

Native Americans in the Cape Fear, By Dr. Jan Davidson

Archaeologists believe that Native Americans have lived in what is now the state of North Carolina for more than 13,000 years. These first inhabitants, now called Paleo-Indians by experts, were likely descended from people who came over a then-existing land bridge from Asia.¹ Evidence had been found at Town Creek Mound that suggests Indians lived there as early as 11000 B.C.E. Work at another major North Carolinian Paleo-Indian where Indian artifacts have been found in layers of the soil, puts Native Americans on that land before 8000 B.C.E. That site, in North Carolina's Uwharrie Mountains, near Badin, became an important source of stone that Paleo and Archaic period Indians made into tools such as spears.²

It is harder to know when the first people arrived in the lower Cape Fear. The coastal archaeological record is not as rich as it is in some other regions. In the **Paleo-Indian** period around 12000 B.C.E., the coast was about 60 miles further out to sea than it is today. So land where Indians might have lived is buried under water. Furthermore, the coastal Cape Fear region's sandy soils don't provide a lot of stone for making tools, and stone implements are one of the major ways that archeologists have to trace and track where and when Indians lived before 2000 B.C.E.³ These challenges may help explain why no one has yet found any definitive evidence that Indians were in New Hanover County before 8000 B.C.E.⁴

We may never know if there were indigenous people here before the **Archaic** period began in approximately 8000 B.C.E. After that time, however, there are a number of documented Archaic Indian sites in the Lower Cape Fear area. An archaeological dig that began in the summer of 2006 at a site near present-day River Road south of the state port shows that Indians lived in the area off and on from 7000 B.C.E. until the mid-17th century.⁵ Archaic hunting camps have also been found in the Castle Hayne area.

Experts believe that Native American life and culture changed in the Archaic period. It did so in part because the climate changed. As the region got warmer, big game died out, and Indians hunted smaller animals such as deer and turkey. They fished in fresh and saltwater. They likely traveled to gather food such as berries and nuts. Most archaeologists believe that "because these food resources did not always occur at the same time or place, it was necessary for Archaic peoples to move among several different campsites during the course of a year. Given this mobile way of life, they probably lived in small bands composed of extended families or groups of families."⁶ The Cape Fear River was likely a major transportation route for Indians coming to and from the area. Archaeologists have found canoes dating back to the Archaic period in Lake Phelps in Northeastern North Carolina.⁷

Indian society became more complex in the Archaic period. Jason Moser has noted that the Cape Fear's "prehistoric inhabitants probably participated in an extensive trade network that

allowed the people to acquire many necessary raw materials not available locally.”⁸ Just one example can suggest the ways trade affected the region. Rhyolite points are found widely in the state, but rhyolite is not. It is a rock that likely came to the area from the Uwharrie Mountains, an area of the state near Asheboro and the State Zoo.⁹ So Archaic period rhyolite tools found in the Cape Fear suggest either local Indians were part of a well-developed trade network that provided them with access to supplies of stone, or they traveled long distances to harvest supplies of stone themselves.

Indian life changed most dramatically in the **Woodland** period, which began in approximately 1000 B.C.E. During the Woodland period, thousands of Native Americans likely lived in the Cape Fear. Woodland people began to live in small villages, grow crops, and make pottery. Native Americans also began to use bows and arrows during this time. Since crops need to be tended, and pottery is fragile and it takes time to produce, archaeologists think these new developments in Native American material culture mean that Woodland Indians established more permanent settlements.

