sequence? These basic questions filled everybody's mind as they stood knee-deep in what archaeologist and author Brian Fagan once described as "classificatory confusion."

In the 1930s, when Coe began working at Chapel Hill, professional archaeology was in its infancy. Coe, in fact, was the state's first professional archaeologist. As he settled into campus life and faced the hodgepodge, he knew the confusion could only be dispelled with information from *stratified*, not surface, sites. Only these sites had identifiable layers of earth laid down over time, each distinct enough to be associated with a discrete period of human settlement. Coe figured that by seeing what turned up in each layer, he could learn what artifacts went together, which groups came first, second, and so on, and how they related to one another through time. The trick, of course, was finding stratified sites. Relying on contacts and his own surveys, Coe found four promising ones scattered through the Piedmont, set along river floodplains and on ridge tops with riverine views. The sites were named Lowder's Ferry, Doerschuk, Gaston, and Hardaway.



Excavations at the Hardaway site.

Coe and his staff and students spent summers digging. Each field season, they hacked back vegetation. They sidestepped rattlesnakes and swatted biting insects. The hard, red Carolina clay mucked their clothes, stained their skin and resisted pushes through the processing screens. Coe and his crews charted the excavations, meticulously keeping records of where every shovel full came from and what was found. They made sketches and shot photographs. When the work was done, Coe carted away the notes and more than 66,000 stone fragments.

Back at his laboratory, Coe spent a decade hunched over tables sifting through the artifacts and records. He didn't take long to see that spear points in each layer of a site were slightly different from those in the site's other layers, even though many other tools, like scrapers, looked the same. To him, it seemed logical to make the spear points the heart of a classification scheme. But little in archaeology is so tidy. The trouble was the other tools *did* change. Also, changes in spear points could be so slight that assigning them to categories got tough. Using trial and error, Coe made up criteria to classify the artifacts, only to revise them and start over when they proved inadequate.

When Coe finally finished his study, he had ordered the hodgepodge, and his work was applauded. Not only did he and his crews excavate the first undisturbed stratified sites in North Carolina, he was the first to show that the many differently-shaped spear points mixed together in the open sites, caves, and rockshelters across the whole Southeast were not all made at once. Each style, along with other distinctive tools, was popular at a certain time. From oldest to youngest, Coe named the tool groups Hardaway, Palmer, Kirk, Stanly, Morrow Mountain, Guilford, Halifax, and Savannah River.

Initially, Coe didn't have dates for when people made these different tool groups. The sequence was *relative*, meaning he just knew one kind was older or younger than another based

on the soil layer it was found in. Nonetheless, archaeologists could know from Coe's work that Indian people made smaller triangular points with corner notches (Palmer's) long before their descendants made large, square-stemmed blades (Savannah Rivers). Archaeologists were soon scouring for more stratified sites to dig. Ultimately, datable and associated evidence like charcoal turned up in levels with the points. Bracketed by absolute dates, Coe's revised sequence let archaeologists know not just that people made Palmer points before Savannah Rivers, but they made them about 5,000 years earlier.

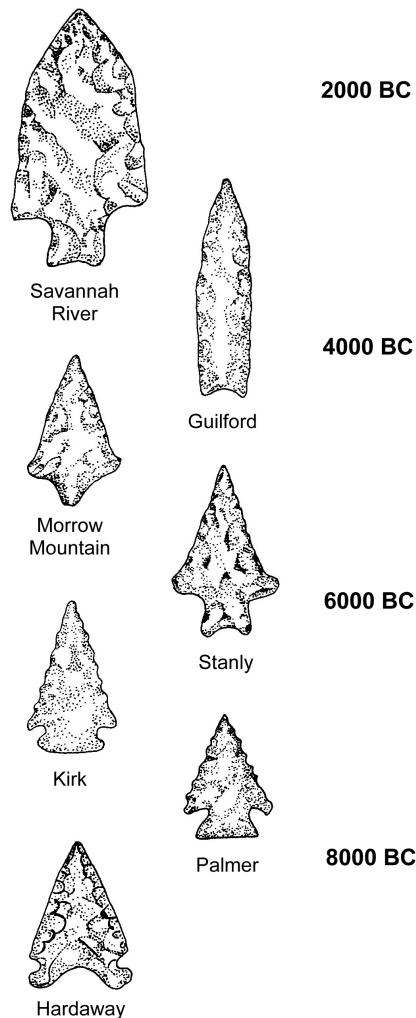
First things first, archaeologists like Coe built the chronology that ordered the jumble of artifacts. This let archaeologists like Daniel not have to wonder what tool came first or how old it is or what kinds of things went together or how the physical changes in tools evolved over time. They could turn, instead, to filling in the picture and pondering other sorts of questions: Why did people change tool styles? How exactly did people live? Why did they choose to live where they did? What was life like? What effect did the changing environment have on people?

