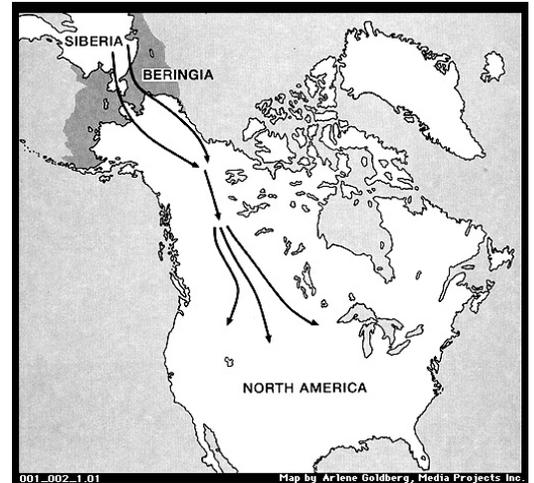


## **Essay: American Prehistory: 8000 Years of Forest Management**

### **In the Beginning...**

For thousands of years before Columbus set sail for the New World in 1492, people lived in the Americas. By crossing a land bridge (exposed because of low sea levels) that connected Siberia with Alaska at the end of the last Ice Age approximately 12,000 years ago, people from Asia followed an ice-free corridor into present day Canada. Termed Native Americans by historians because they were the original inhabitants of North and South America, these early people left evidence both of their existence and customs. Historians and other scholars in related disciplines such as archaeology and anthropology face many challenges when attempting to piece together the mysteries of prehistoric Native American life. Because the first inhabitants of the Americas kept no written records, professionals analyzing this time period must search for clues in order to better understand the lifestyles of the earliest Americans.



**Figure 1:** Map depicting how prehistoric people probably traveled from Asia to North America. Shaded area between Siberia and Alaska was a land bridge.

\* Map courtesy of American Historical Images On File

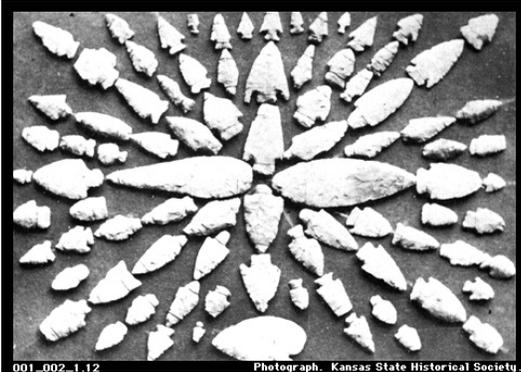
### **Prehistory vs. History**

Historians often divide history into two segments: prehistory and history. Defining prehistory as the period of time in which no written documents existed (history therefore remains the period following prehistory when the written word first appeared), historians are forced to rely upon artifacts, objects made or modified by humans, when examining prehistoric people. Based on artifacts unearthed by archaeologists, historians have divided the history of Native Americans into different time periods. Although not all experts agree on the exact dates for each period, the classification of

prehistoric life into distinct ages helps historians emphasize the features shared by cultures at one time and highlight the differences between people of other times.

## Paleo

During the first period of prehistory in the Americas, Paleo, estimated to have occurred between 10,000 and 8,000 B.C., Native Americans were nomads. Living in small groups, the Paleo people moved from place to place following herds of big game such as mammoth and mastodon. The most famous artifact from this period, the Clovis point (named for the original type site near Clovis, New Mexico) was used by Paleoindians to hunt. Found throughout North America, the stone projectile points proved effective in killing both large and small animals. Besides hunting, Native Americans supplemented their diet by gathering fruits, plants, and nuts from nearby forests.



