

# The First Mississippians

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THE PALEO INDIAN PERIOD 11,250 - 10,950 B.C.

To many people the picture of the first people coming in to America and thence into Mississippi conjures up the vision of strange looking, primitive people moving through a familiar landscape. Surprisingly, the people probably would have looked familiar while the landscape would have looked foreign. Most of the plant species present then are present today, though the distribution of said flora has changed. What would have appeared most bizarre to us today, is the Mississippi River and especially the animals present upon the landscape. The earliest Mississippians arrived at the end of the Wisconsin glaciation. The ice sheets which covered almost all of Canada and parts of the northeast United States, were over 1.2 miles thick in some areas. At the glacial maximum, 9,300,000 square miles were covered by ice. So much water was contained in the ice sheet that the world's oceans were lowered by a depth of 250 - 390 feet below present level. The Mississippi River did not exist as such at this time. Instead the river was a series of rivulets, or as geologists call them, braided streams. These intertwined streams were shallow and easily traversed by man and beast. Most of the Yazoo Basin, or Delta as it is commonly, but incorrectly referred to, was barren of plant life. Large windstorms blew fine silt against the banks forming the steep Loess Bluffs that parallel the Mississippi River Alluvial Valley today.

Perhaps the most unusual feature of this landscape would be the animals. True, many of the species we are familiar with today were present but so were several others that have no counterparts in North America, and certainly Mississippi, today. There were two types of beavers, the smaller being the species that is extant today. However there was a giant beaver with incisors over four inches long. This creature was as large as a black bear. A most unusual creature was the giant ground sloth. This animal was as large as a modern day elephant and stood on its hind legs tearing up rotting trees searching for insects. Speaking of elephants, the American Mastodon roamed the forests of Mississippi at this time. These large hairy elephants grazed upon coniferous trees and are good indicators of the vegetation of the region. Two types of giant Bison, larger than the extant species today, were present. Carnivores were present as well. America had both a cheetah and a lion. This latter animal was larger than its African counterpart. The Dire Wolf was also larger than the present day wolves. Sabre tooth tigers were as large as an African lion, but their oversized fangs make them appear much more ferocious. Finally, perhaps the most fearsome carnivore of all was the Giant Short-Faced bear. This creature was as large as a moose and with its short stocky body and long legs, was certainly a fast runner. The powerful jaws must have been a terrible sight for any unlucky Indian who crossed the path of this ferocious creature and looked eye-to-eye at the most dangerous predator in North America since Tyrannosaurus Rex.

The Indians themselves were very similar to modern Indians and peoples of western Asia. They were adapted to the cold and were quite successful hunters. Their winter clothing was probably quite similar to modern day Eskimo. While the exact means of entry into the New World is being argued, the entry into Mississippi is less controversial. The earliest artifacts are made from northern chert. As one moves south, this material begins to drop off until finally, only local material is being used. Evidence in the form of early tools suggests the first people in Mississippi came south along the Tennessee River into northern Mississippi. Also people were moving south along the braided stream surfaces of the Yazoo Basin, and then east up the tributary streams into the hills. Eventually, the entire area of what was to become Mississippi was settled by these first Mississippians. While their number was few, their influence was great. Some suggest that they were the cause of the extinction of the large Pleistocene mammals. This cannot be proved at this time however, and remains one of the great riddles of science. We know more about the extinction of the dinosaurs than we do of the animals that were here several thousand years ago. These first Mississippians had begun to settle into defined territories though they still moved around a lot and could by no means be called sedentary.

#### THE EARLY ARCHAIC PERIOD 10,950 B.C. - 5500 B.C.

The main change that occurred in this time period was the end of the ice age and a return to a warmer climate. Further, many of the large animals of the Pleistocene had died off and the fauna was of a modern variety with white tail deer being one of the main prey species in the Southeast. There is evidence of dugout canoes in the preceding late Paleo-Indian period and water borne transportation probably was significant in this period as well. Chipped stone adzes suggest heavy woodworking, and this most likely represents canoe manufacture. The primary hunting weapon was the spear, used with a spearthrower or atlatl. Snares, deadfalls and other devices were also most likely used to take small game. Gathering of plant foods, especially nut harvests, were of great importance. Fishing was also probably an important source of protein, though we have little hard evidence for it at this time. Social organization was probably similar to that of the preceding period, small family bands who moved about in a seasonal round.