Concerning Hardaway, Coe grasped, like anybody else studying the site, that making tools obviously took up a sizeable chunk of camp life. The manufacturing litter was hefty. Clearly, countless groups of ancients plopped hearths in a willy-nilly fashion, settled in for a stay, and made tools from a particular kind of stone. But until Daniel's work, nobody knew exactly where that stone came from. When Daniel and Butler identified the Morrow Mountain quarry, archaeologists put a steadier finger on reasons for Hardaway's popularity. Not only was the place safe, watered, and near food, but also it was close to the best source in the Carolinas where Archaic people could get their preferred rock for making tools: rhyolite.

## Stories in Stone

Three piles of artifacts are stacked on a gray metal table covered with brown paper taped to the sides. All date to the Archaic. The piles, left to right, go from oldest to youngest, breaking into discrete chunks the 7,000-year era. In each group, similar kinds of tools can be picked out. Each pile has its array of spear points, drill bits, mortars (to process nuts and other plant foods), hide scrapers, chisels, and cutting and slicing knives.

But on close inspection, a couple of things are obvious. First, while the job a tool did may have stayed the same (like tip a hunting spear or clean a hide), the tool's look could change among and even within the piles. The styles of spear points, particularly, don't hold steady. In the middle pile alone, three kinds vary in size and shape. The drill bits, on the other hand, look pretty



Changes in spear-point styles during the Archaic period in the North Carolina.

much alike in all the stacks.

Compare the piles, and something else pops up. One has items another doesn't. A roughly chipped stone ax and net sinkers are in the middle one while the left, or most ancient, one doesn't have them. Nor does the pile with the oldest artifacts have any of the smoothed and wing-shaped stones with holes drilled in their middles that sit in the other two. Probably, these *bannerstones* were weights placed on *atlatls*, which were arm-length sticks used to launch spears fast and forcefully. As the piles mark time, the most recent one has other distinctive things. There is a bowl carved from a soft, soapy-feeling stone called steatite; pieces of shell carved and made into beads; exquisitely crafted stone axes, finely chipped and ground smooth to a glistening polish.

Why are there three piles, alike yet different? It boils down to a fundamental constant: culture changes over time. Archaic life was dynamic during the 7,000 years people responded to the earth's changing heartbeat. Faced with shifts in climate, geography, animals, plants, and even their own increasing population, the people coped and adapted. Undoubtedly, Archaic people had likes and dislikes that affected their choices. But as conditions changed throughout their epoch, Archaic people tinkered with technology—changing the styles of their spear points, chipping and grinding better tools to process nuts and seeds, creating nets to catch fish, and sculpting containers to cook in. As people tinkered, some innovations caught on, others faded, and some things stayed the same.

Like words, the artifacts in the three piles chronicle the Archaic tale. Each pile is a chapter about change, sometimes subtle and sometimes not.

### *Early Archaic Collectors*

Between 8000 and 6000 BC, the Archaic era gets a handhold in the transition from the waning Ice Age to the Holocene, or new geologic age.

In this early stretch, Archaic people lived much like their Paleoindian ancestors, the pathfinders who arrived in North Carolina at least 2,000 years earlier. Like them, they endured a fickle climate and adjusted to its impacts. They lived in small family groups called bands and ranged through the land to hunt, fish, and gather plant foods. What they owned, they carried on their backs.

The Paleoindians, so few in number, were nomadic hunter-gatherers. When they first crossed the Appalachians into Carolina, Paleoindians flowed like a slow wave through an uninhabited land. As they moved, they learned the land's potential: the locations of seasonal wild fruits and vegetables, the habits of the different animals they encountered, and the dependable nutrition of nuts. Eventually, their movements probably stabilized into an annual pattern, a walk-about cycle through a huge Piedmont swath of what is now Virginia and the Carolinas, with individual movements timed to exploit the availability of foods in particular locales.

