

Early Man in Louisiana

We generally think of Indians as living in the days of the Wild West, chasing buffalo across the prairie on an Indian pony. We seldom envision Louisiana as the home of the Indians, but long before the first European set foot on Louisiana soil, it was their home.

The ancestors of the first Indians arrived in North America approximately 30,000 years ago. Scientists theorize that these nomadic people crossed an ice bridge linking Asia and North America at the Bering Straits. Over thousands of years, descendants of these people spread throughout North America.

Scientists called archeologists provided the information on the pre-historic people to us. Archeologists carefully study sites of Indian villages to determine how these people lived (Figure 3.). In Louisiana these sites fall into one of three categories: 1) midden site – which is similar to a trash dump, 2) mounds – which were either ceremonial or burial, and 3) village sites.

The earliest Indian culture we have identified in Louisiana is the Paleo-culture. These people lived in Louisiana between 10,000 B. C. and 6,000 B.C. Their village sites have been found from the hill country of central Louisiana to the salt domes of Avery Island. Louisiana's environment and climate were much different at that time than they are today. Louisiana was feeling the effects of the Ice Age; sea level was lower, which meant the coast of Louisiana extended further into the Gulf of Mexico. Louisiana was part of the range of buffalo, mastodon, and mammoth.

Around 5,000 B.C. the early Indians of Louisiana underwent a cultural change. This group is identified as the Meso- or Archaic-Indian culture. These people were a more advanced culture than the Paleo-Indians. The Archaic-Indians fashioned tools such as knives, axes, and scrapers. They tamed and domesticated the dog, and although they were nomadic, they did not range as far as earlier groups. The Archaic Indians witnessed a drastic change in Louisiana's environment. The end of the Ice Age brought about a rise in temperature and in seal level. Large deltas formed along Louisiana's coastline, and made Louisiana a lush grassland with mild climates.

The best known of the pre-historic Indians belonged to the Neo-Indian culture. These people live in Louisiana from 2,000 B.C. to 1,600 A.D. The Poverty Point culture lived on the west bank of Bayou Macon in West Carroll Parish near Epps, Louisiana. The Poverty Point Indians were an advanced culture of about 5,000 people. This population made Poverty Point one of the largest population centers in

