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## Lesson 3.4

# THE VILLAGE FARMERS

## The Mississippian Period, AD 1000 to 1650



Pottery vessel from Rockingham  
County, North Carolina  
ca. AD 1200.

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*Long ago, when the world was new, an old woman lived with her grandson in the shadow of the big mountain. They lived happily together until the boy was seven years old. Then his Grandmother gave him his first bow and arrow. He went out to hunt for game and brought back a small bird.*

*“Ah,” said the Grandmother, “You are going to be a great hunter. We must have a feast.” She went out to the small storehouse behind their cabin. She came back with dried corn in her basket and made a fine-tasting soup with the small bird and the corn.*

*From that point on the boy hunted. Each day he brought back something and each day the Grandmother took some corn from the storage house to make soup. One day, though, the boy peeked into the storehouse. It was empty! But that evening, when he returned with game to cook, she went out again and brought back a basket filled with dry corn.*

*“This is strange,” the boy said to himself. “I must find out what is happening.”*

*The next day, when he brought back his game, he waited until his Grandmother had gone out for her basket of corn and followed her. He watched her go into the storehouse with the empty basket. He looked through a crack between the logs and saw a very strange thing. The storehouse was empty, but his grandmother was leaning over the basket. She rubbed her hand along the side of her body, and dried corn poured out to fill the basket. Now the boy grew afraid. Perhaps she was a witch! He crept back to the house to wait. When his Grandmother returned, though, she saw the look on his face.*

*“Grandson,” she said, “you followed me to the shed and saw what I did there.”*

*“Yes, Grandmother,” the boy answered.*

*The old woman shook her head sadly. “Grandson,” she said, “then I must get ready to leave you. Now that you know my secret I can no longer live with you as I did before. Before the sun rises tomorrow I shall be dead. You must do as I tell you, and you will be able to feed yourself and the people when I have gone.”*

*The old woman looked very weary and the boy started to move toward her, but she motioned him away. “You cannot help now, Grandson. Simply do as I tell you. When I have died, clear away a patch of ground on the south side of our lodge, that place where the sun shines longest and brightest. The earth there must be made completely bare. Drag my body over that ground seven times and then bury me in that earth. Keep the ground clear. If you do as I say, you shall see me again and you will be able to feed the people.” Then the old woman grew silent and closed her eyes. Before the morning came, she was dead.*

*Her grandson did as he was told. He cleared away the space at the south side of the*

*cabin. It was hard work, for there were trees and tangled vines, but at last the earth was bare. He dragged his Grandmother's body, and wherever a drop of her blood fell a small plant grew up. He kept the ground clear around the small plants, and as they grew taller it seemed he could hear his Grandmother's voice whispering in the leaves. Time passed and the plants grew very tall, as tall as a person, and the long tassels at the top of each plant reminded the boy of his grandmother's long hair. At last, ears of corn formed on each plant and his Grandmother's promise had come true. Now, though she had gone from the Earth as she had once been, she would be with the people forever as the corn plant, to feed them.*

— “The Coming of Corn,” a Cherokee story as told by Joseph Bruchac

North Carolina sat on a crossroads by AD 1000. Cultural ideas from other places breezed through it and around it. How to decorate pottery; how to orient political and social life; how to honor the dead; how to structure towns. Each time some wind of change blew, it bumped into barriers created by local people's habits. Sometimes, it slowly broke down the barriers and prevailed. Sometimes, it hit them with the force of sudden storms and slipped through cracks. Other times, it just spent itself out.

The result is no tidy historical picture of North Carolina between AD 1000 and 1650. Archaeologists debate what to call the cultural tradition and period spanning this time. Ideally, cultural traditions and periods are based on strong similarities in how people live.

But as archaeologists reconstruct the cultures of people living across the state at that time, they find enough diversity that a naming dilemma plagues them. Studies in one place might show people carried on an egalitarian social and political life, hoeing gardens and making their pottery between bouts of seasonal hunting and gathering. Somewhere else, fields and towns got bigger, with some towns having a privileged class of people and central plazas dominated by earthen mounds topped with civic or ceremonial buildings.

In essence, North Carolina during this period straddled the boundary between two major, and very different, cultural traditions. The Coastal Plain and northern Piedmont were inhabited by people who carried on a Woodland way of life; their cultural tradition is often called Late Woodland by archaeologists. These people were farmers who grew corn, lived in permanent villages, and had a relatively egalitarian political structure. The Mountains and southern Piedmont, on the other hand, were marked by the appearance of a new cultural tradition called Mississippian. Like their neighbors, people of this new cultural tradition lived in permanent villages and depended on corn agriculture. But they also had stratified social organizations embodying permanent—and probably hereditary—power. In the larger towns where the elite lived, they built flat-topped earthen mounds, usually situated near a town plaza; and they engaged in extensive long-distance exchange for items like shell beads, copper, and other exotic minerals—some of which were transformed into stunning works of art.

The key feature that these two traditions had in common, and that distinguished them from earlier cultures, was a heavy reliance on crops for food—particularly on corn, beans, and squash. This agricultural lifeway coincided with an increasing population. It also brought about the appearance of permanently settled villages, often fortified with defensive stockades. Whatever quibble archaeologists have about life in this period, the cultural punch of agriculture can't be disputed. An era of village farmers had begun, the period we call *Mississippian*.

## The Piedmont Village Tradition

In the years between AD 1000 and 1200, Native life in the north and central Piedmont hadn't changed much from prior Woodland times. People still made a style of pottery decorated with net impressions. People still lived in small hamlets whose houses strung out along river and stream banks. At times, the hamlets sat empty when people left to hunt and gather wild foods.

Yet seeds of change were being sown. Archaeologist Trawick Ward quips the seeds were literal. Around AD 900, intense maize agriculture begins, and the practice has repercussions. Population grows; people start gathering in larger villages of clustered houses; conflict erupts for reasons archaeologists can only speculate about.

Two settlements archaeologists call Hogue and Wall document the switch Piedmont people made from their tendency to live in small hamlets to living in larger, compact villages. Separated by some 400 years, Hogue is the earlier of the two. Both sat on a bend of the Eno River near Hillsborough, North Carolina.