Paleoindian settlers were so successful in learning the land and feeding themselves, their Archaic descendants were the first to face the consequences of something that would never go away—population growth. Archaeologists infer population grew because they find many more sites dating to Archaic times than to the Paleoindian. More, they think, than survive merely because preservation is better or because the Archaic lasted longer.

Today, much of what archaeologists know about how early Archaic people lived in North Carolina during the young Holocene comes from sites like Morrow Mountain and Hardaway. Between 8000 and 6000 BC, the Piedmont's Uwharries held the equivalent of a hardware superstore and Motel 6. The only decent store around, Morrow Mountain lured people to come and stay a bit. They pried apart its rhyolite boulders and reduced the chunks to handy-sized

pieces archaeologists call *cores*. Back at the Hardaway camp, they used some cores immediately and chipped out tools. Others they stashed into packs to carry away, acting as spares until they returned.

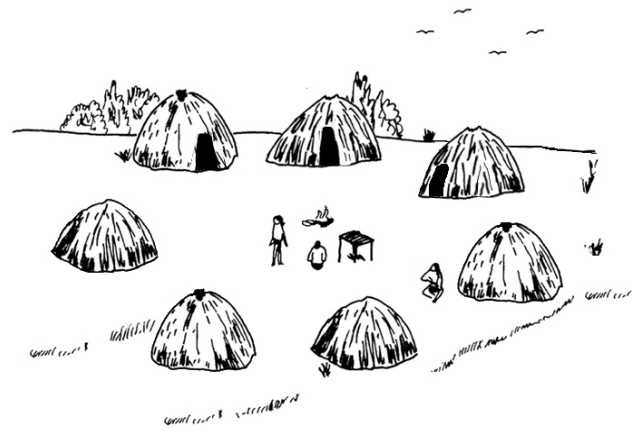
Archaeologists believe the quarry visits and stays at Hardaway during the early Archaic may have been part of a distinctive food-gathering strategy that, in archaeological shorthand, is called *collecting*. This strategy involves using relatively stable *base camps* as staging areas for gathering resources over a large area. The base camps themselves may be relocated several times over the course of a year. For a variety of reasons, people who use this strategy often employ specialized, well-crafted tools (as opposed to generalized, disposable tools) in carrying out their daily activities.

Certainly, the collector notion meshes with what archaeologists know about early Archaic tool kits. While people then had their share of disposable tools, like knives that are nothing more than sharp stone flakes, they also had exquisitely crafted tools. Some, like the triangular scraper (used for working hides), carried over from Paleoindian times. Delicate, with a wide, blunt working end created by artful flaking, this scraper was one people undoubtedly carried in their tool kits. People also tucked in their portable kits items like adzes and stone drills.

Archaeologists define base camps in a couple of ways, but both refer to a gathering place. One kind may have served as the staging area for food collection. Often located near or along a river or tributary, it was within the band's territorial boundaries. While living there, people presumably divided up into task-oriented groups. They left camp, got what they needed and then returned to distribute it. Sometimes groups might stay away from the base camp several days, leaving a series of temporary camps where they worked or rested. The surface litter people left behind at these places hint at what happened in them; scatters of stone points and hide scrapers suggest they killed and butchered an animal; grinding slabs and stones suggest the place they collected and processed nuts.

Sites like Hardaway make archaeologists think early Archaic people used a second kind of base camp. Rather than serve just the people in whose territory it lay, this place drew people from adjacent territories as well. It was a sort of neutral zone. Based on research like Daniel's, some archaeologists think rock collection was a vital part of Archaic people's overall ecological adaptation. The reasoning goes that rock, like food, was indispensable; people's technology and economics depended on it. With ample food at every turn, early Archaic bands could, in effect, shrug off the notion of territoriality when it came to shopping for the best rock.

Apparently, although bands during the early Archaic claimed distinct territories, they didn't have rigid boundaries. People could journey to places like Hardaway for things they didn't have at home. However, work probably wasn't the only draw to these *trans-territorial* base camps. Most archaeologists believe bands in adjacent territories periodically came together to satisfy basic needs beyond food, water, raw materials, and shelter. All people, anytime and anywhere, need to socialize. Religion and ritual also are part of the fabric of life. While nothing survives from the Hardaway camp to document these aspects, archaeologists believe bands timed their visits not just to get rock, but to visit, find marriage partners outside the family group and participate in ceremonies.



