

A SHORT ARCHAEOLOGICAL HISTORY OF KENTUCKY

For Kentucky Master Naturalists

This handout presents a brief, general description of the major eras in Kentucky archaeology: the **Indigenous Peoples Era** (when ancient Native peoples were the exclusive residents of the land that we now call Kentucky), the **Natives and Newcomers Era** (when Native peoples shared residency of Kentucky with Euro-american and African-American migrants), and the **European Era** (when Americans of European and African descent were Kentucky's major residents, and Native peoples made up the minority).

The information presented in this handout is excerpted and summarized from three sources:

The Archaeology of Kentucky - An Update (2 Volumes), edited by David Pollack. Kentucky Heritage Council, Frankfort, 2008.

Kentucky (Chapter 17) by A. Gwynn Henderson and David Pollack in *Native America: A State-by-State Historical Encyclopedia* edited by Daniel S. Murphree. Volume 1, pages 393-440 Greenwood Press, Santa Barbara, CA. 2012

Kentucky Before Boone – Poster Information sheet. Kentucky Heritage Council, Frankfort, 2005.

For more detailed information, readers are encouraged to access these resources directly and to access the other resources listed in the “For Further Reading” section in the Class 3 Syllabus.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES ERA (10,000 B.C.-A.D. 1539)

This is the longest era in Kentucky history, and it is recorded exclusively in the objects and sites (camps and villages, burial mounds and geometric earthworks) of Kentucky's rich Native American archaeological record. It begins when humans arrive in Kentucky, and ends when the first news of Europeans arrives. It is the era of exclusively Native American occupation, and it embraces hundreds, if not thousands, of different cultures, beliefs, languages, and technologies.

Archaeologists have learned that changes in diet and food gathering methods were linked to the development of new technologies. Through time, indigenous peoples made lighter and better weapons. Containers in which to prepare and store food also changed. Yet, even as they adopted new inventions, these ancient Kentuckians continued to use older technologies. For example, people used baskets even after they began making pottery.

Changes in diet and new inventions often affected the way people lived. Through time, a mobile lifestyle gave way to a settled way of life. Communities became larger and societies became more complex. Changes took place over hundreds of generations and thousands of years. But not all aspects of culture changed at the same rate. Sometimes change was so slow, living people were not aware of it.

Paleoindian Period (10,000-7000 B.C.)

Archaeologists think Paleoindian groups arrived in Kentucky by at least 14,000 years ago, at the end of the last Ice Age. At that time, Kentucky's climate was much colder and wetter than it is today. Perhaps people first came to Kentucky on the trail of the *megafauna*: mammoth, mastodon, or giant bison. These animals not only provided meat, but skins for shelter and clothing. Undoubtedly, Paleoindian people, who lived in small groups and moved frequently, also collected wild plant foods.

Paleoindians made well-crafted spear points and a variety of cutting, chopping, and scraping tools. Spears with distinctive "flutes" are unique to the Paleoindian period. It seems likely that Paleoindians also made tools from wood and animal bone, but these objects have not survived in the archaeological record. Little is known about their ritual or ceremonial life.

Archaic Period (7000-1000 B.C.)

By the Archaic period, the climate had become more like it is today. Climatic changes led to the extinction of the megafauna, so Archaic hunter-gatherer peoples hunted smaller game, such as deer, turkey, and rabbit. They also collected wild plants for food and medicine, and by the end of this period, they began to grow small gardens. Archaic groups made baskets for collecting, transporting and storing their food.

Although Archaic people tended to live for longer periods of time in base camps, they were still nomadic peoples, never staying in one place longer than a few months. They built their base camps in areas rich in a variety of natural resources. Sometimes they used rockshelters as smaller, seasonal camps.

Archaic people had a rich ceremonial life. In some graves, Archaic peoples placed objects made from marine shell or copper from the Great Lakes region. They acquired these items by trading with other groups.