Hogue was a small hamlet occupied between AD 1000 and 1200. Today, the site sits on either side of a large, wooded ditch that was probably the bed of a road used in the 18th century. Cutting Hogue in two, the road destroyed a chunk of the old settlement. From what's left, it seems Hogue had only a few houses. Archaeologists aren't sure how people built them. Dark stains (called postmolds or postholes) show where some of the structures' wooden support posts decayed. But the traces don't make clear house patterns. The best guess is the Hogue homes were round.

Throughout the hamlet, people dug round pits, each about 2 feet deep. Freshly made, each pit was apparently used first as an underground food cupboard. It was safe and hidden, not just from animals, but from any non-Hogue humans who might poke about the hamlet when everyone was off on hunts and collecting trips.

However, as happens, the pit eventually fell out of use. People then filled it by using it as a receptacle for trash. They swept in litter from cooking hearths and sweepings from village and house floors. Archaeologists find pieces of broken pottery, animal bones, nut hulls, broken stone tools, charcoal from fires, and any odd stone caught up in the sweepings.

Enough maize kernels and sunflower seeds turn up in the trash that archaeologists think Hogue's people were farmers. Probably, their fields weren't big. The quantities of charred acorns and hickory nuts, along with deer, squirrel, and rabbits that archaeologists found in the pits suggest people relied heavily on wild foods. Archaeologists call this blend of grown and wild foods for subsistence a *mixed economy*.

Hogue gives archaeologists a glimpse at how Piedmont people living then dealt with death. Hogue's cemetery was small. Eight people lay buried there in round or oval graves. Hogue villagers arranged each body for burial by drawing the person's knees up to the chest. They put no offerings in the graves. But in some, large rocks were placed at the feet of the deceased. Why? Archaeologists don't know.

Small hamlets like Hogue were sprinkled through the north-central Piedmont between



An ancient storage pit being excavated by archaeologists. The tray in the background contains deer bones, broken pottery, and other village "sweepings" found in the pit.

AD 1000 and 1200. Most sat along ridges and knolls bordering the narrow floodplains of secondary streams. But a few exceptions, like Hogue, sat along primary streams and rivers. Because all these hamlets have only scant traces of houses, artifacts, or other hints of daily life (like pits to store food), archaeologists think few people lived in them. What's more, people seemed to change village locations every few years in a settlement-abandonment cycle. While they stayed put in each place, they blended agriculture with hunting and gathering. They looked to tradition to make pottery. They dealt with death according to custom.

Four hundred years after people left Hogue for the last time, another group settled in the same bend of the Eno River. Archaeologists call their village the Wall site. Unlike the sparsely populated, Hogue-like hamlets, the Wall site was a densely-settled village with a larger population. This kind of village had houses placed close together, arranged to form a tight circle around an open area used by community members.

Definitely, Wall was a bigger village than Hogue. It spread over more than an acre. So far, archaeologists have excavated about one-fourth of it. And, so far, they have traced seven round houses, each having a diameter of about 25 feet. Archaeologists found, too, outlines for a couple of smaller buildings, which may have been cribs or sheds for above-ground food storage. Wide, shallow cooking pits are sprinkled among the houses and cribs. From the charcoal and ash, along with their design and the plant and animal food remains found in them, these hearths were probably used to prepare feasts for community ceremonies. And surrounding the entire village was a stockade, a wall made of upright posts. Whether people constructed it for protection from enemies or to keep animals from pilfering food stocks is unknown.



Archaeological traces of a round house at the Wall site. Small stakes mark locations where posts once stood.

Archaeologists' best guess is about 100 to 150 people lived at Wall. Their stay was short-lived. Archaeologists think less than 20 years passed between the time people drove in house poles and then left for somewhere else. While they were there, they planted fields of corn, beans, and probably squash in the Eno River's rich bottomlands. They gathered the wild fruits and berries that rooted and grew in the areas they churned up around the plots. Seasonal supplies of acorns, hickory nuts, and walnuts came from nearby forests. So, too, did their main source of meat, the white-tailed deer. Other small mammals, turtles, fish, wild turkeys, and passenger pigeons added variety. This evidence all tumbles out of their refuse deposits.

Comparing the two Eno River bend settlements, archaeologists note key differences between Hogue and Wall. In a few centuries, the kind of settlement went from a sparsely populated, scattered hamlet to a compact village, larger in size and population; from underground food storage to above-ground food storage; from open to stockaded village.

Burial customs were different, as well. Instead of using a cemetery like that at Hogue, people living at Wall buried their dead in graves located within or just outside their houses. They sealed the graves with timbers or large stones. Funeral offerings, not found among the Hogue villagers, were common. Wall's people used shell beads to decorate burial garments. Sometimes, they strung the beads and put them on the deceased as jewelry. They also put small clay pots of food in graves, perhaps to sustain the person's journey to the other world. And because food remains

are found in the fill of some graves, archaeologists think feasting might have been part of their burial ceremony.

Such differences—and similarities, such as the mixed subsistence economy—are the stuff of archaeologists' questions. Were the people at Wall cultural descendants of those at Hogue? If so, does Wall give us a look at how life in the north-central Piedmont typically evolved during the Mississippian period?

Most archaeologists would answer these questions “no” and “yes.” Current thinking is people who lived at Wall moved into the Eno River valley from somewhere else. Just from where is still up in the air. It turns out that not only was the Wall village layout different from that of most nearby and contemporary villages, but the pottery people living in Wall made was distinct.

Wall villagers decorated vessels with a design archaeologists call *simple stamped*. This design consists of a series of parallel lines running in one direction that people etched on a wooden paddle; the design was transferred on the wet clay by striking the paddle against it. The resulting vessels look very different from the net-impressed pottery found on earlier sites such as Hogue.

As for village layout, Wall's compact, fortified settlement wasn't standard in the central Piedmont either. Other contemporary people tended to live like those in the earlier Hogue—in sparsely populated hamlets.

Elsewhere in the Piedmont, archaeologists find that about the same time hamlets like Hogue were cropping up along the Eno and Haw river drainages, people were settling along the upper Dan River drainage of the northern Piedmont.

For reasons archaeologists aren't sure of, more people lived in the Dan River valley around AD 1000 than in other Piedmont parts. The extensive bottomlands along the Dan and its tributaries might have drawn them due to greater amounts of and more easily reached agricultural soils. For the most part, everyday life there mirrored the Eno River's Hogue settlement.