Base camp.

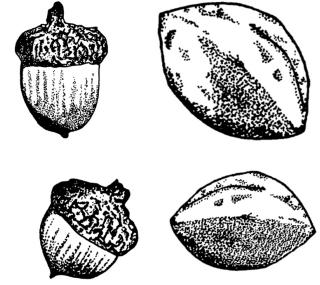


What other peeks into early Archaic life come from research? Judging from the lack of evidence for relatively permanent, wooden houses, people must have slept in lightly-constructed shelters. Quick to construct and dismantle, such dwellings were made of poles tied with cordage and then covered with animal skins or overlapped pieces of bark for waterproofing.

Besides being hunters, Archaic people got plenty of nutrition from nuts. They developed tools to process them. *Nutting stones* are slabs of flat rock with surface depressions. People set nuts in the depressions and then bashed them using a fist-sized rock called a *hammerstone*. Sometimes archaeologists find nutting stones where Archaic people camped at harvest time. Probably, people left the heavy, bulky tools tucked away in these places for future harvests rather than carrying them around.

From the earliest years of the Archaic, people ate both acorns and hickory nuts. Acorns are rich in starches, and hickory nuts are rich in fats. Together, they form a very balanced source of nutrition.

The two kinds of nuts differed also in their ease of processing. Acorns, though nutritious, are labor intensive because the bitter tannin they contain has to be removed. To prepare acorns, people shelled them, then pounded or ground the meats into a flour-like meal. After sifting the meal, people poured water through it to leach out the tannin. Then they mixed the prepared meal with water in a cooking basket, boiled the mixture, and stirred it into a mash for eating.



Acorns and hickory nuts.

Hickory nuts were decidedly easier to use. People could smash them with rocks on nutting stones and put the mass of shells and nut meats into a water-filled cooking basket. Rocks heated in fires were added to the container until the water boiled. Indeed, archaeologists frequently find fire-cracked rocks—which may have fractured when the hot rock contacted cool water—at Archaic sites. As the water heated and the mixture cooked, the hickory shells sank to the bottom while the nutmeat rose to the top. People easily skimmed the meat off and used it in stews, breads, and other foods.

So much else of what archaeologists think Archaic life was like are educated guesses blended with admittedly skimpy or limited evidence from sites. Archaeologists frequently study historic hunter-gatherers to get ideas about what life during the early Archaic may have been like. Some archaeologists are uncomfortable doing this, worrying the sketch they draw is wrong and has no concrete evidence to support it. Certainly, the risks and the blind spots are real. But, used with doses of caution, *ethnographic analogy* is sometimes the only interpretive tool available to archaeologists.

Notions that Archaic life revolved around the extended family unit, or band, for instance, derive from how groups like the modern-day Kung! in Africa live. Archaeologists have different opinions on how big Archaic bands traveling and living together were. Some think a band consisted of 15 to 30 members, while others believe a band could be as large as 75 to 100 individuals.

Based on ethnographic analogy, some archaeologists suggest that survival in Archaic times depended on a division of labor by gender. They think Archaic men, like their Paleolithic forebears, were the primary hunters. Deer was the main target, although animals like bear, rabbit, turtle, and turkey also were taken. Women were the botanists, knowing what grew where and when to harvest plants for food, herbal drinks, or remedies. Equally important providers, they knew, too, what plants to extract soap-like substances from; what plant materials, like the long, thin surface roots of trees, they could use to process and weave into rope and string; what grasses and reeds made the best mats and carrying and cooking baskets.

Whether or not these ideas eventually prove correct, there's little dispute that early Archaic people were successful dwellers of the young Holocene forests. All the evidence to date points to this interpretation about them: They were nomadic, moving through forested territories in family bands. Much of their food came from the white-tailed deer, hickory nuts, and acorns. Seasonally roaming their territory, band members chose places near food and water to camp at regular times of the year. They used some of these base camps as staging areas from which to collect and hunt local foods. Others were situated near key economic resources, like rock, and were used by more than one group. In these trans-territorial camps, early Archaic people not only worked, but probably socialized and held ceremonies as well.