**Figure 2:** Stone points used by prehistoric people to hunt, fish, and fight. The points either were held by hand or mounted onto shafts. \* Image courtesy of *American Historical Images On File*

## Archaic

The Archaic Period, 8,000-1,000 B.C., had some similarities with the preceding time period. People still relied heavily on hunting for food and until the latter parts of the period they continued to move from place to place on a frequent basis. However, the Archaic Period did have some important differences from the Paleo Period. Climatic changes (warm and dry conditions replaced the cold, wet weather of the Ice Age) allowed people to take advantage of their thriving surroundings. In addition to hunting big-game animals, Native Americans developed fish-hooks made of bone, stone tools, and weighted nets for catching fish. Moreover, Archaic people made even greater use

of forest resources than before by gathering seeds, berries, and nuts and hunting forest animals like the white-tailed deer to help provide additional food sources.

## **Woodland**

The Woodland Period, 1,000 B.C. through 800 A.D., followed the Archaic years. During this time frame Native Americans not only hunted and fished but they cleared away forestland to make room for fields of planted crops. The transition from forager to farmer marks one of the most striking achievements of the period. By domesticating plants like sunflowers and several species of small grains (maygrass for instance), the people living during this period had less reason to constantly change locations because they had an additional supply of food to complement their hunting and fishing habits. Besides the emergence of agriculture, the Archaic Period also distinguished itself from earlier periods because it was during this time that pottery first appeared and trade networks between the various groups of native people first developed.

## **Mississippian**

The final period of prehistoric life in the Americas, Mississippian, occurred between 800 and 1650 A.D. Throughout these years Native Americans continued to hunt and fish, but they came to mostly rely on agriculture for food. During this era, Native Americans cleared land by girdling (cutting away a ring of bark from trees to stop growth) or setting fire to a group of trees and used stone tools to assist in the planting of crops in the fertilized ash. The widespread adoption of agriculture (prompted in great part by the domestication of corn) resulted in the extensive clearing of forests and also led to the establishment of permanent villages. Looking to build sturdy structures for their more sedentary lifestyles, many Native American tribes began to use tree products (bark, wood, branches, leaves) when constructing houses and other buildings.

## Architecture

Archaeologists believe that the prehistoric people living in the Americas often used resources from surrounding forests to build shelter. In addition to the discovery of artifacts supporting this inference, historians also find evidence for this claim in the words of European explorers and early colonists who observed and subsequently kept written records describing the various Native American tribes. For instance, during the late 17<sup>th</sup> century Roger Williams explained how Narragansett Indians constructed buildings: “They gather poles in the woods, and put the great end of them in the ground...and bending the topps of them in



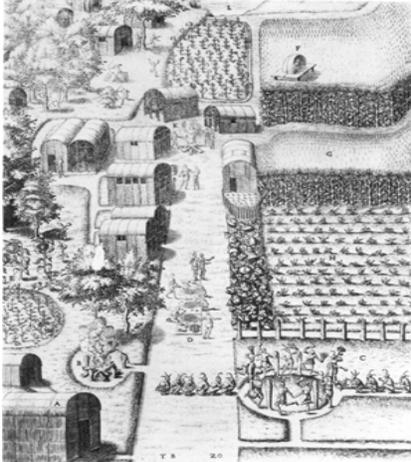
**Figure 3:** Chief Little White Cloud standing in front of a birch bark tepee in the Chippewa National Forest, Minnesota, 1940. \*Photo courtesy of U.S. Forest Service

the forme of an arche, they bind them together with the bark of walnut trees, which is wondrous tough.” Not all Native Americans assembled their buildings in a similar fashion. The climate of a region and type of wood available often dictated the sort of structures a tribe would choose to build. Nonetheless, the construction of all Native American house types --from wigwams to tepees-- required specific training and technical knowledge. These skills (learning how to peel the bark off a tree, for example) often were passed down from one generation to the next representing a significant portion of a tribe’s unique culture.