A site called Power Plant in Rockingham County, for instance, traces a community whose houses string out along the Dan River's banks. Like Hogue, Power Plant was a hamlet. Residents dug pits they used first to store food and then to stash garbage. Recovered food remains suggest agriculture was part of life along the upper Dan River by AD 1000. But, like people living along the Eno did, folks at Power Plant balanced cultivated food with wild foods in their subsistence equation. They ate the white tailed deer, assorted smaller animals, and wild plant foods along with the corn, beans, and sunflower seeds.

As far as archaeologists can tell, people at Power Plant and elsewhere along the Dan River had the same burial ritual as their contemporaries along the Haw and Eno rivers. They, too, made pottery having clear style links to their local past. Most pots were big storage and cooking vessels, decorated with net impressions stamped on the surfaces. Sometimes, however, Dan River people added extra decorative touches. Their version could have brushed or etched lines around the pot's neck. Occasionally, fingers and fingernails punched and pinched depressions along it.

But a fundamental change stalked the Dan River. Where central Piedmont people tended to keep living in hamlets, their northerly Dan River neighbors switched to Wall-like compact villages. Already boasting more people at the period's start, the Dan River area saw a dramatic increase in population around AD 1250.

Presumably, this growing population relied more and more on corn agriculture, and archaeologists think this reliance affected the size and kind of villages people lived in. Some villages covered more than 2 acres and likely contained 15 to 20 round houses ringing a central plaza. Such villages were protected by stockades and had storage pits, cooking hearths, and graves scattered throughout.

Residents of these Dan River villages made a variety of striking ornaments and tools from animal bone, shell, and clay. Awls, pins, needles, fish hooks, and hide scraping tools archaeologists call beamers were crafted from bone. Bones from small mammals, like rabbits, were drilled and threaded into necklaces. Turtle shells became bowls and cups. People found beauty and usefulness in a variety of things. The serrated edges of freshwater mussel shells became scrapers. Marine whelk obtained through trade got carved into long or short beads and flat pendants. Clay, besides being coiled into pots, was molded into cups, spoons, dippers, beads, and smoking pipes.

When people died, relatives often put these bone, shell, and clay items in the graves. Some items may have been ones the deceased used during life; others may have been fashioned at the time of death, such as the burial garment decorated with shell beads.

By AD 1400, most northern Piedmont villages had made the transition from hamlet to compact village. Archaeologists generally agree the shift was one of necessary convenience. Yet they toss out two ideas about just what sparked it.

One is based on the notion of fragmentation. According to this idea, hamlet-living folks find themselves confronted with having to travel farther and farther to get to their fields. Eventually, family groups responsible for various fields get tired of the daily commute. So they settle next to the fields, clustering their homes nearby. Over time, they end up establishing a separate, independent village whose population then grows and stabilizes.

The other explanation flips the scenic coin. Instead of original villages splitting apart to create new ones, they come together. The reasoning goes that as agriculture becomes more important, people in small, dispersed hamlets start grouping. This way, they can work fields more efficiently, as well as find safety in numbers. Over time, their groupings create clustered villages that stabilize and grow.

Probably, both of these processes were responsible to some degree for the change.

Why Piedmont people put stockades around many of their villages is a question that musters other theories. One idea revolves around conflict. People may have begun fortifying their communities because raids from outsiders picked up. Other ideas about why village walls existed include the practical need to keep animals fenced from food stocks.

All in all, village life across most of the Piedmont was similar during the Mississippian period. Corn agriculture was important. Society seemed to be egalitarian. Whether in compact village or hamlet, no grand burials or other hints of people having special possessions and status have been uncovered. Houses were all about the same size. For the most part, customs emerged from deeply rooted local traditions. Archaeologists tell the same story again and again, embellishing it, of course, as they make more discoveries.

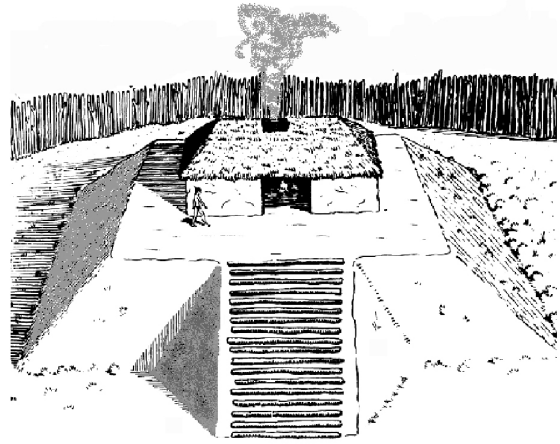
But in one southern Piedmont corner, a flash of something else shows up. It's called the Pee Dee culture.

## **The Pee Dee Culture**

Town Creek Indian Mound near Mt. Gilead in Montgomery County is North Carolina's most visible, and most visited, archaeological site. Framed by a backdrop of tall pines, a reconstructed stockade daubed with red clay surrounds grounds dominated by a flat-topped earthen mound—what archaeologists call a platform mound. A square, thatched building whose sides also glint with red clay sits on top of it. Steps carved in the mound's eastern side lead to the building. Where they begin, a rectangular area once flanked by open-sided, covered buildings spreads out from the mound's base. A tall pole is planted on one end, with a bear skull resting on top. Nearby

sit two other clay-sided and thatched buildings.

Town Creek is reconstructed from archaeological evidence. It sits on the west bank of the Little River, upstream from the confluence with Town Creek. A few miles downstream, the Little River flows into the Pee Dee, which itself becomes the Great Pee Dee River cutting south to empty into the Atlantic. With these river names, it's no surprise archaeologists called the culture of the people who lived in that Montgomery County spot from AD 950 to 1500 the *Pee Dee*, and the site at which they gathered *Town Creek*.



Platform mound.

The name Pee Dee sometimes causes confusion. The archaeological Pee Dee culture was arbitrarily named after the major river along which its sites are found. That river, in turn, was named after an Indian tribe that lived there in the Colonial period (and still lives in South Carolina today). Despite having the same name, the archaeological culture and the modern-day tribe are distinct entities. The latter may or may not have descended from the former.

Exactly who built Town Creek is something archaeologists have been trying to sort out since the mound was saved from plowing by archaeologist Joffre Coe in the 1930s. It's an unsettled and sometimes controversial topic. Was it people or ideas moving in that sparked the Pee Dee culture? Some combination of the two? However the evidence finally answers the questions, archaeologists do not disagree about one thing. Whoever comprised the Pee Dee culture practiced a local version of the pan-Southeastern Mississippian tradition, which shows up from Georgia to eastern Oklahoma.