During the Archaic period, people developed a spear-throwing device called an *atlatl*. Using an atlatl meant that a hunter's throw was longer, more powerful, and more accurate. Spear points, too, did not have to be as large to do the job. Archaic spear points varied in shape and size. Archaic peoples also made grooved axes and celts from hard stones, such as granite, mounted in wooden handles.

Woodland Period (1000 B.C. - A.D. 1000)

The Woodland period begins with the development of pottery by Native peoples. Although early pots were thick, heavy, and fragile jars, they had important advantages over baskets and skin bags. Vessels were used for cooking and could be made water-tight. As containers for storing surplus and seeds, these jars could be sealed up, keeping pests out. Woodland peoples continued to use baskets, gourds, and other containers, too.

During the Woodland period, Native peoples spent more time gardening. These hunter-gatherer-gardeners cultivated plants that became an important part of their diet: squash,

sunflower, goosefoot, and maygrass. Woodland peoples also hunted a variety of animals and collected wild plants. They began to build bigger houses and to live in larger communities.

Large earthen enclosures and the mounds the Woodland peoples built reflect the richness of their religious and ceremonial lives. They often held religious ceremonies within the earthen enclosures. They built conical earthen burial mounds, and added to them over several decades. Some people were buried in log tombs deep inside these mounds. At important events, Woodland people smoked tobacco, which they grew in their gardens. During the Woodland period, people also began to explore caves, and pecked turkey track *petroglyphs*—stone pictures—into sandstone.

Late in the Woodland period, Kentucky's Native peoples began to use the bow and small, true arrowheads, an improvement in weapons technology. They still used groundstone tools, especially when they processed nuts and seeds.

Indigenous Village Farmers Period (A.D. 1000-1539)

Village life revolved around the planting, growing, and harvesting of corn, beans and squash. For the Mississippian people of western and southern Kentucky and the Fort Ancient people of eastern and central Kentucky, corn and beans made up 60% of their diet. These Native hunter-gatherer-farmers used stone or bone hoes to work their agricultural fields.

People began to build rectangular houses and live year-round in large communities during this period. New pottery vessel forms—jars, bowls, plates, bottles, and colanders—were developed. Potters added handles to jars and attached human and animal effigies to some bowls and bottles. Leaders wore stylized figures engraved on shell *gorgets* (ornaments worn around the neck). Other religious practices included placing whole ceramic vessels with shell spoons, pipes, and shell necklaces in graves. Some people were buried in stone box graves.

In western and southern Kentucky, as many as 2,000 people may have lived in some Mississippian towns. Hereditary chiefs ruled these communities and lived in houses built on top of large flat-topped earthen platform mounds. Stockades protected some of these settlements. The Fort Ancient people of eastern and central Kentucky arranged their houses around a central plaza. Their circular villages, sometimes encircled by a palisade, held upwards of 500 inhabitants. For a short time, Fort Ancient people buried their dead in low earthen mounds located in the plaza. Fort Ancient chiefs were chosen based on their personal leadership qualities.

A.D. 1400-1450 was a watershed. For reasons that are still unknown, some Mississippian societies in extreme western Kentucky and surrounding states collapsed. However, Mississippian groups did not abandon their centers in the Wabash-Ohio River confluence region, south-central Kentucky, or southeastern Kentucky. Fewer, and larger, Fort Ancient villages occur at this time, made up of clusters of houses and associated cemeteries. Fort Ancient people engaged more often than before in long-distance trade and interaction with groups living outside the Ohio Valley.

NATIVES AND NEWCOMERS ERA (A.D. 1539-1775)

Information from new sources—documents such as maps, journals, and letters—joins archaeological information to tell Kentucky’s story during this era. This is the era when Native cultures and representatives of European nations and American colonials meet. It marks the end of an exclusively Native history and the beginning of a history shared with Europeans and Africans. It is the story of contact and conflict between different cultures, languages, technologies, beliefs, and world views.