## The First Forest Managers

For many years it was believed that Native Americans used what they could find in their immediate environment to supplement their diet and lifestyle with little disruption to the surrounding landscape. Today, many scholars disagree that the original inhabitants of the Americas had little impact on the environment. Calling this the myth of the “ecologically invisible” American Indian, critics instead believe that Native Americans altered the land to better suit their needs. Based on archaeological

evidence (mainly charcoal deposits and pollen records), in addition to eyewitness accounts by European explorers, many experts now contend that prehistoric people



**Figure 4:** Copy of an engraving by Theodore DeBry from the late 1580s of Indian farms in the village of Secoton, near Sir Walter Raleigh's colony of Roanoke in present-day North Carolina. \* Courtesy of Library of Congress

deliberately set fires to accomplish a variety of tasks. Besides using fire to clear large tracts of wooded land for farming (by 1500, millions of acres had been cleared to plant corn, squash, and other domesticated plants), Native Americans also set fires to improve visibility, facilitate travel, and control the habitat of the forest by getting rid of unwanted plants and encouraging the growth of more desirable ones like blackberries and

strawberries. Fire also was used to make hunting more productive in two essential ways. First, Native Americans would light fires near a grazing herd to either force them off a nearby cliff to escape the flames or compel them to run towards hunters waiting to kill the animals with their spears. Second, the fires set to keep the land open and grassy also increased the number of bison, elk, and deer in the area, thereby making hunting even easier for the Native Americans.

## European Contact

Isolated for thousands of years by oceans on both the east and west, the immune systems of most Native Americans could not fight the influx of new diseases brought by European explorers. Devastated by the huge decrease in their population in a short period of time (as a result of both disease and wars with the Europeans), the social structure, customs, and everyday practices of many Native American tribes collapsed. Consequently, the fires frequently used by Native Americans to alter the environment decreased dramatically. Over time, the halt in the periodic burning triggered changes to several ecosystems: prairies became woodlands, savannas

transformed into forests, and the previously open forests of the eastern coast developed dense undergrowth. When large numbers of settlers began arriving in America during the 1700s, the land they saw was the result of over two centuries of reforestation. Romantic poets of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and other inhabitants of the United States described the landscape as difficult to traverse, dark, and dense. Just two hundred years before, European explorers portrayed the same forests as open and park-like. Such a discrepancy in accounts suggests that Native Americans did have an effect on their environment.

### **Population Debate**

Although scholars agree that European diseases played a significant role in the decimation of the Native American population in the Americas, they have been unable to reach a consensus regarding the approximate number of people living on the continents before European contact. Some estimates place the population as low as several million inhabitants, while others make the claim that over 18 million Native Americans occupied the land. Population levels therefore have moral and practical implications for U.S. history. For instance, if only a few people lived in the Americas at the time of European exploration, this could support the practical claim that the land was “up for grabs.” Furthermore, a low population estimate also could be used to reinforce the negative stereotype of Native Americans as savages. If, for example, only a small number of people lived in the Americas and possessed little knowledge or desire to purposely improve the land, this could imply that the Europeans had a moral obligation to seize the land occupied by the Native Americans for the sake of progress and the common good. On the other hand, if many millions of people lived in the Americas before European contact this could be used to support the argument that Native Americans probably did have a great impact on their surroundings. Such a conclusion also could undermine the caricature of Native Americans as a primitive people and provide evidence that the Europeans stole land away from the rightful owners. In the years to come, scholars surely will continue to debate these points.

## **Conclusion**

Early explorers and colonists assumed the indigenous people of the Americas were too simple to modify the environment and therefore thought they had stumbled upon land “untouched” by humans. Today, many experts refute the position that Native Americans did not have an impact on their surroundings. Even though the prehistoric inhabitants of the Americas left no written record of their existence, scholars can use artifacts, oral histories, and the words of European explorers and early settlers to demonstrate how Native Americans altered the environment. All in all, despite the lack of agreement among researchers regarding the relationship between the prehistoric people of North America and their physical surroundings, convincing evidence exists that suggests Native Americans do indeed deserve the title of “the first forest managers.”

## Worksheet 1: Keywords and Concepts

Review the essay entitled “American Prehistory: 8000 Years of Forest Management” to complete the chart below. Note that a few answers have been completed to help you get started.