Such traits included temples and civic buildings set atop earthen platform mounds; social and political hierarchies, with priests and chiefs; religious symbolism artistically represented in jewelry and ritual items; corn agriculture bound up with a host of ceremonies surrounding redistribution. Where they held sway, these kinds of binding habits tended to focus towns on centralized ceremonial and political centers.

Town Creek was one such center. Apparently, Town Creek was the hub for a number of Pee Dee villages peppering the southern Piedmont. They radiate away from the complex. Some are distant. Many are accessible by water. One village, called the Payne site, is about 30 miles northeast of Town Creek. Others, which archaeologists call Leak and Teal, are in Richmond and Anson counties. From what they've learned through excavating the villages, some archaeologists think Pee Dee culture people built Town Creek after some of the towns had been established.

Right now, the best guess is the Pee Dee culture surfaced in North Carolina around AD 950. Early adherents started making distinctive pottery, decorating vessels with a distinct group of geometric stamped designs. Some were large urns, reflecting not just a style, but a different kind of burial practice the people adopted. People of the Pee Dee culture cremated some adults and infants and put their ashes in the large clay urns.

Distinctive architecture and intensive agriculture were other notable characteristics of the Pee Dee culture. Houses and public structures were rectangular, a shape that sets them apart from the round buildings used by other, contemporary Piedmont peoples. And, although they hunted, fished, and collected wild foods like everybody else, Pee Dee culture villagers were mainly farmers of corn.

Presumably, the Town Creek ceremonial center was built only after a large enough population had accepted and settled into Pee Dee culture life. Regularly, people from surrounding villages congregated there for ceremonies.

On a lighter note, members from different towns and clans may have played competitive games on the field near the mound's base. Each summer, people celebrated the harvest of early corn. Called the Busk, the ceremony signaled hope for a winter of filled granaries; it was also a time of renewal when people swept out homes to discard old clothes, pots, and foods.

By AD 1400, Town Creek's importance as a ritual and ceremonial center for the Pee Dee culture was fading. By 1600, Town Creek was a memory. During that 200 years, some habits held. Cremations and urn burials were still done. The large, fertile bottoms surrounding the old Pee Dee culture villages were still planted in corn, beans, and squash. The Pee Dee River gave up its harvest of fish and mussels and the forests its fruits, deer, and other game. But people stopped making rectangular houses, constructing instead oval-shaped buildings. And they quit building mounds.

## **Mountain Cultures**

In North Carolina's Mountains, there were other earthen mounds contemporary to the one at Town Creek. After Europeans noticed them in the late 1800s, the mounds helped fuel a myth. They, along with others in the South and Midwest could not have been built, so the myth went, by Indians. They were too spectacular; the things found in them too sophisticated and rich. Ancient Hebrews or Celtic peoples must have landed, journeyed here and there, and constructed the monuments.

Research has debunked this myth. Indian people clearly built the mounds. While many mounds have been destroyed over the years (by relic hunters, construction, or erosion), some still hold enough evidence to chart some history.

North Carolina's Mountain region felt bursts of influence well before Mississippian times. Trade routes traversed the Mountains 1,000 years ago, stretching northwestward to the Ohio Valley and the Great Lakes regions and south toward the Gulf of Mexico and the Georgia coast. Some cut west to Tennessee and then down to Alabama and Mississippi. Traders transported and bartered along it merchandise as diverse as sea shells, steatite, copper, chert, and mica. Skilled artisans sculpted these goods into dazzling ornaments: realistic copper fish and birds, stone pipes with bowls shaped like beavers; conch-shell ornaments whose etched designs varied from serpents to people with forked eyes. All linked to symbols unifying vastly different Woodland groups under a geographically wide religious umbrella called Hopewell.

During the Woodland in western North Carolina, people belonging to the Connestee culture had their hands in Hopewell-related trade. Their involvement opened the door to change-inducing social and religious ideas. Status differences, maybe resulting from control of precious materials, were overturning some once strongly egalitarian Mountain societies. Some communities basked in brighter economic good fortune, serving as political and religious centers.

This was the Mountains' cultural stage before Mississippian times rolled in. But given the strong egalitarian bent of prior Woodland generations—and, indeed, of most Woodland people across North Carolina—social stratification probably needed additional footing to keep hold where it popped up. Thus, some archaeologists point, as well, to the role agriculture played.

Until AD 1000, corn agriculture wasn't something Southeastern people engaged in much. But about that time it became a major player in local lifeways. The increased productivity of corn agriculture could support larger, denser populations. It also provided greater opportunities for



accumulating wealth that could be used for political purposes: encouraging alliances, building loyalties, and inflicting social debts. Whatever the reasons, within a few generations of when corn agriculture intensified, social ranking and political centralization increased. These changes coincided with the emergence of the Mississippian cultural tradition, not only in the Mountains of North Carolina, but also across much of the Southeast.

Thus, while influences from the Pee Dee culture slipped into the southern Piedmont, while other Piedmont and Coastal Plain groups continued the Woodland cultural tradition, the Mountain region was creating its own identity. And it was this identity that archaeologists ultimately tied to the modern-day Cherokee.

### *Pisgah*

Pisgah and Qualla are the names archaeologists give Mississippian cultures that were Cherokee ancestors. Like other names archaeologists use, Pisgah and Qualla are based on collections of artifacts from key sites that can be dated and linked to each other. But conceptually they refer to the specific cultures represented by these artifacts and the peoples who lived at these sites.

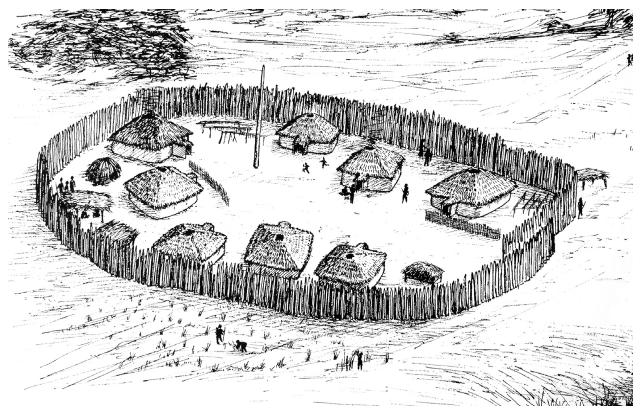
The Pisgah folk lived between AD 1000 and 1450. A stratified site called Warren Wilson, located on the grounds of Warren Wilson College near Swannanoa, helps bring the Pisgah to life. Like Hogue on the Eno, this Pisgah village was located on a river. The Swannanoa flowed by, and its spot on the north bank had been used before by both Archaic and Woodland groups. After AD 1000, the fertile bottomland was hosting a sizable Pisgah village.