Trade also seems to have flourished during the Woodland period. Appalachian mica made its way to the Cape Fear coast, and shells and salt from coastal regions have been found in the Mountains and the interior.¹⁰ A Woodland period burial mound near Fayetteville on the Upper Cape Fear River contained a number of shell necklaces in the graves that could very possibly have come from the Lower Cape Fear.¹¹ Indians may also have traveled to trade for yaupon holly (*ilex vomitoria*). Southeastern Indians used the leaves of this type of holly to make a ceremonially-used caffeinated beverage called black drink.¹²

Europeans first came into contact with the coast of North Carolina and coastal Indians in the 1520s. At that time, Giovanni Da Verrazano recorded his impressions of Native American life in the Lower Cape Fear region.¹³ Verrazano’s account of his visit is short, but it does give some clues to what life was like for Native Americans. Verrazano wrote his account in Dieppe, France, in 1524, after he’d returned home. According to Verrazano, his ship travelled for 50 days until the expedition “...discovered a new land, somewhat low, but being within a quarter of a league of it, we perceived by the great fires that we saw by the seacoast, that it was inhabited: and saw that the land stretched to the southward.”¹⁴ Verrazano repeated the claim about fires after they set sail again. After the crew left their first landfall (fifteen miles below Wilmington), he claimed “we saw everywhere a great many fires, by reason of the multitude of the inhabitants.”¹⁵

When the crew finally stepped on land (with Native American help) they interacted with the local population, describing the people as handsome, russet colored, and partially clothed. Verrazano’s account is one of the few available written sources on Cape Fear Indians. Like most Europeans of the day, Verrazano believed that whites were superior to Indians, and he

interpreted what he saw based on that flawed understanding. Even so, Verrazano acknowledged that he didn't know much about Indians' ways of life: he declared "We could not learn of this people their manner of living, nor their particular customs, by reason of the short abode we made on the shore, our company being but small, and our ship riding far off in the sea."¹⁶ Still, his account does suggest the southeastern Native American population was relatively large when he visited. One historian has estimated that "The numerous fires and settlements Verrazano saw along the North Carolina coast suggest that...seven thousand or more natives probably lived there."¹⁷

Other European accounts provide further glimpses into Indian life after the first Europeans arrived in the region. In the 1660s, colonist William Hilton had an altercation with an Indian who used a bow and arrow from a canoe to shoot at Hilton and his companions. The Europeans retaliated by smashing up the canoe and pulling down the man's hut. Then they broke "his pots, platters, and spoons, tore his Deerskins and mats in pieces, and took away a basket of Akorns..."¹⁸ In other parts of the account, it became clear that along with canoes, and huts, and skins and mats, and weapons and acorns, Indians in the Cape Fear in the 1660s planted non-native corn, fished and gathered shell fish, had bows and arrows, and raised and ate cattle and hogs. The account also shows that by the 1660s, beads were also an acceptable form of tribute to the Indians in our region, so they either made them, or traded with others who did. We also know from Hilton that "by the historic period, the Cape Fear Indians were living in well-established villages."¹⁹

Although these early sources give us some tantalizing hints about Native American life, by the time Europeans settled the Lower Cape Fear region permanently in the 1720s, there weren't very many Indians in the area. The region's demographic shift happened quickly. In 1715, there were, apparently, only 206 Cape Fear Indians—76 men and 130 women and children—living in five villages in the region. Sixteen years later, Welshman Hugh Meredith noted "there is not an Indian to be seen in the place...the small remains of them abide among the thickest of the South Carolina Inhabitants."²⁰ Disease likely played a role in the demise of the local Indian population. Although experts do not agree how many Indians died through so called "virgin soil" epidemics,²¹ the consensus seems to suggest that disease probably did play an important role in ridding the land of Indians.²²

According to E. Lawrence Lee the Yamasee War played a vital role in removing the remains of the region's Native American population. Colonel Maurice Moore's "line of march took him by Cape Fear but before arriving there he learned the Cape Fear Indians and the nearby Waccamaw tribe of the Waccamaw River, planned to ambush him. Because of his advance information, he was able not only to avoid the ambush but also to strike a devastating blow against the two tribes..."²³ This same Maurice Moore returned to the region and founded Brunswick Town, starting the first permanent European-led settlement.

Even though few Native Americans remained in the Lower Cape Fear by the 1720s, centuries of Native American presence in the region helped shape the forest and life in the area. Indians used fire to clear the forest's underbrush for travel and hunting. Fires were probably set to reduce the insect population. Lightning strikes also set fire to the forest. The combination of natural and human-set fires had the unintended effect of making the longleaf pine the region's dominant tree. So, although the first European settlers thought they were seeing a pristine virgin growth forest when they arrived in the region, they were mistaken.