<b>Time Period</b>	<b>Approximate Dates</b>	<b>Characteristics of The Period</b>	<b>Native American Forest Use</b>
			Hunt big game but use forest to supplement diet – gather plants, fruits, and nuts to eat
Archaic			
		- First Pottery - Hunting, Fishing, and Agriculture - Extensive Trade	
	800 AD – 1650 AD		

## Worksheet 2: Essay Analysis

Read the essay to answer the questions below.

1. List 3 ways Native Americans used fire as a forest management tool.
2. How did European explorers describe the forests of North America? How did poets and other people of the 19<sup>th</sup> century describe them? Why was there such a difference between the two descriptions?
3. Why do historians face such a challenge when attempting to answer questions surrounding early Native American life?
4. How did Native Americans utilize forest resources in their architecture?
5. Explain why a disruption in the social structure and everyday practices of many Native American tribes occurred soon after contact with Europeans.
6. What are two pieces of evidence historians can use to support the claim that prehistoric people living in North America did have a substantial impact on the environment?
7. How could the debate about the population in the Americas before European contact affect the conclusions scholars draw about the impact Native Americans had on the environment?

## Detecting Prehistory Background...

When studying **prehistory**, historians and other professionals often have to act like *detectives* to solve the mysteries of the past. Instead of reading books, diaries, or speeches from a specific time period, scholars normally are forced to rely upon **artifacts** to provide information about ancient peoples and cultures. Because the people living in North America before European exploration did not have written languages for experts to analyze, much of what we know about the first inhabitants of this continent originates from the careful analysis of artifacts. Furthermore, when attempting to identify and explain the early artifacts of Native Americans, historians often don't work alone; they rely on the help of archaeologists, anthropologists, and geographers (and other people from related fields). Together, as a team, professionals make **inferences** about artifacts and how these prehistoric objects explain past events and people. Although the conclusions reached by experts provide new insight about the lives of prehistoric people, the discovery of new artifacts, in addition to advancements in science and technology, often triggers debate, controversy, and at times even the rewriting of history!

### Before you Begin...

Each of you has received a card identifying your profession for the day (archaeologist, anthropologist, geographer, or historian) and by now you should be assembled in teams based on the color of your cards. In order to prepare yourself for your upcoming "detective" work complete the following 3 tasks:

1. Use a dictionary (traditional or online) to locate and record the definitions of the 3 **bold** words in the first paragraph entitled "Background."
2. Use a dictionary (traditional or online) to locate the definition of your designated job (either archaeology, anthropology, geography, and history).
3. Based on the definition you found for the previous question, construct 3 questions that someone in your profession might want to answer when analyzing a prehistoric artifact. For example, a historian would want to know, "When was this object made?"

### The Case...

Use the essay ("American Prehistory: 8000 Years of Forest Management"), the chart you completed in Worksheet 1, class discussion, and the 3 completed tasks above to help you solve Worksheet 3: "The Case of the Mystery Artifacts." Before trying to solve the mysteries, look at each of the artifacts on Worksheet 3 and answer the 3 questions you decided were relevant to your field of study (from question #3 above). Your ultimate goal is to rely on each other's expert opinions, and as a team make inferences based on the evidence to answer the questions listed under each artifact. Be prepared to give a 5-10 minute oral presentation in order to teach the class about your line of work as either an archaeologist, anthropologist, geographer, or historian and to explain how and why your group reached its conclusions for each of the Native American artifacts. Note that the mystery of Artifact #1 has been "solved" – use this example as a guide in your detective work.

- The 4 photos from [Worksheet 3](#) are courtesy of *Indian Artifacts of the Midwest*. Hothem, Lar, Paducah: Collector Books, 1992.

## Worksheet 3: The Case of the Mystery Artifacts

### Artifact 1 - Paleo Period



What is it? Blades or points

What was it used for? Used to hunt large and small game

What role did it play in the culture? The blades look like they were crafted and refined suggesting hunting was an important part of the culture.

Relationship between object and environment? People made use of their environment by developing weapons to hunt animals.