Garden Creek near Canton, North Carolina is another Pisgah site. It, too, was a village, but had, in addition to the usual fare of discoveries, three earthen mounds tucked within its borders. Earlier Woodland people had built the two smaller mounds. But it was the Pisgah people who constructed the largest mound, building a village around it that spread over 5 acres.

Excavations at Warren Wilson and Garden Creek show that the Pisgah people had a variety of settlement types. They ran the gamut from small, spread out farmsteads to large villages of clustered houses. Some of the bigger villages had *platform mounds*. This term refers to how the mounds were used. Typically, a wooden building that may have been used for ceremonies or burials first occupied the locality. It was placed at ground level, like all the others. But at some point, the building was dismantled or destroyed, and, on the same spot, people constructed a flat-topped mound of earth with another wooden building on its summit. The eventual size of the mound depended on how many times it went through this cycle.

Not all Pisgah villages had mounds. Only a few larger villages did. Archaeologists think the mound-containing villages were political and religious focal points, with smaller villages spaced out around them. Regardless of size, most Pisgah settlements sat in floodplain environments. The exceptions were the short-term camps people made when hunting and gathering wild foods. Geographically, almost all Pisgah settlements were concentrated in the eastern and central parts of the Appalachian Summit region.

At Warren Wilson, the Pisgah village covered about 3 acres. Compared to others



The Pisgah village at Warren Wilson.

archaeologists find, it was mid-sized. Houses were close together, forming a circle around an open, central plaza. Like those houses people of the Piedmont's Pee Dee culture built, Pisgah houses were rectangular. They measured about 20 feet on a side. To build them, people set side-by-side posts in holes and then wove branches between them. Wet clay, sometimes with grasses mixed in, was smeared over the interweave, which dried to create a tight, secure dwelling. Some Pisgah houses had partitions for rooms, while others had large, open interiors. All had thick, inside support posts holding the roof, which probably was bark or thatch. And most dwellings had hearths lined with hardened clay collars sitting in middle of the building.

Besides houses, the Pisgah constructed several smaller structures at Warren Wilson. Some may have been granaries or sweat lodges. The small hearths in them had layers of packed fire-cracked cobbles, along with charcoal and bits of burned wood. No food remains littered these hearths, so heat seemed to be the main function. Cooking food probably took place in individual homes. But at times, people may have joined together to prepare feasts for community-wide celebrations. Telltale evidence for this may be in the shallow roasting pits, some as large as 10 by 5 feet, that lay along the village edge. Archaeologists found them filled with food remains.

The Pisgah surrounded their Warren Wilson village with a stockade. Archaeologists mapped several different wall lines when they excavated. Some seem to reflect village expansion, with people moving the walls out to accommodate additional houses. At one point, it seems there was a double-walled stockade. But one pattern of post lines puzzles archaeologists; it encircles the central plaza instead of the town's edge. Archaeologist Trawick Ward thinks this particular wall separated the central plaza from surrounding houses. Comparing it to the square grounds of historic Cherokee villages, he believes the plaza may have been set apart and reserved for ceremonies and political activities.

In ways, Pisgah everyday life by AD 1300 seems similar to what is going on in much of the Piedmont. They had compact, stockaded villages. They had corn agriculture; probably half their food came from fields of maize, beans, squash, and marsh elder. The rest came from wild foods. Deer and bear provided meat, as well as skins for clothes and containers; the bones were shaped into tools. Smaller animals, along with fish and turtles from rivers and streams added variety. Each fall, people collected acorns, hickory nuts, walnuts, and butternuts. When the season was right, they added fleshy fruits and berries.



Maize plants.

But what archeologists don't find or find infrequently at sites like Warren Wilson may point up some differences. For instance, archaeologists find few underground food storage pits in the Pisgah's villages. Presumably, the Pisgah used corn cribs and granaries. This above-ground food storage stands in sharp contrast to Piedmont practices of hiding stores underground.

There are also hints, particularly in burial customs, that Pisgah life was not egalitarian. For the most part, the Pisgah buried their dead in graves either inside or next to their homes. Many graves had offerings. But other burials around some houses did not. Archaeologists think the different practices suggest some households had family members who ranked above others. Some of the people could have been political leaders. Others may have been religious leaders; priests or shamans, for instance, may have been buried with the objects they used or wore.

Evidence for ceremonies is usually scant or tough to interpret so far in the past. Yet the discovery of almost 14,000 toad bones in one pit at Warren Wilson suggests that villagers may have used these amphibians for medicine or for a feast.

The image of Pisgah life is more complete when evidence from Garden Creek comes into the picture. While a village, too, Garden Creek is also a place where the Pisgah's ceremonial side is much more evident.

The Pisgah mound at Garden Creek sat in the midst of a village. At the time archaeologists found it, the mound's rectangular shape was still evident. It stood about 7 feet high, and measured about 150 feet by 130 feet at the base. A ramp leading to the top was on the east side. From the dark stains of postmolds, two buildings had sat on the west side of the summit, and a stockade looped around them. On the east (and open) side, about 24 people were buried. About half of them had grave offerings, most of which were made from shell. Jewelry included strings of shell beads, gorgets, and ear pins.

While the Pisgah people put these same kinds of offerings with some of the deceased at Warren Wilson, they did so for proportionally more graves at Garden Creek Mound. Archaeologists wonder what the disparity means, especially as they deal with how to interpret things like social ranking. Except for grave offerings, no other evidence suggests people buried in the mound had achieved a higher status. But maybe, archaeologists think, the mere fact they were buried in a mound points to it.

Presumably, Garden Creek was a Pisgah *big town*, meaning it was one of those with enough social punch to have mounds, around which other villages like Warren Wilson sat like stationary satellites.

Importantly, Garden Creek links the Pisgah with a filtered-in set of cultural practices prevalent in other parts of the Southeast, like platform mounds with buildings on top and ranked social orders. This same set of adopted traits, it seems, put the Piedmont's Pee Dee culture in motion. Archaeologists classify these traits in a tradition they call *South Appalachian Mississippian*.