### *Middle Archaic Foragers*

By 6000 BC, a kink was put in the early Archaic lifeway by something geologists call the Altithermal. The Altithermal was yet another climatic fluctuation. Characterized by warm, dry air that wove drought into periods of wet weather, it lasted 3,000 years. The erratic weather changed the forest composition in the Coastal Plain and Mountain regions. Long-needled pines and soft woods, like gums, moved in and pushed out the Coastal Plain's stands of nut-bearing trees. A similar shift happened in the Mountains, with conifers choking out hardwoods. The Piedmont kept its hardwoods, but yields were not dependable anymore.

To make matters more unsettled, the physical geography was still ironing itself out. Sea levels by 6000 BC were only about 30 feet lower than today, and the Altithermal oversaw the final sculpting of the modern coast.

Archaic people certainly felt these effects. Food sources became impoverished in some places as landscapes readjusted. Yet middle Archaic people made remarkably skilled adaptations. So much so, their population grew. The evidence for their success comes in several guises. Archaeologists find more sites dating to the middle Archaic than for the early Archaic—too many more (to echo an earlier phrase) to be merely the result of better preservation. Site density, then, is one measure archaeologists use to infer how well people adapted. Other indicators include the new tool technologies middle Archaic people developed and how they organized themselves to get resources.

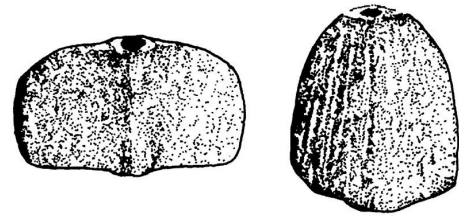
Middle Archaic people abandoned the collecting life; they were forced to. The days of scheduled wanders through large territories packed with deer and abundant nut trees were gone. Because of ecological change during the Altithermal, some bands found themselves with territories having too little of these foods to survive. Quite probably, the situation worsened because population growth meant each band's territory grew smaller as more people divided up the space.

UNC–Chapel Hill archaeologists Trawick Ward and Stephen Davis think middle Archaic people coped by becoming *foragers*. The band was still the basic social unit. But families abandoned the practice of using base camps to stage collections of seasonal foods and dispersed across their territories. As foragers, they moved more frequently, living in short-term camps and combing their territory for what they could find. They tapped food sources they previously ignored, like fish and shellfish.

With analytic eyes on how tools are made and used, Ward and Davis note telling similarities between those used by middle Archaic and historic foragers. Regardless of era, foragers use more throw-away implements, or *expedient tools*. Slivers of sharp stone flakes act as knives; scrapers are nothing more than large flakes hastily, but efficiently, chipped along the business end. Middle Archaic sites are loaded with these discards, while crafted tools, like the triangular scraper, are

absent. Archaeologists think this means people no longer made and carried such items around. More mobile, more immediately attuned to what they needed at the moment, people during the middle Archaic made work-a-day items when they were called for and then tossed them aside.

Of course, not all middle Archaic tools fell in the expedient category. Besides experimenting with spear point styles, people developed a *polished stone* industry, where the chipping scars were smoothed out by grinding and polishing. This smoothing technique was used for making bannerstones, which were used as atlatl weights.



Bannerstones.

The Altithermal's effects moderated around 3000 BC. As it slid away, the weather assumed its modern-day character. Throughout the middle Archaic, the forest dwellers also became, to a degree, riverine dwellers. Fishing supplemented forest foods like deer and nuts. How much people turned to fishing depended on what the land offered under the Altithermal's impact. Certainly, people foraged every livable niche and used the rivers effectively. Fruits, turtles, small game, and seed plants growing along riversides undoubtedly fell into their foraging bags. In spite of the Altithermal, people adjusted well enough that population kept growing, contributing to that host of very modern problems. Namely, more people in the same space meant less room; territories shrunk and became more bounded.

### *Late Archaic Horticulturalists*

After 3000 BC, people once again used base camps. With the ecology settling down, they could predict once more where reliable food sources were. As people did in the early Archaic, bands gathered regularly near prime sources of water, food, and the rocks they used for tool making. Evidence from sites archaeologists find suggest late Archaic people preferred camping on the Piedmont's river floodplains and along the low ridges and hollows of its western boundary. Bands also liked rivers on the Coastal Plain. In the lower reaches of the Mountains, late Archaic people tended to camp on or near river floodplains. The higher elevations were no draw for base camps, but temporary hunting or gathering camps scatter about.

