

About The Development of Indigenous Cultures in Louisiana

POVERTY POINT

Poverty Point refers to both a specific site and the wider culture that emerged across Louisiana. The Poverty Point people did not have a written language, so the Indigenous name of the site is unknown. Instead, the site and culture get their name from the plantation later built on the site in West Carroll Parish, in the upper northeast corner of Louisiana.

The Poverty Point people were mound builders. The Poverty Point site features a large plaza in the center, surrounded by six concentric, semicircular earthen ridges. The ridges are as high as six feet tall (1.8 m) and are three-quarters of a mile (1,200 m) apart at the outer rim. Some thirty million basket loads, weighing roughly fifty pounds (22 kg) each, were required to build the ridges. The site features six mounds that served myriad purposes to the Poverty Point culture. Mound A, or the Bird Mound, is the tallest at more than seventy feet (21 m). Mound C, a rectangular mound with a five-foot-thick (1.5 m) domed top, has sixteen distinct layers. Mound D was built much later, in 700 CE, when people returned to the site.

Archaeologists think the Poverty Point culture developed long-distance trade routes. Poverty Point artifacts have been found along the Mississippi River and in Florida, Georgia, Missouri, and Tennessee. At the same time, many Poverty Point tools were made with stones native to the Great Lakes and Appalachia, indicating that they acquired raw materials from other cultures.

Like the Clovis and Folsom cultures before it, the Poverty Point culture developed its own distinctive technologies. They made spearpoints and other objects like hoes, drill bits, bowls, and beads from stone. They also took advantage of the local soil and clay to form figurines and cooking balls. The balls were heated over a fire before being used to cook fish or meat.

The Poverty Point culture disappeared around 1100 BCE; however, other Indigenous groups intermittently occupied the Poverty Point site beginning around 700 CE.

OTHER LOUISIANA CULTURES

The Tchefuncte Culture

The Tchefuncte culture existed in the lower Mississippi River valley and along the coast of southeastern Louisiana from 800 BCE to 1 CE. The Tchefuncte also lived in areas of present-day Arkansas, Mississippi,

and Texas. Like Poverty Point, the Indigenous name for this culture is unknown. Tchefuncte is the name of a river in Louisiana and comes from the Choctaw word for a type of chestnut.

Much of what archaeologists know about the Tchefuncte comes from middens, or areas where garbage from settlements builds up over time. Like the Poverty Point culture, the Tchefuncte hunted, gathered, fished, and lived in the same place year-round. They engaged in less trade than the Poverty Point culture and built much smaller mounds. Mounds were just two to fifteen feet (0.6 to 4.6 m) in height and used for burials. The Tchefuncte formed egalitarian communities of about one hundred people. Communities would meet at a central site for ceremonial purposes throughout the year.

While the Tchefuncte did use some stone tools, most tools they used for hunting and fishing were made from bone. The Tchefuncte are best known for their significant use of pottery in daily life. Thousands of pottery fragments have been uncovered at Tchefuncte sites. The pottery was made without a temper, or a material used to help strengthen clay during the firing process, making it extremely fragile. Tchefuncte pottery was highly decorated using a variety of techniques, suggesting it held more than a functional purpose.

The Marksville Culture

The Marksville culture emerged when the Tchefuncte culture began feeling the influence of the Hopewell tradition. It thrived in Louisiana from around 1 to 400 CE. The culture is named for an archaeological site at Marksville in Avoyelles Parish. Like Poverty Point, the site includes large mounds. The mounds were aligned with the sun, moon, and stars and were important ceremonial places that marked times of the year.

Like the Poverty Point and Tchefuncte cultures, the Marksville people were hunter-gatherers who relied on a variety of plants and animals to survive. Their tools were very similar to those used by the Tchefuncte, and evidence suggests the creation and use of woven mats and baskets.

Like the Tchefuncte, the Marksville people were prolific potters, though their work was much more durable than that of their predecessors. Marksville pottery, and the culture at large, was influenced by the Hopewell culture that existed in the Ohio and Illinois River valleys between 200 BCE and 500 CE. Marksville pottery featured geometric designs and animal shapes, particularly birds.