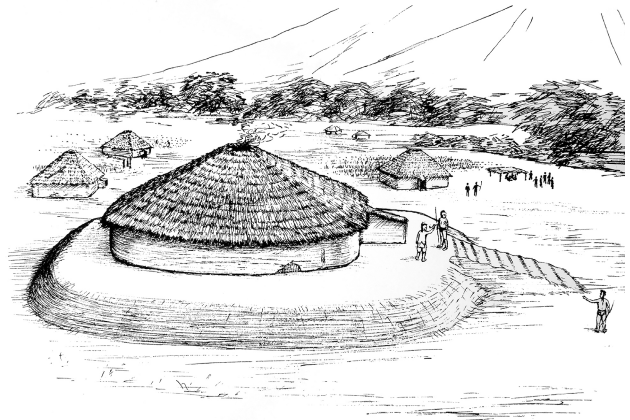
At this point, it's unknown if the Pisgah or the Pee Dee people had regular contacts with each other. Certainly they mirrored each other in how they built mounds and developed ceremonial complexes. Early in their histories, each group put square to rectangular public buildings on the ground's surface. Sometimes referred to by archaeologists as earth lodges because dirt was packed up around their sides, the buildings often had stockade walls around them. When they eventually deteriorated and collapsed, people filled in sags with more dirt to smooth out a new building surface and constructed another in the same spot. Continuing this process over time resulted in mounds.

Archaeologists think the mound-building sequence in some places went hand in hand with changing social and political life. One idea is that the earliest earth lodges served as council houses for egalitarian societies. Representatives met in them to make decisions based on consensus. But the subsequent building of mounds coincided, at least in the Mountains, with transitions to more centralized societies. There, the flat platforms served to elevate the homes of chiefs or priests. Inheriting both rights and power, the chiefs and their families were buried in the mounds. Most archaeologists think the mounds were very visible expressions of a stratified or ranked political system ruled by a hereditary aristocracy.

### *Qualla*

Around AD 1400, people in North Carolina's southern Appalachians (and most of the western third of the state) started making different kinds of pottery. Pots lost the distinctive Pisgah look. So, in the way of archaeologically defined cultures, the Qualla culture "emerged" when the new designs became common. Potters continued experimenting with shapes and decorations. Soon they were turning out bowls with forms no Pisgah potter had ever made.

The Qualla people also had their own versions of public architecture, in that they stopped using platform mounds for chiefly houses. Rather, they placed townhouses on mound summits. Large and rotunda-like, the townhouses could host several hundred people. The townhouse was the focal point of the community, and it was in this building that community decisions were made. Given that much of the community could participate in this process, Qualla communities may have been politically more egalitarian than their Pisgah predecessors.



The townhouse at Coweeta Creek.

The Coweeta Creek site in Macon County, North Carolina, is a Qualla townhouse mound site. It was also a village. In ways, the village was very Pisgah-like. The Qualla styled their houses identically. They were rectangular, averaging about 20 feet on one side; they had vestibule entrances and interior supports surrounding a central, clay hearth. No dramatic differences existed either in how the Qualla laid out their villages, where they chose to put them and how they got food by combining farming with hunting and gathering. Houses clustered around a plaza and mound; a stockade probably encircled the buildings; the setting was in fertile soils by a water source; corn, beans, squash, pumpkin, and gourds mixed in pots with deer, black bear, and other seasonal nuts and fruits.

The Qualla people often placed burials in house floors, beneath or near the hearths. They put offerings in some graves; shell beads, ear and hair pins; engraved gorgets; masks made from conch shells. A few people were buried near the townhouse entrances. Presumably, these were important members of the community.

The Qualla lifeway endured into the time of European contact.

## The Coastal Villagers

When Europeans arrived in the late 1500s, North Carolina's northern Coastal Plain was home to two different cultures. Algonkians lived closest to the Atlantic edge, in what's generally called the Tidewater. The term Algonkian isn't a tribal name; it refers, rather, to the language family coastal tribes shared who lived in the broad stretch from Canada to Carolina. Iroquoian speakers—the Tuscarora, Meherrin, and Nottaway tribes—lived more inland, on the Interior Coastal Plain. Generally, the Tuscarora's boundaries began just south of the Neuse River and extended north to where the Virginia border is today. The Meherrin and Nottaway stayed between the Roanoke and Chowan Rivers.

Through research so far, archaeologists have sorted out the political and social boundaries of the various groups who lived in the north Coastal region. Hints of their lives prior to European contact survive in their old villages and camps. Based on the distinctive items each group left, archaeologists call the Algonkian speakers *Colington* and the Iroquoian speakers *Cashie* (pronounced "ca-SHY," accenting the last syllable).

### *Colington*

By now, the fact archaeologists categorize pottery-making Indian cultures by how they made and decorated pottery is old hat. By AD 800, North Carolina's coastal Algonkians were making

pots tempered with crushed shells and decorated with fabric impressions. Some flair was added to vessel rims by carved lines and geometric patterns. The pots themselves shaped up in several fashions: small, simple bowls; large, hemispherical bowls, looking much like today's wide-mouthed mixing bowls; and medium-sized, cone-shaped bowls, whose bottoms stuck securely in hearth ash or sand.

The Colington Algonkians regularly traded with the nearby Tuscarora. Archaeologists find a lot of Tuscarora pottery in Algonkian sites. The Tuscarora made vessels much like Algonkians'. But, perhaps being farther from sources of shell, they used sand or small pebbles for temper. Not surprisingly, the Algonkians living closest to Tuscarora territory had more Tuscarora vessels than those living along the ocean's edge.

The other Colington artifacts aren't much different than those used by other contemporary groups in the state. Besides making vessels, the Colington molded clay into pipes. They fashioned stone into triangular arrow points, blades of various shapes, celts for woodworking, sandstone abraders, and milling stones. They turned bone and shell into work-a-day tools, such as hoes, picks, ladles, fish hooks, sewing awls, and punches. They also carved bone and shell into jewelry, such as tubular beads and gorgets. Sometimes, people used altogether different materials, such as freshwater pearls and copper, for adornment. A panther mask archaeologists found may have been used for ceremony.

By tracing locations of Colington sites, archaeologists found that the people Europeans first met and wrote about had lived in the same general territory since AD 800. It spanned the Tidewater from southeastern Virginia from Hampton Roads and the James River south and into the northern half of North Carolina. This puts the Colington's southern boundary around present-day Onslow County.