Early Contact Period (A.D. 1539-1730)

For about the first 150 years of this period, Kentucky’s Native peoples were spared the effects of direct contact with Europeans. Mississippian people in western and southern Kentucky and Fort Ancient people of eastern and central Kentucky continued to pursue their respective hunter-gatherer-farmer lifestyles very much like their immediate ancestors.

Indirect impacts of the foreigners appear to have been experienced first within the realm of economics. They are reflected by marine shell ornaments and platform pipes possibly related to Calumet ceremonialism. Items made in Europe, like metal ornaments (beads, pendants) and very rarely, glass beads, also filtered into Kentucky through Native trade networks. French documents mention groups living upstream from the Falls of the Ohio in the late 1660s and early 1670s. Maps of the same period locate indigenous groups like the *Chaouanons* (Shawnee) in the middle Ohio Valley at this time.

In the later decades of this period (1680s to the 1730s), indirect foreign impacts brought disease and cultural disruption. The first smallpox pandemic probably began sometime around 1696-1700. It is possible that smallpox appeared in western Kentucky first, given the main travel artery the Mississippi River represented and given the proximity of French settlements and trading posts. Native people would have died in numbers: between 50 and 90 percent of the population. For this reason, it is difficult to identify the ethnic/linguistic affiliations of Kentucky’s village farming peoples at this time.

Perceived threats from the *Haudenosaunee* (Five Nations Iroquois) of New York, who were raiding in what is now Illinois and the Virginia Colony, could have compelled people to leave the region, too. Newly established European trading opportunities developing in Illinois, South Carolina, and eastern Pennsylvania may also have drawn inhabitants out of Kentucky.

Around the late 1720s to early 1730s, groups of Native peoples began to move into the Ohio River valley to establish villages. The Miami and Wyandott moved in from the north. The Shawnee, Delaware, and Iroquois, primarily Seneca (called Mingo), moved in from the East.

During the mid-1500s, Spaniards appeared in the Southeast, but not Kentucky. Over a century later, in the mid- to late 1600s, the French and the English appeared sporadically along Kentucky’s extreme western and eastern borders. There is no record of Europeans visiting or exploring inside Kentucky’s borders until after the 1730s.

Late Contact Period (1730-1775)

This period opens with resident Native hunter-gatherer-farmer groups and new Native arrivals from the East living in Kentucky as autonomous peoples. It brought overwhelming challenges to Native peoples. By the mid-1700s, only a handful of Native settlements existed in Kentucky, and after around 1760, Native peoples apparently did not occupy any villages in the state.

As colonial settlement exploded in central Kentucky in the 1770s, the Indian “presence” consisted of multi-tribal raiding parties of Native men. Kentucky was still the economic base from which Native people took the furs and deerskins they needed to trade with the Europeans. Living elsewhere did not mean they were relinquishing claim or control over the land. Colonial settlement required a response: accommodate and stay; resist by removing beyond the frontier; or resist and fight to drive the settlers out? The end was the same, regardless of the choice: land cession and removal.

Virginia’s western lands were still largely unexplored by Europeans at this time, but imperial agents seeking to claim territory for European nations soon arrived. They were followed closely by traders looking to exchange European goods for valuable skins and furs. Next the land speculators appeared, taking a measure of the land’s fitness for settlement. Finally the Virginia colonists/Kentucky pioneers arrived, intent on building new lives for themselves and agitating for the removal of Native people. The “Myth of the Dark and Bloody Ground”—that Native peoples never lived in Kentucky permanently but used it only for hunting—began during this period.

EUROPEAN ERA (1775-present)

This is the current era in Kentucky history. The quantities and kinds of documentary sources explode, especially after radio, television, and the internet developed. Added to maps, journals, and letters are deeds and lawsuits, books, paintings and photographs, video and audio tapes, and the archives that preserve them. Still, archaeological information remains important, especially since it holds the stories of people overlooked in the documents, like women, the enslaved, and children.