¹ There is some work being done that seems to put the peopling back in time thousands of years. Notably, by Al Goodyear on the Allendale site in South Carolina. See "Rewriting History: The Allendale Archaeological Site, Humans may have been here earlier," *The State*, July 23, 2004, 1.

² <http://ancientnc.web.unc.edu/files/2016/04/L301.pdf>:<http://ancientnc.web.unc.edu/teachers/resources/intrigue-of-the-past/> p. 143-4

³ Mark Wilde-Ramsing "Archaeological Survey and Testing on Prehistoric Shell Midden Sites in New Hanover County, North Carolina" (The Catholic University of America, MS Thesis, Department of Anthropology, 1984), 1

⁴ Cece Nunn, "Discoveries might reveal origins on Southeastern N.C.'s first inhabitants," *Star News*, May 9, 2010 suggests that may be more evidence to support a Paleo-Indian inhabitation in the Cape Fear. Divers found chert off the coast that they are trying to link to Native American tools.

⁵ Jason Moser, "Prehistoric Inhabitants Along the Cape Fear River," article provided by author. N.d.

⁶ H. Trawick Ward and R. P. Stephen Davis, Jr., *Time Before History: The Archaeology of North Carolina* (UnC Chapel Hill, 1999), p. 2

⁷ David Sutton Phelps, *Pettigrew State Park, Ancient Pots and Dugout Canoes: Indian Life as Revealed By Archaeology at Lake Phelps* (North Carolina Parks and Recreation)

⁸ Moser, "Prehistoric Inhabitants," 2

⁹ Ward and Davis, *Time Before History*, 38

¹⁰ Walter H. Conser, *A Coat of Many Colors: Religion and Society along the Cape Fear River of North Carolina* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2006), 18; Timothy Silver, *A New Face on the Countryside: Indians, colonists, and slaves in South Atlantic Forests, 1500-1800* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), p 69

¹¹ Conser, *A Coat of Many Colors*, 24

¹² Charles M. Hudson, *Black Drink: A Native American Tea* (University of Georgia Press, 2004) p. 2

¹³ "Giovanni Da Verrazano's Explorations, 1524" in David Leroy Corbitt, *Explorations, Descriptions, and Attempted Settlements of Carolina, 1584-1590* (State Department of Archives and History, Raleigh, NC 1953), 140

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¹⁵ Corbitt, *Explorations And Attempted*, 142

¹⁶ Giovanni Da Verrazano's Explorations, 1524" in David Leroy Corbitt, *Explorations, Descriptions, and Attempted Settlements of Carolina, 1584-1590* (State Department of Archives and History, Raleigh, NC 1953), 141

¹⁷ Timothy Silver, *A New Face On the Countryside*, 38-39

¹⁸ "A relation of Discovery by William Hilton, 1664" in A. S. Salley, (ed.) *Narratives of Early Carolina, 1650-1708* (New York: Scribener's Sons, 1911) p. 50

¹⁹ Ward and Davis, *Time Before History*, 19-20

²⁰ Walter H. Conser. Jr. *A Coat of Many Colors*, 31 Bradford J. Wood, *This Remote Part of the World: Regional Formation in Lower Cape Fear, North Carolina 1725-1775* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2004) footnote on p. 250.

²¹ Alfred Crosby's *Columbian Exchange* made this idea famous: it is that because the Indians came over the Bering land bridge so many thousands of years ago, and the population was isolated, they were not exposed to various forms of disease and therefore didn't have any resistance to such things as small pox.

²² Russell Thornton, "Demographic History" in Raymond D. Fogelson, Ed., *Handbook of North American Indians, Volume 14 Southeast* (Smithsonian Institution Press, 2004), 50

²³ E. Lawrence Lee, *Indian Wars in North Carolina, 1663-1763* (North Carolina State Archives, 1997) p. 41