Colington society—like that of most eastern Algonkians—revolved around chiefdoms, formal religion, and a priesthood. Chiefdoms claimed distinct chunks of the Tidewater, and their various territories scattered across the region. Politically similar to the Appalachians' Qualla people, Colington chiefs apparently ruled democratically rather than autocratically. While their power was nothing to trifle with and they could sway decisions with persuasion, they generally governed by consensus. That is, they listened to and did what a council of representatives from the chiefdom's villages decided was best. The chief's village, which archeologists call the capital village, was usually bigger than others in the chiefdom, and it tended to be centrally located within the claimed area.

The Colington Algonkians used several types of settlements, ranging from capital villages, common villages, seasonal villages and camps for specialized activities. How the settlements were structured, what went on in them, and how long people stayed in each place varied.

Capital villages were centers of political and religious activities. Smaller than capital villages, common villages were those bound to and loyal to the chief. Apparently, most were seats of farming with at least some people always there. Some were stockaded, but others were not. The seasonal village, as its name implies, was occupied at certain seasons.

On Colington Island, for example, archaeologists found a place where people spent summers fishing and collecting shellfish. They returned to their main villages each fall and winter, and from there they periodically struck out for hunting camps. Farmsteads, presumably worked by members of an extended family, were also part of the pattern of settlement.



Colington cooking pot.

Archaeologists believe each Colington chiefdom stretched over a territory that could handle the several subsistence strategies—agriculture, hunting, gathering, and fishing—needed to support a large population. Most capital and common villages sat along sounds and estuaries, or on high banks and ridges next to major rivers and their tributaries where sandy loam good for agriculture existed. The water bodies, depending on what they were, also provided shellfish, turtles and even alligators. The upland oak and hickory forests were sources of nuts, game, and other resources.

One example of how the Colington made their system work is at a summer village visited by English explorer Arthur Barlowe on Roanoke Island. There, Colington people fished and planted gardens while their corn crops matured at their mainland capital village across Croatan Sound. So far, only one chiefdom has been documented away from the mainland. It sat on the Outer Banks of Hatteras Island, but in a place with enough area at its south end to host the people's food needs.

Colington life was, in many ways, similar to other Indian groups across living across North Carolina after AD 1000. They had permanent, sometimes stockaded villages; they had agriculture, but never stopped relying on wild foods. They fashioned distinctive pottery. They traded and formed alliances. While their chiefdoms and priesthoods had the ring of ranking, the Colington political and religious system was based more on consensus than decree. In that sense, it was notably distinct from the hereditary and autocratic ruling elite that characterized Mississippian societies elsewhere.

The Colington people did, however, have a form of burial quite different from most other North Carolina people living then. They, along with their Iroquoian neighbors, used ossuaries, or communal burials, where the bones of many were placed in a large grave at one time. Some ossuaries, such as ones along the Chowan River in Currituck County or at Gloucester in Carteret County, had as many as 58 persons buried together—old and young, male and female.

Apparently, the tradition of mass burials was part of a strong northern tradition that made its way south to the Carolina Coast. It brought with it not just a way to bury the dead, but ways to prepare the dead for burial.

Colington communities had mortuary temples tended by priests. In the temples, deceased people were kept until it was time for burial. It's still unclear how often ceremonies for mass burials occurred. It's also unclear whether there were different temples for political and religious leaders and for common people. And it's not clear where the ossuaries were in relation to the villages. It seems, but archeologists aren't sure yet, that the ossuaries were placed in cemetery areas on a village's northern edge. Sometimes offerings, such as shell beads or bone pins, accompanied the burials.

By AD 1650, Colington life was brought to an end by European expansion. Facing the brunt of colonization, many Algonkians died from European diseases to which they had no immunity. Remaining members of the once powerful Algonkian tribe, the Chowanoke, were put on a Gates County reservation in 1675. Mention of these people in colonial records stops by the mid-18th century.

### *Cashie*

Iroquoian-speaking Tuscarora, Meherrin, and Nottoway tribes were the Colington Algonkians' neighbors after AD 800. The Tuscarora lived in the Interior Coastal Plain, forming a confederation of three tribes. Together the Tuscarora tribes claimed the area from the Roanoke to the Neuse rivers and the western estuarine border (or where the tide meets river currents) to the

fall line. The Meherrin and Nottoway lived farther north, occupying the Meherrin and Nottoway river drainages.

Archaeologists label the pottery these Iroquoians made as Cashie, and, hence, give an umbrella name for their culture and lifeway between AD 800 and 1750.

Archaeologists find many similarities in how the Colington and Cashie people lived. Certainly, the Cashie used the same kinds of tools and jewelry as the Colington. They put their villages, farmsteads, and hunting or collecting camps in places to take best advantage of what the territory offered. Some villages had stockades. Some were open. The Cashie traded with the Colington for pottery, conch shells, and shell-bead jewelry.

What's left of one Cashie village sits along the margin of the Roanoke River at a site called Jordan's Landing. The village is small, sitting on the confluence of a small stream and the Roanoke. Long ridges of fertile sandy loam sit behind it. A lush oak-hickory forest covers the bank's ridge. Clearly, people picked the village site with an eye to the nearby variety of wild foods and arable land for agriculture. Food remains recovered at Jordan's Landing show the Cashie grew corn and beans. They ate hickory nuts and several kinds of animals: deer, bear, raccoon, possum, and rabbit. Fish, turtle and terrapin, mussel, and turkey were also eaten.

Cashie agriculture was not tied to floodplains, as it was in the Piedmont, Mountains, or Tidewater. The Interior Coastal Plain still contains the most productive agricultural soils in North Carolina, located in the loamy uplands along streams. The Iroquoians certainly observed this. They settled their villages on or near those uplands, regardless of how close or how big nearby floodplains were. The early European explorer John Lawson wrote descriptions of young men working hard in fields of corn as well as hunting to provide food for their families. This practice of men working fields was not just true of Iroquoian tribes, but of Tidewater and Piedmont groups Lawson observed.

Although the Cashie village at Jordan's Landing has not been completely excavated, archaeologists can tell that it was stockaded, and its shape was oval. A ditch bounded the village on its north and west sides, which people gradually filled in with trash. Whether the ditch was formed by natural erosion or whether it resulted from people using its soil to bank the base of the stockade is not clear. Nor can archaeologists make out from the pattern of the few postmolds they found anything about the size and shapes of the village houses. The people's cooking hearths are still visible, and so are some pits they may have used for storage.