Marksville archaeological sites are relatively small, making it difficult to ascertain information about daily life. Burial mounds indicate some social stratification or higher status among specific individuals and clans. Marksville burials were influenced by the Hopewell culture. Bodies were either laid flat or positioned with knees tucked close to the chest; in some cases, the bones of an individual were bound in a bundle and buried. Like the Hopewell people, they interred bodies with items like jewelry, animal effigies, clay figures, and crystals.

The Troyville Culture

Named for an archaeological site in Catahoula Parish, the Troyville culture emerged in the lower Mississippi River valley floodplain around 400 CE and continued to occupy this area and areas around the Red River valley and Yazoo River through 700 CE. Few Troyville sites have been excavated, and many sites are muddied by later cultures that existed in the same area.

Compared to the Marksville culture, the Troyville culture experienced significant population growth, a conclusion supported by the abundance of Troyville sites relative to Marksville artifacts. Like preceding

cultures, Troyville people were hunter-gathers. The Troyville people used the bow and arrow, a technology that emerged around 500 CE and became widely popular in North America. The bow and arrow led to the production of smaller points that weighed less.

The Troyville culture constructed numerous mounds, including the second-tallest mound in the United States. Many Troyville mounds featured large platforms that may have been used for ceremonies or performances. Communal burial practices employed by the Troyville reflect an egalitarian society. Unlike Marksville burials, Troyville burials included few mortuary items.

The Troyville people created pottery that they frequently decorated with black, red, and white paints made from mineral pigments. Troyville pottery shows many similarities to pottery made by Florida panhandle cultures, though it is unclear to archaeologists where the aesthetic began or if it developed simultaneously in both areas.

The Coles Creek Culture

The Coles Creek culture emerged in the lower Mississippi River valley following the Troyville culture. From 700 to 1200 CE, the Coles Creek culture experienced rapid population growth. As a result, there are more Coles Creek sites in Louisiana than sites of preceding cultures. At its peak, the Coles Creek culture included Louisiana and parts of Mississippi and Arkansas. Coles Creek is named for a creek that runs by the archaeological site in Jefferson County, Mississippi.

Coles Creek sites are all organized in the same way. They feature a large central plaza flanked by four mounds, one in each of the cardinal directions. The plaza was likely used for sports and ceremonies, while the flat-topped mounds were used for viewing purposes and as platforms for the homes of rulers and other elites. Many Coles Creek sites were constructed upon former Troyville sites.

Coles Creek people continued to hunt, gather, and fish, but they began small-scale farming, adding some seed crops and a little corn to their diets. Early Coles Creek communities were family-based. Settlement patterns shifted over time as the population density around mound sites grew. Some people were buried in the mounds, indicating some sort of special rank, but most people were buried off the mounds in community cemeteries. As in the Troyville culture, the burial of mortuary items was uncommon, indicating an egalitarian form of governance.

The Coles Creek culture continued to refine arrowheads for use with a bow. Like the Tchefuncte, Marksville, and Troyville cultures, the Coles Creek culture produced pottery. Coles Creek pottery has a similar aesthetic to Troyville pottery, although its decoration was limited to the rim of the vessel. Around 1150 CE, some Coles Creek people in northeastern Louisiana began interacting with the Mississippian people of the middle Mississippi River basin.

The Caddo Culture

The Caddo culture existed in northwestern Louisiana around the Red River floodplain and in neighboring areas in Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. The name Caddo comes from the Kadohadacho Confederacy that existed in Louisiana at the time the first Europeans arrived in the region. Caddo artifacts date back to the 900s CE, and the culture persisted to about 1700 CE. The Caddo were sedentary. They gathered wild plants, including berries and seeds, and hunted deer and other, smaller animals, like rabbits and turkeys. The Caddo also practiced agriculture and grew corn, squash, and beans. Like the Poverty Point people, the Caddo engaged in extensive trade.

