

# The First People of North Carolina

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The first people to inhabit the land that would become North Carolina were American Indians. The Indians have lived on this land for at least 12,000 years. They were here during the Ice Age, a time when now-extinct mammals such as the mammoth, giant bison, and mastodon still roamed parts of North America. If junior historians could use a time machine to visit these first people, they would find that the Indians lived in a land that was much different from the North Carolina we live in today. The climate was cooler and drier, and the environment had different types of trees and plants. Archaeologists call these oldest ancestors of the American Indians who still live here the Paleo-Indians.

American Indians were building communities and making history for thousands of years before Italian explorer Christopher Columbus reached the Western Hemisphere in 1492. The Spanish and other Europeans began visiting the southeastern Atlantic Coast soon after Columbus's travels. These visitors introduced diseases from Europe to the Native peoples along the coast, and epidemics spread to the interior of the Southeast, killing thousands of American Indians and, in the process, destroying tribes. Thus many Indians felt the impact of the Europeans before actually meeting any of them. After 1500, the native American Indians and Europeans and Africans from the Old World began to make history together here.

In the 1500s, Indians in what is now North Carolina directly affected European efforts to settle in the continental United States. The explorer Hernando de Soto entered the future North Carolina in 1540, becoming one of the first Europeans to meet Indians in the state's interior. De Soto's expedition was just passing through, but in early 1567, Captain Juan Pardo led a military expedition with 125 Spanish soldiers into the area. He and his men met with many American Indian chiefs. One village that Pardo visited was Joara (state archaeological site classification 31Bk22) in present-day Burke County near Morganton. At Joara, Pardo's soldiers built Fort San Juan, the very first "European settlement in the interior of what is now the United States," according to historian Charles Hudson in his recent book on the Pardo expeditions. The Spanish soldiers at Fort San Juan violated the customs of Joara, causing the Indians to attack and destroy Fort San Juan. So North Carolina Indians stopped the first effort at European settlement within the continental United States. The site of Joara and Fort San Juan can be visited today. (Access [www.warren-wilson.edu/~arch/fs2004](http://www.warren-wilson.edu/~arch/fs2004) for information.)

By 1500, American Indians in the North Carolina region practiced sophisticated agriculture that included growing crops such as corn, beans, and many varieties of squash, as well as hunting, fishing, and gathering. Extensive Native trade networks connected the Indians of the Coastal Plain, Piedmont, and Mountain regions to one

another and to Indian peoples farther away. By the time of Pardo's explorations, many of the historic tribes that Tar Heels know today had created their own communities, including the Tutelo, Saponi, Occaneechi, Keyauwee, Eno, Cheraw, Waxhaw, Waccamaw, Sugeree, Sissipahaw, Shakori, Catawba, Cape Fear, Neuse River, Coree, Pamlico, Hatteras, Machapunga, Weapemeoc, Secotan, Moratac, Chowanoke, Croatan, Meherrin, Tuscarora, and Cherokee. Nearly three dozen tribes have lived in North Carolina at one time or another. Many of them disappeared due to warfare, dislocation, disease, and absorption into other tribes. Today, the state officially recognizes eight tribes, and North Carolina has the largest American Indian population of any state east of the Mississippi River. Modern American Indians dress, eat, and live in much the same ways as other North Carolinians.

The arrivals of de Soto and Pardo began the interaction between the native American Indians and the new settlers from Europe and Africa. Together all of them created, and continue to create, a truly New World.

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