Excavations also showed the Cashie at Jordan's Landing buried their dead on the village's southeastern side. Like the Colington Algonkians, the Cashie Iroquoians typically buried people in ossuaries.

But the Cashie practice had some differences. Apparently, Cashie ossuaries were family rather than community burials. Most have only two to five people placed in them. Also, where Algonkian ossuaries tend to have few if any grave offerings, the Cashie generally put tools like bone awls and jewelry like shell beads in the graves. Some had so many offerings, archaeologists wonder if they suggest social status or rank for the family buried there.

Besides this ceremonial difference, the Cashie organized their political life differently than the Colington. Unlike the Algonkian's Tidewater chiefdoms with its capital villages and allegiances, each Iroquoian village was autonomous. European accounts tell of a Tuscarora Confederacy composed of three tribes, but each seemed to retain political independence.

### *Oak Island*

While the Algonkians and Iroquoians dominated most of North Carolina's Coast, small tribes

of Siouan-speaking people wedged in the southern corner below the Cape Fear River. Two of them were the Waccamaw and Cape Fear tribes. Archaeologists draw them under the cultural label Oak Island.

Oak Island—as a culture and way of life—is still a puzzle because little archaeological work has been written up or done. Presumably, Oak Island Siouans were more affected by goings-on in South Carolina than in North Carolina. Archaeologists think this because the temper they used for pottery and how they decorated vessels had stylistic predecessors to the south, not north.

Yet, Oak Island people, too, sometimes used ossuaries, especially in areas closest to the borders with their Iroquoian and Algonkian neighbors. Presumably, they had the same subsistence practices, lived in the same kinds and sizes of villages, and used the same kinds of everyday tools and jewelry other Coastal groups did.



The Mississippian period is the bridge to Colonial-era cultures. The Tuscarora on the Interior Coastal Plain, the Algonkians of the Tidewater, the Siouans of the Piedmont, and the Mountain Cherokee are a few whose unwritten histories try to speak from the ground.

Archaeologists caution that any connection between archaeological findings and specific historic tribes is tenuous. Even with year-round, permanent villages, people tended to move about and shift locations every few years. Because archaeological trails are rough and incomplete marked, they can turn out to be false. Nonetheless, the markers do document aspects of the way life was and how this affected the diverse cultural shapes of historic groups.

## Links

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

Lesson 4.5: “A Siouan Village.”

Lesson 4.6: “Language Families.”

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## Quick Study

### Mississippian Period (AD 1000 to AD 1650)

Archaeologist David Hurst Thomas says one of the neat things about being an archaeologist is you get to name things. Find a new kind of pottery, you name it; find a new archaeological site, you name it. Find a bunch of similar-styled artifacts geographically spread in similarly dated soil levels, you name it. And this is big-time naming because what you call it becomes the umbrella for a cultural period.

Archaeologists don't quibble much about what to call periods from Paleoindian through Woodland times. But faced with what was going on in North Carolina and the Southeast after AD 1000, they get stuck. North Carolina then was in a crossroads. Influences traveled to it from places like Virginia, Georgia, and Tennessee.

These influences affected North Carolina people variably. Where they filtered in, they helped mold life. How to shape and decorate pottery; how to organize politically and socially; how to bury and honor the dead; how to feed, clothe, house, and protect.

What gets sticky is that in some North Carolina places, like the Coastal Plain and the northern Piedmont, changes from previous ways of life were gradual; in these places, drawing a line separating the Woodland period from anything after AD 1000 seems like an arbitrary exercise. In other places, like the Mountains and southern Piedmont, the changes were more dramatic, as new customs associated with the Mississippian tradition were adopted; here, AD 1000 coincides with a major cultural transition.

So the sometimes testily debated issue is: What to call the period in North Carolina after AD 1000 and before European contact? Archaeologists use various names, depending on where they work in the state and the cultures that they find. Some archaeologists prefer the term Late Woodland, thereby emphasizing continuity with the preceding Woodland cultures. Others use Mississippian—the name given a cultural tradition found across most of the South and noted for its social structure, architecture, and art. Here we have decided to follow the broader regional trend and to use the name *Mississippian period* for the span between AD 1000 and 1650. This term recognizes the presence of the Mississippian cultural tradition (in the Mountains and southern Piedmont), but it should not be taken to mean that all cultures in North Carolina belonged to this tradition.

### *Key Characteristics*

- Corn agriculture, along with beans and squash, provides the bulk of food. Hunting and gathering now supplement food from crops. The white-tailed deer is still the most important source of meat. Some archaeologists call AD 1000 “The Great Divide” between horticulture and intensive agriculture.
- Population increases.
- Permanent villages exist. They tend to be larger than Woodland villages. Some are hamlets, with houses strung out along river banks. Others are what archaeologists call compact, nucleated villages, where houses cluster together and surround a central, open

area. Some compact villages have wooden stockades surrounding them, while others don't.

- House shapes vary across the regions. In the Mountain and Coastal regions, people usually build square or rectangular houses. Piedmont dwellings tend to be round or oval.
- Also, distinctively made structures besides houses exist in villages, such as large council houses and sweat lodges. Many people also construct corn cribs.
- Platform mounds are built in the southern Piedmont, the Mountains, and adjacent portions of the western Piedmont; these are earthen mounds sometimes constructed on top of the burned or destroyed remains of a ceremonial earth lodge. A new structure is placed on top of the earthen mound, which people use for religious or political purposes.
- Conflict is documented; some burials show people died from arrow or trauma wounds. Archaeologists think population growth and the need for good agricultural land increased intertribal friction.
- Pottery styles become more complex and varied. People decorate pots with elaborate stamped and incised designs. Besides using vessels for cooking, people apparently use the clay pots to store large amounts of food. Some groups use large, capped pots as burial urns for infants or to hold the cremated remains of adults.
- Some tribes develop social and political hierarchies, particularly in the southern Piedmont and the Mountains. Other groups remain egalitarian.
- A distinctive cultural tradition called Mississippian cuts swaths of influence through western and southern North Carolina. Evidence includes ceremonial complexes with temple mounds, designs, and symbols—like a cross in a circle—carved into shell gorgets (pendants), and ways to make and decorate pottery.
- Burial practices continue to evolve among certain groups; ossuaries are used more along the Coast. Temple-capped earthen mounds in the Mountains have some people buried in them. Graves offerings are common.