The Caddo built platform mounds on top of which the elites lived and governed. Sometimes elites were buried in these mounds, but the Caddo also constructed burial mounds for the burial of other elites. The Caddo placed exquisite goods made of ceramic, stone, wood, copper, and shells around the graves of important people. Commoners were buried without such items. This indicates that Caddo society was hierarchical. The Caddo population once centered on large mound sites, but eventually settlement patterns shifted to village life, likely in order to grow corn. Large mound sites continued to serve ceremonial significance, and some villages built their own, smaller mounds.

The Caddo produced a variety of stone tools, like polished axes and arrowheads. They also produced two distinctive forms of pottery. Fine ware was characterized by thin walls and ornate designs. It was likely used for serving food and for ceremonial purposes. Utilitarian ware was sturdier, less decorative, and used for cooking.

In 1835, the Louisiana Caddo ceded their land to the U.S. government and relocated to Texas, where other Caddo communities had already moved. Threats of violence from white settlers forced them to move to a reservation in Oklahoma in 1859. Caddo bands united in 1874 to form a single Caddo nation. Caddo County, Oklahoma, continues to be the seat of the Caddo Nation. Today, the Caddo people work diligently to revive and perpetuate their distinctive culture and way of life.

The Mississippian Culture

The Mississippian culture emerged and spread from Cahokia, a massive mound site located outside of present-day St. Louis, Missouri, between 1050 and 1700 CE. The Mississippians were very influential on neighboring contemporary cultures. As a result, 1200 to 1700 CE is known as the Mississippian period. Sites in Louisiana include those that were occupied by Mississippians who had migrated to the region as well as those that were influenced by their culture to varying degrees, such as the Plaquemine and Caddo sites.

Two defining characteristics of Mississippian culture are their pottery and their dependence on corn agriculture. Mississippian pottery was tempered with crushed shells. This was a departure from other prehistoric methods of strengthening clay during the firing process. Vessels were decorated with cosmological symbols that reveal the Mississippians' belief system. Cultivating corn was also central to the Mississippian way of life. Intensive corn agriculture provided a surplus that could support laborers, elites, religious specialists, and craft specialists. Because not everyone had to farm to survive, corn agriculture freed people from farm labor. Corn became a staple in many prehistoric diets, though not to a significant extent in Louisiana.

The Plaquemine Culture

The Plaquemine culture existed in the lower Mississippi River valley, stretching as far north as the Arkansas River. It emerged from the earlier Coles Creek culture around 1200 CE and lasted until 1700 CE. The name Plaquemine comes from a town in West Baton Rouge Parish. Medora, the first Plaquemine site to be excavated, features two mounds, one ten feet (3 m) high and the other five feet (1.5 m). The mounds were built in stages and likely featured a temple. Other Plaquemine sites feature mounds; however, their construction varies.

The Plaquemine culture produced some stone tools and also relied on bones, shells, and other nearby materials. Artifacts found at Plaquemine sites indicate contact with the Mississippian culture. Plaquemine pottery was very similar to Coles Creek pottery. Plaquemine people built sedentary villages

and large ceremonial centers and likely hunted and gathered for survival. While the Plaquemine people grew corn, it is unclear whether it was a major part of their diet. Little is known about the Plaquemine social structure.

European Exploration

The first European explorers to set foot in Louisiana were those of the Hernando de Soto expedition in the 1540s CE. They encountered the Plaquemine, Caddo, and Mississippian peoples. De Soto died in 1542, and the remainder of the expedition eventually made their way back to present-day Mexico. By the early 1600s CE, Europeans had settled along the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts, but they did not start settling the land that is now Louisiana until the 1700s.

Native peoples became involved in the European trade with the French, Spanish, and English, trading Indigenous slaves and animal skins for guns, ammunition, and other European-made goods. This trade in enslaved Indigenous people resulted in increased warfare between Native communities. Disease also swept through the South, leaving many dead in its wake. The result was the shattering of Native communities and a decline in the Indigenous population.

Still, some of the Native peoples, cultures, and traditions survived, and the lives of Indigenous peoples became intertwined with those of Europeans and Africans, resulting in new ways of life for all. Native peoples rebuilt their lives and became the Native American nations known today as the Creek, the Caddo, the Cherokee, the Choctaw, the Seminole, the Catawba, and others.