### Artifact 2- Probably Archaic Period



What is it? \_\_\_\_\_

What was it used for? \_\_\_\_\_

What role did it play in the culture? \_\_\_\_\_

Relationship between object and environment? \_\_\_\_\_

### Artifact 3 - Woodland Period



What is it? \_\_\_\_\_

What was it used for? \_\_\_\_\_

What role did it play in the culture? \_\_\_\_\_

Relationship between object and environment? \_\_\_\_\_

### Artifact 4 - Mississippian Period



What is it? \_\_\_\_\_

What was it used for? \_\_\_\_\_

What role did it play in the culture? \_\_\_\_\_

Relationship between object and environment? \_\_\_\_\_

## **Eyewitness Accounts**

For many years, historians supported the argument that Native Americans had very little impact on the environment. Believing that Native Americans lived in harmony with nature, the first European explorers who arrived in the New World thought they were viewing an “untouched” landscape. In recent years, scholars have begun to rethink this line of reasoning, contending instead that Native Americans, much like the Europeans and all other people of the world, purposely altered their surroundings to better suit their needs.

In the previous exercise you learned that historians generally have to rely upon artifacts in order to gain a better understanding of prehistoric people. Although historians still use artifacts when studying the lives of Native Americans after European contact, another type of written evidence exists to help scholars unlock the mysteries of the past: eyewitness accounts written by European explorers and colonists.

In groups of 2-3 read the following 5 **eyewitness accounts** aloud. Think about the main idea of each and how the statements might relate to the historical debate surrounding prehistoric Native Americans and the environment.

1. "[We] marched on through some great fields of corn, beans, and squash and other vegetables which had been sown on both sides of the road and were spread out as far as the eye could see across two leagues of plain."  
- Description of Native American agricultural field in northern Florida by a Spanish chronicler writing about DeSoto's expedition (1539-43).
2. "There is much ground cleared by the Indians, and especially about (their agricultural fields); and I am told that about three miles from us a man may stand on a little hilly place and see thousands of acres of ground as good as need be, and not a Tree on the same."  
- Francis Higginson writing about the country around Salem, Massachusetts in 1630.
3. "Not choked with an undergrowth of brambles and bushes, but as if laid out in by hand in a manner so open, that you might freely drive a four horse chariot in the midst of the trees."  
- Observation of the forest by Andrew White while on an expedition along the Potomac in 1633
4. "And this custom of firing the Country is the meanes to make it passable; and by that meanes the trees growe here and there as in our parks: and makes the Country very beautifull and commodious."  
- Comment by Thomas Morton about Native American use of fire on the landscape in 1637
5. "The most striking feature (of the country) is an almost universal forest, starting at the Atlantic and thickening and enlarging to the heart of the country."  
- Statement of a French naturalist in 1796, more than 3 centuries after the first European contact

## Worksheet 4: Debating History

**Assignment:** You have been asked to enter the debate raging among historians regarding Native Americans and their relationship with the environment. Using only the 5 eyewitness accounts from the preceding page your assignment is to **prove** the following statement:

**The Prehistoric people living in North America purposely altered their physical surroundings to better suit their needs.**

**Part I.** Each of the eyewitness accounts includes one or several pieces of evidence that will help you prove the above declaration. As a group re-read the eyewitness accounts and then decide how each statement might help your case. Record your conclusions on the chart below.

<b>Eyewitness #1</b>	<b>Evidence:</b>
<b>Eyewitness #2</b>	<b>Evidence:</b>
<b>Eyewitness #3</b>	<b>Evidence:</b>
<b>Eyewitness #4</b>	<b>Evidence:</b>
<b>Eyewitness #5</b>  (* Although it may not be obvious this account can help your case.)	<b>Evidence:</b>

**Part II.** Use the completed chart to construct a 1-2 paragraph **summary** outlining **how** and **why** Native Americans of the prehistoric period intentionally altered the environment.

## Legend of the Cedar Tree



Red cedar tree  
in Raleigh, NC  
(1929). Photo  
courtesy of AFA  
and Forest  
History Society

A long time ago when the Cherokee people were new upon the earth, they thought that life would be much better if there was never any night. They beseeched the Creator that it might be day all the time and that there would be no darkness.