By putting base camps along rivers or trunk streams, people in the late Archaic not only had transportation routes, but access to fish, freshwater shellfish, mussels, and wild seed plants growing in the silty soils set down by periodic floods. Some people may have lived in their base camps all year. Presumably, though, most left periodically for seasonal hunts and food-collecting forays. While this come-and-go routine is no different from early Archaic practices, the time and distance people stayed away apparently diminished. Population growth had reduced each band's territory size and tightened its boundaries.

Several things late Archaic people made hint at longer, more settled stints at base camps. People started carving wide-mouthed bowls from a soft, soapy-feeling rock called steatite. Making the bowls not only required time and space to do the job, but a settled enough existence in which to use the heavy stone bowls. Certainly, people seemed to value them; they'd repair cracks rather than discard the bowls. By 2000 BC, a few people in the southern part of the Coastal Plain were making thick clay vessels archaeologists call *Stallings ware*. This is the earliest clay pottery archaeologists find in North Carolina.

Archaeologists think it's quite likely late Archaic people divided up into different social, political, and linguistic groups. Yet they all made a series of similar things. The atlatl was still

the hunting tool of choice. Points for the spears attached to the launcher were large, stemmed blades archaeologists call Savannah River. Some people made exquisitely crafted atlatl weights from steatite or other kinds of polished stone. They also crafted ground and polished stone into pendants or made implements like axes. Some axes were so well made many archaeologists think they were used for ritual or other special purposes; other archaeologists shrug at that interpretation and suggest the axes were merely new. Less disputable items include awls, fish hooks, and jewelry made from bone.

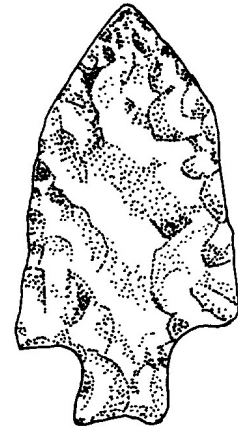
Another common denominator for late Archaic people is their use of imported materials. Unquestionably long-distance trade thrived, particularly for materials such as shell from the Gulf Coast and copper from the Great Lakes; items made from these materials are found at archaeological sites throughout the Southeast and Midwest, hundreds of miles from their original sources. One bargaining chip local people may have used to get such things was steatite, which could be mined in the Piedmont and was also widely traded.

Archaeological evidence suggests that Archaic people started cultivating wild seed plants that grew near river floodplains. This marked the beginning of *horticulture*, or small-scale gardening.

How did this practice begin? The process may have been partly inadvertent. Human beings disturb the natural areas they live in. Felling trees, building houses, digging cooking and garbage pits, digging graves, playing games, walking about—all are things people do that churn up the ground and disturb their immediate environment. As it happened, the seed-laden annuals that Archaic people collected for food thrived in disturbed habitats. While the plants' natural place was along floodplains where soils were often scoured and churned by flooding, they found an accidental niche in the base camps' disturbed soils. After harvested seeds were carried home, any that happened to fall to the ground found easy growing. The only thing Archaic people had to do to keep plants around was to let them grow in casual stands by their homes.

Somewhere along the line, people must have categorized some plants as useful and others as weeds (although not necessarily drawing the distinction in exactly the same way we do today). They encouraged the spread of economically useful plants by cultivating them in gardens. As Archaic people collected seeds from these gardens, they chose only the best plants and best seeds. Most seeds they ate, but some they kept to broadcast the next growing season.

Archaeologist Brian Fagan says the intentional act of seed dispersal marks the first step toward farming. This, along with other Archaic habits, like longer stints in base camps and making more non-portable and artistic possessions, poised people for transition to an era of pottery-making horticulturalists archaeologists call *Woodland*.



Savannah River point.

## Links

Lesson 2.5: “Archaeobotany.”

Lesson 4.1: “Shadows of North Carolina’s Past.”

Lesson 4.3: “Name That Point!”

## Sources

Daniel, I. Randolph. 1998. *Hardaway Revisited: Early Archaic Settlement in the Southeast*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.