Rural communities grow and urban centers appear. Industries develop. Immigrants from all over the world join Kentucky’s Native American, European, and African-American residents.

Early European Settlement Period (1775-1820/1830)

Marked early by conflict between Native peoples and the British, by the end of this period, Europeans had claimed most of the land in Kentucky.

After Kentucky became a state in 1792, Euro-American settlers (and their enslaved African-Americans) established an infrastructure of new roads, and built new towns, often where Native villages had once stood. Counties were formed. Residents established a regional economic system that depended on major rivers to transport goods, a national banking system, and shipped farm produce to regional markets.

Multi-tribal raids into Kentucky continued after the Revolutionary War and lasted until nearly 1800. From 1795 to 1818, Native groups signed treaties and gave up any Indian claim to ancient Native homelands. With the passage, in 1830, of the federal government's "Indian Removal Act," American Indians living east of the Mississippi River were required to move west.

Antebellum Period (1820/1830-1861)

Kentucky experienced a great deal of growth at this time, a result of a highly productive agricultural economy. For much of the Antebellum period, Kentucky was the sixth most populous state in the union, and its political leaders played a greater role in national affairs than at any other time.

County seats grew in population as the countryside was fully settled by Euro-Americans and enslaved African-Americans, cleared of forests, and brought into productive agricultural use. The Bluegrass region was unique in that it contained the only counties where enslaved blacks outnumbered whites before the Civil War.

Civil War Period (1861-1865)

Although few major battles were fought in Kentucky during the Civil War, Union fortifications were established throughout the state. Kentucky was not affected by the war to the same degree as states to the south and east.

Postbellum Re-Adjustment and Industrialization Period (1865-1915)

Kentucky remained predominantly agricultural during this period, as the rest of the nation entered the industrial age. During the Reconstruction Era, the local agricultural labor system was restructured, and an effort was undertaken to build a railroad system that integrated Kentucky into the national economy. As a result of the railroad, by the end of this period, goods produced in Kentucky were sold in direct competition with those manufactured in distant regions.

Simultaneously, the demand for lumber and coal in the growing industrial centers to the east brought other changes to much of Kentucky, as did the rapid expansion of industries and commercial interests in local urban centers. The lumber and coal industries restructured the economies of eastern and western Kentucky, while urban industrial and commercial developments required a greater workforce, which led many Kentuckians to move from rural communities to the larger cities in search of jobs. The development of Kentucky's cities as industrial and regional commercial centers in the last half of the 19th century was due in large part to their location on the Ohio River. Due to the topography in eastern Kentucky, roads, housing, and coal processing facilities tended to be located in the few flat areas that were suitable for settlement. Even as the extractive industries expanded in eastern and western Kentucky and Kentucky urban centers grew, the state as a whole remained more rural and traditional than the rest of the nation. During this time, many farms began to grow tobacco, and the landscape around Lexington began to take on the appearance of the present-day horse farms.

Industrial and Commercial Consolidation Period (1915-1945)

Kentucky continued to lag behind the nation in economic development during this period. As with much of the South, the 1920s were a period of agricultural stagnation. The national prohibition on alcohol had a negative impact on the economy of central Kentucky, which was known for its bourbon. At the same time, the social issues of the 1920s, such as the antievolution Crusade, resulted in the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan in Kentucky.

The age of the automobile brought with it the construction of service stations, motels, tourist attractions, and garages, along with wider, realigned major roads that together gave both urban and rural Kentucky a new look. Many areas in eastern Kentucky, devastated by large-scale clear-cutting, came under federal government management in the 1930s and were incorporated into the Daniel Boone National Forest. In western Kentucky, federal recreational and flood protection projects and the development of Kentucky Lake, Barkley Lake, and the Tennessee Valley Authority's Land Between the Lakes Recreation Area displaced many residents.

World War II Period and Beyond (1945-present)

The archaeology of this period is still being written.