The Creator heard their voices and made the night cease and it was day all the time. Soon the forest was thick with heavy growth. It became difficult to walk and to find the path. The people toiled in the gardens many long hours trying to keep the weeds pulled from among the corn and other food plants. It got hot, very hot, and continued that way day after long day. The people began to find it difficult to sleep and became short tempered and argued among themselves.

Not many days had passed before the people realized they had made a mistake and, once again, they beseeched the Creator. "Please," they said, "we have made a mistake in asking that it be day all the time. Now we think that it should be night all the time." The Creator paused at this new request and thought that perhaps the people may be right even though all things were created in twos... representing to us day and night, life and death, good and evil, times of plenty and those times of famine.

The Creator loved the people and decided to make it night all the time as they had asked. The day ceased and night fell upon the earth. Soon, the crops stopped growing and it became very cold. The people spent much of their time gathering wood for the fires. They could not see to hunt meat and with no crops growing, it was not long before the people were cold, weak, and very hungry. Many of the people died. Those that remained still living gathered once again to beseech the Creator. "Help us Creator," they cried! "We have made a terrible mistake. You had made the day and the night perfect, and as it should be, from the beginning. We ask that you forgive us and make the day and night as it was before."

Once again the Creator listened to the request of the people. The day and the night became as the people had asked, as it had been in the beginning. Each day was divided between light and darkness. The weather became more pleasant, and the crops began to grow again. Game was plentiful and the hunting was good. The people had plenty to eat and there was not much sickness. The people treated each other with compassion and respect. It was good to be alive. The people thanked the Creator for their life and for the food they had to eat.

The Creator accepted the gratitude of the people and was glad to see them smiling again. However, during the time of the long day of night, many of the people had died, and the Creator was sorry they had perished because of the night. The Creator placed their spirits in a newly created tree. This tree was named a-tsi-na tlu-gv {ah-see-na loo-guh} cedar tree. When you smell the aroma of the cedar tree or gaze upon it standing in the forest, remember that if you are Tsalagi Cherokee, you are looking upon your ancestor. Tradition holds that the wood of the cedar tree holds powerful protective spirits for the Cherokee. Many carry a small piece of cedar wood in their medicine bags worn around the neck. It is also placed above the entrances to the house and the needles are burned to protect against the entry of evil spirits.

## Worksheet 5: Understanding A Legend

**Part I:** In groups of 3-4 answer the 8 questions below (on the back of this paper or a piece of loose-leaf paper) about the “Legend of the Cedar Tree.”

### Just the Facts

1. What happened to the Earth and the Cherokee people when the Creator ended the night?
2. What happened to the Earth and the Cherokee people when the Creator ended the day?
3. How did the Creator express his sorrow and regret about the death of the Cherokee people?
4. What modern tradition is linked to the cedar tree?

### Beneath the Surface

5. Why do you think the Cherokee wanted the Creator to change their environment?
6. What is one lesson this legend attempts to teach?
7. Do you believe the legend more closely resembles the image of Native Americans as forest managers or as “ecologically invisible” inhabitants of the land? Give evidence to support your answer.
8. Based on the legend, what conclusions can you draw about how the Cherokee people felt about the environment?

**Part II:** Staying in your same groups you now need to **write** and **perform** your own legend. The focus of your legend should be an explanation of the origin of either a tree, plant, or animal from your state. Before writing the story, first use the library and/or the internet to research your tree, plant, or animal.

When writing your legend you should answer the following questions:

- a. How and why was the tree, plant, or animal created?
- b. What has the tree, plant, or animal meant to the people of your state?
- c. What lesson do you hope to teach?

Remember that legends are not based on historical fact, so when creating your own you need to use your imagination. Although creativity is required, keep in mind that your story should try to demonstrate the importance of the tree, plant, or animal to the environment and the people of your state. Once you have written your legend prepare a short skit for the class (3-5 minutes) in which you act out the important scenes of your story. Use props, music, or illustrations to accompany your performance.