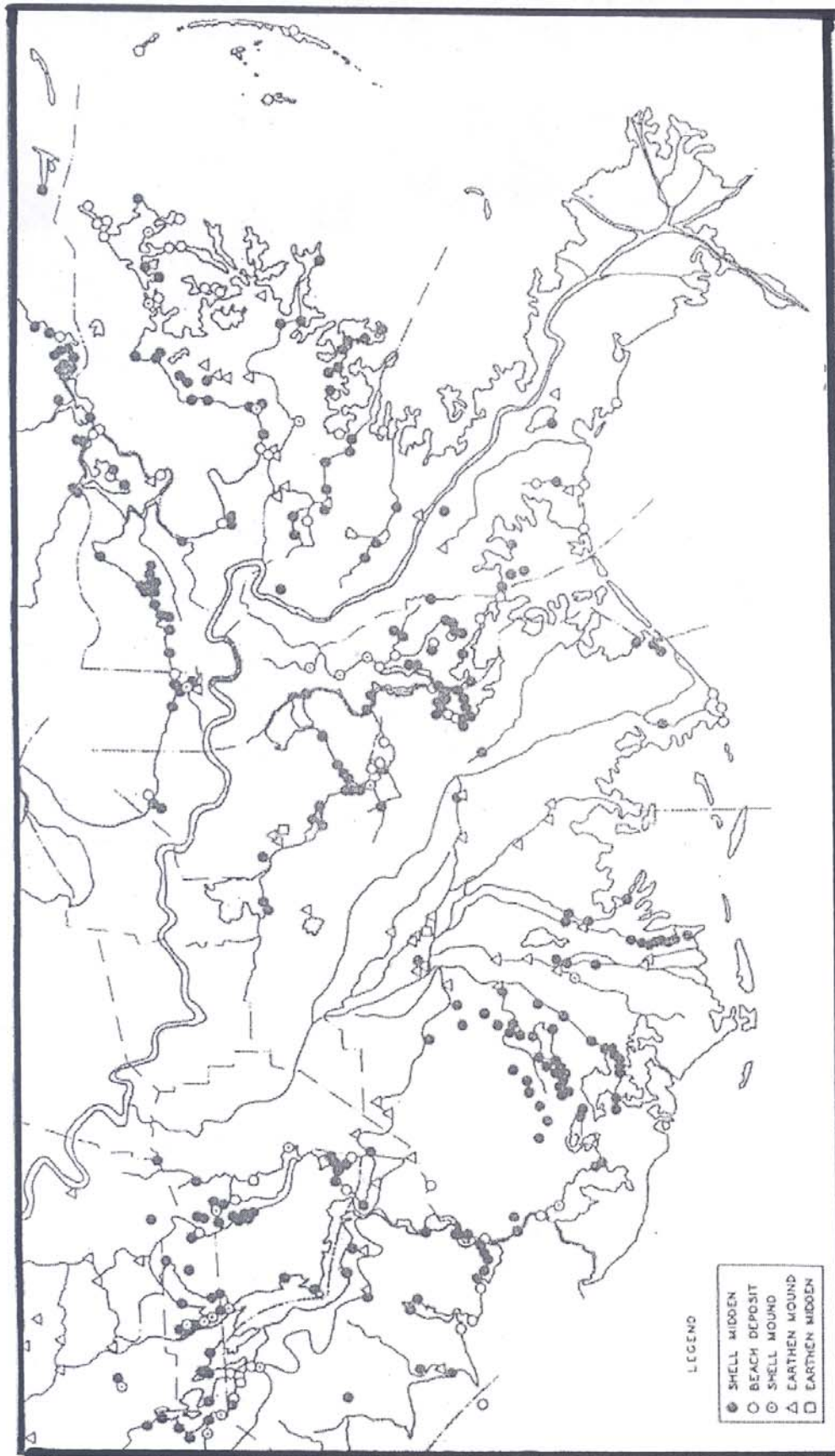


Figure 3. Map of Distribution Prehistoric Archaeological Sites in the Eastern Portion of the Mississippi River Deltaic Plain (from McIntire 1958)

North America at this time. The Poverty Point Indians built a total of 11.2 miles of ridges and terraces in geometrical designs. These ridges and terraces were used for ceremonial as well as practical purposes. Huts built on the terraces would be protected from the spring flood. ([La. Cultural](#)– to order books and Ed. resources).

At the time of the arrival of the first Europeans, Louisiana had a population of between 12,000 to 15,000 Indians. The major language group of South Central Louisiana was the Chitimacha (Indian meaning; “those having cooking vessels”). The Chitimacha Indians lived in the area from Bayou Teche to the Mississippi River. The Chitimacha Indians flattened the foreheads of their male children to enhance their appearance. Most of the men wore long hair, and there was an occasional mention of some warriors wearing *scalplock*, or a Mohawk. Males wore breechcloth and had extensive tattooing of the face, body, arms and legs. Women wore short skirts and their hair was worn long, usually braided. They were ranked into two groups, nobles and commoners. They believed in marrying someone from their own group. A noble man or woman who married a commoner forfeited their higher status.

Today the Chitimacha are the only Louisiana Indians living on their ancestral grounds. There are about 300 Chitimacha Indians living on a reservation near Charenton in St. Mary Parish.

The early Lafourche Indians adapted well to living in coastal Louisiana. They made their huts from palmetto leaves lashed to wooden frames. The Indians also built dugout canoes called “piragua” by the Spanish --- today we call them pirogues. The pirogues were built from cottonwood or cypress trees. The Indians would girdle a band of bark from the base of the tree. After the tree died, they would build a small fire at the base of the tree to fell the tree. Another fire was built to cut the log the length needed for the boat. Hot coals were placed on the log, and as the wood charred, the Indians would scrape away the ash to create a dugout.

Two tribes of Chitimacha Indians lived in what is now Lafourche Parish. Bayou Lafourche was commonly known as the “River of the Chitimachas.” Before 1732, the Washa (Ouacha– means “hunting place”) had several villages along Bayou Lafourche. The villages were located at Supreme in Assumption Parish, Thibodaux, Raceland, and at Lockport. Today, Washa villages are being excavated in back of Gheens on Golden Ranch Plantation. There is a Bayou Washa in Jefferson Parish, between Barataria and Cheniere Caminada according to the U.S. Census of 1880. The history of the Washa Indians shows that their relationship with the French was a violent one.

For more detailed information on the events that ensued between the French and Washa see www.biloxi-chitimacha.com/history.htm and www.dickshovel.com/chi.html.

The second tribe of the Chitimacha was called the Chawasha (Chouacha—means “raccoon place”). They lived near Lake Salavador and Larose. Armed black slaves destroyed their village in the 1730’s. Gov. Perrier had instructed them to destroy the Indian village. After this time nothing else is mentioned about them.

Using the lush and isolated areas of Bayou Lafourche, the Washa and Chawasha tried to sustain their natural way of life. Both of these tribes made a living by hunting, fishing, and gathering. (Note: Bienville makes a reference to these two tribes upon his arrival and subsequent trips to Bayou Lafourche.)

Another major Indian group is the Houmas (meaning “red”) Indians, who inhabited Terrebonne and the southern part of Lafourche Parish. Originally, east-central Mississippi was part of the Chakchiuma (meaning “red crawfish”). By 1682 the Houma had separated from the Chakchiuma and were living inland from the east bank of the Mississippi River just below the present border of Mississippi and Louisiana. The first encounter of the Houma Indians with Europeans was by LaSalle in 1682. In the year 1700, a bout with dysentery reduced their numbers substantially. They were attacked by the Tunica in 1708 and resettled just above New Orleans. In 1722, they were forced to move due to the pressure of white settlements. By 1730 epidemics introduced by the Europeans brought down the once numerous people to just four hundred strong.

Their homes were wattle and daub construction mound type dwellings, which were built into the hillsides. They were arranged in a circular pattern of two rows with a large public area in the middle. Their bodies were extensively tattooed including the face (www.sdsd.essortment.com/houmaindiansna_rmv.htm).

During the next 50 years they gradually drifted south into Terrebonne and Lafourche Parishes southwest of New Orleans (www.dickshovel.com/hou.html). Today, the Houma Indians have petitioned for federal recognition and have over 11,000 members on their tribal role in Lafourche and Terrebonne Parishes. They have annual tribal festivals, which include their sacred art of dancing.

The Indians of the Lafourche region have contributed much to the history and culture of the area, from area names to food. The next time you think about Indians, you may want to envision a cypress swamp with a pirogue gliding through its waters.