## THE ARCHAIC PERIOD 5500 B.C. - 500 B.C.

As this period began there was a significant climactic event called the Hypsithermal. At this time the climate got much warmer than it is today and plant communities migrated farther north than they are found today. It is thought that some western areas of the state were prairies and this is supported by the finding of spearpoints of a western style some being made from western (possibly Texas) chert, suggesting bison hunters were following herds into Mississippi. At this time regional exchange networks sprang up to move both tools (spearpoints) and special items (carved stone beads shaped like animals) that were considered very powerful. At this time in Louisiana, the first mounds in the world appeared. It is probable that one of these early mound groups was constructed on the Mississippi gulf coast. The purpose of these mounds is unknown at this time but a ceremonial function is not an unreasonable suggestion. Towards the end of this period evidence for early agriculture has been found in nearby states. While we have no evidence from Mississippi, it is thought that primitive agriculture (various starchy seeds and perhaps gourds) was being practiced. A technological innovation, the invention of pottery, also occurs at the end of this period. Most likely social organization consisted of several family bands living together and the groups were becoming more sedentary.

## THE WOODLAND PERIOD 500 B.C. - A.D. 1150

During this period the first large, permanent villages are found. Agriculture becomes increasingly important in the lives of people though hunting, fishing and gathering also play important roles. It is during this time that the tribal organization is seen for the first time. Pottery is important and large storage vessels are found at many sites. At around 100 B.C. the storied burial mounds are built along the major rivers and their tributaries. There are several styles of burial mounds but outwardly most are conical. Also at this time semi circular earthworks are constructed at a few sites, sometimes associated with conical burial mounds. These earthworks are presumed to be ceremonial structures. Some large flat-topped mounds also occur at this time, usually at large multi mound groups. Agriculture continues to develop and at the end of the period the first corn appears. A major innovation, the bow and arrow appears ca. A.D. 800. Interestingly along with the bow and arrow comes the first evidence of warfare, headless burials shot full of arrowheads and the first palisaded villages. Houses are rectangular wattle and daub structures 15-20 feet on a side with thatched roofs and a central fire hearth.

## THE MISSISSIPPIAN PERIOD A.D. 1150 -A.D. 1600

Perhaps the most striking thing about this time period are the large mound groups found along the floodplains of large streams. Mound groups such as Winterville, Lake George, and Fatherland are impressive in scale. Numerous flat-topped mounds are to be found at these sites, usually with one dominant mound. This dominant mound served as the platform for the temple. Other mounds were surmounted by houses of important people. The large populations at many of these sites were not a tribe, but a chiefdom, a level of organization that approached that of the state. This was not an egalitarian society but a ranked one with the lower classes approaching those of India and the higher classes considered semi divine. Not all Indians adopted this type of organization. The Chickasaw retained their tribal organization and they were never mound builders. Warfare was epidemic and many towns were fortified with moats and palisades. Some mound groups, like Owl Creek just off the Natchez Trace, were vacant ceremonial centers that do not appear to have been occupied by people year round. Agriculture was very important, with the "American trilogy", corn, beans and squash being of paramount importance. Hunting, fishing, and gathering also played a part in the economy. These were the peoples encountered by the first Europeans to penetrate into the interior Southeast. This brief encounter of 1540-1541 with the Hernando DeSoto expedition, was disastrous for the Indians. Numerous European diseases for which they had no natural immunity, swept through the large towns killing thousands. It was a plague of biblical proportions. Many groups were almost wiped out and the survivors fled their homelands. DeSoto told of seeing villages with several hundred houses. 140 years later the La Salle expedition reported no Indians living in the Yazoo Basin.