Fagan, Brian M. 1991. *Ancient North America: The Archaeology of a Continent*. London: Thames and Hudson.

Ward, H. Trawick, and R. P. Stephen Davis, Jr. 1999. *Time Before History: The Archaeology of North Carolina*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. [The image in this chapter's main heading is taken from Figure 3.10.]

## Quick Study

### Archaic Period (8000 BC to 1000 BC)

The second oldest known cultural period in North America is the Archaic. The term, loosely defined, means Ancient Ones. Archaic Indians are direct descendants of Paleoindians. Like Paleoindians, they lived in all parts of North America. They, too, were nomadic hunters and gatherers who generally had no pottery and no permanent villages.

Archaic Indians lived so much like Paleoindians that archaeologists find it difficult to make distinctions between them. But there is a fundamental difference that archaeologists use to draw what they admit is an arbitrary cultural line. It is this: Paleoindians arrived in and lived throughout the Americas during the late Pleistocene (Ice Age) while Archaic Indians lived during the subsequent (and modern) Holocene epoch. In chronological terms, this puts the Archaic period's start at about 8000 BC, and in North Carolina it lasts until 1000 BC.

Like the Paleoindians, eastern Archaic Indians had a broad-based hunting and gathering subsistence. No single resource sustained them. They supplemented abundant deer and nuts, such as acorn and hickory, with bear, rabbit, turtle, and turkey. Assorted berries and nutritious seeds from riverine plants like goosefoot and sunflower contributed to their diets. Fish and shellfish were also important to some groups.

Animals furnished much more besides meat. Archaic people crafted skins into clothing or covers for shelters; they shaped bones into tools, such as hooks to catch fish or awls and needles to sew hides. Sinew became sturdy string; stomachs became pouches. Over time and as work demanded, people developed new tools: ground-stone axes, grinding slabs for nuts, and a variety of spear-point styles.

Even though the Holocene went through growing pains of unsettled climates and ecologies before settling into today's environment, Archaic people thrived. Skilled adapters, their population grew. One effect of growing numbers was their territories became smaller than the Paleoindians' and had loose, but identifiable, borders. Yet each territory was still large enough to boast a diverse ecosystem that provided an array of seasonal foods. To collect them efficiently, an Archaic family group (band) of 25 to 100 people systematically traveled through its territory. Archaeologists today find countless traces of their short-term hunting and gathering camps. Periodically, Archaic bands from different areas congregated for a while in centrally-located base camps near food, water, and stone used for tools.

### *Key Characteristics*

- The climate is warming and becoming like today's.
- Territories are smaller than in Paleoindian times; in North Carolina, archaeologists think family groups (called bands) of 25 to 100 people lived in discrete territories. Population is slowly increasing.
- Bands are nomadic. Seasonally on the move, they briefly camp in spots to hunt and gather. But they congregate periodically in base camps near food, water and resources like rock for tools. Most are on or near river floodplains.

- Little is known of Archaic dwellings, but they may be more substantial than in Paleoindian times. They were almost certainly built of wooden poles covered with bark, hides, mats, or thatch.
- Deer, small game, and aquatic animals like turtles and shellfish are important sources of meat. The atlatl, or spear thrower, is used to hunt. This tool launches spears forcefully and far.
- Many wild plants are collected for food, as well as for medicines and drinks. Nuts (hickory, acorns, chestnuts) are very important. So are seed-bearing plants growing wild in floodplain soils near base camps; these include goosefoot, marsh elder, and sunflower.
- Plant domestication takes its first step during the late Archaic. People help nature along by selecting and saving seeds from wild seed plants to throw in faded, natural stands to boost next year's production.
- Stone tools are not just chipped, but some are ground smooth and polished. Among the polished stone tools are grooved axes and balancing weights for atlatls called bannerstones. Bone is carved for some tools, like fish hooks and awls; bone and shell are also made into jewelry, such as decorative pins and necklaces.
- Long-distance trade exists; for example, people living far from the coast obtain marine shell they use to carve into jewelry.
- People weave baskets. Late in the Archaic, people begin creating other containers. They carve steatite bowls; steatite is a soft, soapy-feeling rock also called soapstone. A few people around the Cape Fear and Neuse Rivers also make a thick, clay vessel.