

BEFORE THE WESTERN RESERVE: AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL HISTORY OF NORTHEAST OHIO

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When Moses Cleaveland landed at the mouth of the Cuyahoga River in 1796, he had no idea that the human history of the land he was sent to survey was unbelievably ancient. He was also probably unaware that the few Native Americans that he met in the newly christened Western Reserve were relative newcomers. They were unrelated to the original inhabitants of the land whose final descendants had disappeared just a few generations earlier.

This then, is a story of the first people of northeast Ohio. People whose true names are unknown, but whose deeds are reflected in the artifacts left behind. This is a history that only archaeologists can read, but one that all northeast Ohioans should know.

The landscape of northeast Ohio is a relict of the great Late Pleistocene Ice Age. The rugged terrain, which begins just south and east of Cleveland, is known as the Glaciated Allegheny Plateau, an ice-scoured portion of the western foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. This land was once covered in thick Beech-Maple forest and small lakes and bogs left behind by the glaciers. The steepness of these "heights" is set off by the nearly flat Lake Erie Plain that hugs the south shore of Lake Erie from Buffalo to beyond Toledo. At the time of white settlement, the mixed oak forest of this plain was interrupted by coastal marshes, small prairies, and wide river estuaries. Just west of the Cuyahoga Valley, the land flattens out to become the Central Till Plain, a rolling terrain of glacial soils still covered today in spots by native beech-oak-hickory woodland.

All of these landscapes, with their varying but productive ecosystems, come together in the Greater Cleveland area and make northeast Ohio one of the most geographically diverse, but environmentally rich, landscapes in Ohio. Into this ecological mosaic ventured the first human inhabitants. They, and those who came after, occupied our state for more than 10 millennia before contact with Europeans.

THE FIRST PEOPLE

Archaeological research in northeast Ohio over the last century sheds considerable light on the various prehistoric or 'pre-Contact' cultures that inhabited our region. The earliest known colonists are called 'Paleoindians' ("Paleo" meaning ancient) or more appropriately 'Paleoamericans' since their true relationship to more recent Native Americans remains uncertain. These earliest peoples lived in Ohio from about 13,000 to 11,000 years ago and left behind their finely flaked flint spear tips (called 'fluted' points), as well as stone hide-scrapers and knives, in dozens of locations across



northeast Ohio.

In most cases these ancient sites are under modern farm fields where more than a century of agriculture has left behind little more than scatters of artifacts. The geographic distributions of these fluted point sites reveal that the Paleoindians traveled great distances during the year and lived in small, dispersed groups of related families. The sourcing of various flints (also called 'cherts') that were routinely selected for making tools help us to trace the movements of these groups to and from quarries near Coshocton and Newark, Ohio

From 1990 to 1993, Museum archaeologists excavated the remains of a large Paleoindian



Fluted points and scrapers from Paleo Crossing.

campsite at the Paleo Crossing site in Medina County. This site, covering more than four acres, was a central meeting place for several small hunting bands. Here, very likely, caribou hunts were planned, marriages arranged, ceremonies performed, and information exchanged. An unusually large amount of an Indiana chert (called Wyandotte) from a source more than 350 miles away, was found at the Paleo Crossing site. This abundance of 'exotic' stone could mean that the inhabitants of this 13,000 year old site originated from the lower Ohio River Valley, making them the first colonists of northeast Ohio. A much larger congregation of Paleoindian bands—using good Ohio flints—took place at the 22 acre Nobles Pond site in Stark County.

We have little direct evidence of what the Paleoindians hunted, because no identifiable bone remains were recovered from Paleo Crossing or Nobles Pond. Based on the large size of their stone tools, however, we suspect that the Paleoindians killed and butchered sizable game like caribou and possibly mammoth or mastodon. All of these animals were late Ice Age inhabitants of northeast Ohio and lived alongside humans in forests dominated by spruce, fir, and pine trees.



Flint tools and bone points from Sheridan Cave.

Intriguing evidence of Paleoindian life in the late Ice Age is preserved at the Sheridan Cave site in Wyandot County, Ohio. In this once deeply buried cave, Paleoindian artifacts were found alongside the remains of now-extinct creatures like the flat-headed peccary, giant beaver, stag-moose, and giant short-faced bear. Among the more important traces of the human occupation of this cave are a complete fluted point and flint hide-scraper as well as two extremely rare bone spear points.

ARCHAIC HUNTERS AND GATHERERS

The Paleoindians' stone tools, and presumably their very nomadic hunting lifeway, disappeared with the Ice Age by 10,000 years ago. At about that time, we see the appearance of new stone tools such as large chert knives and spear points with large side- and corner-notches. Many of these distinctive artifacts are made from the same kinds of high-grade cherts that the Paleoindians coveted. This indicates that these first cultures of the 'Archaic' period also traveled great distances during the year.

By about 7,000 years ago, the Archaic period people of northeast Ohio added groundstone tools such as mortars and pestles to their technology. These new tools show that native peoples of the area were becoming more and more dependent on wild plant foods like hickory nuts, acorns, walnuts, seeds, and even tubers and roots that needed to be crushed, ground, and tenderized before being eaten. Also added to the Archaic toolkit was the distinctive grooved axe which was probably used for the construction of wood-framed dwellings and even dugout boats.

The remains of such houses are long gone. One important improvement in the technology of the middle Archaic period was the use of the wooden spear-thrower called the *atlatl*. Although the remains of wooden atlatls have not been found in northeast Ohio, the existence of this useful hunting device is revealed by the discovery of ground slate weights called *bannerstones* that were attached to the spear-thrower shafts.

During the last few millennia of the Archaic period, from about 5,000 to 3,000 years ago, the native inhabitants of northeast Ohio became fully accustomed to the beech-maple forests that we know today. In addition, an increase in the sheer number of late Archaic sites signals that population was rapidly increasing. This 'settling in' process is reflected in a dramatic increase in the number of stone grinding implements and chert 'hardware' such as projectile points, knives, drills, scrapers, and flake tools. Bone hooks, harpoon heads, and other kinds of fishing tackle, as well as notched stone net weights, show that fishing in the rivers and in Lake Erie became an important pastime in the late Archaic period. Freshwater clams were most likely another important food by this time; however, telltale shell residue is rarely preserved on sites of this still-great age.



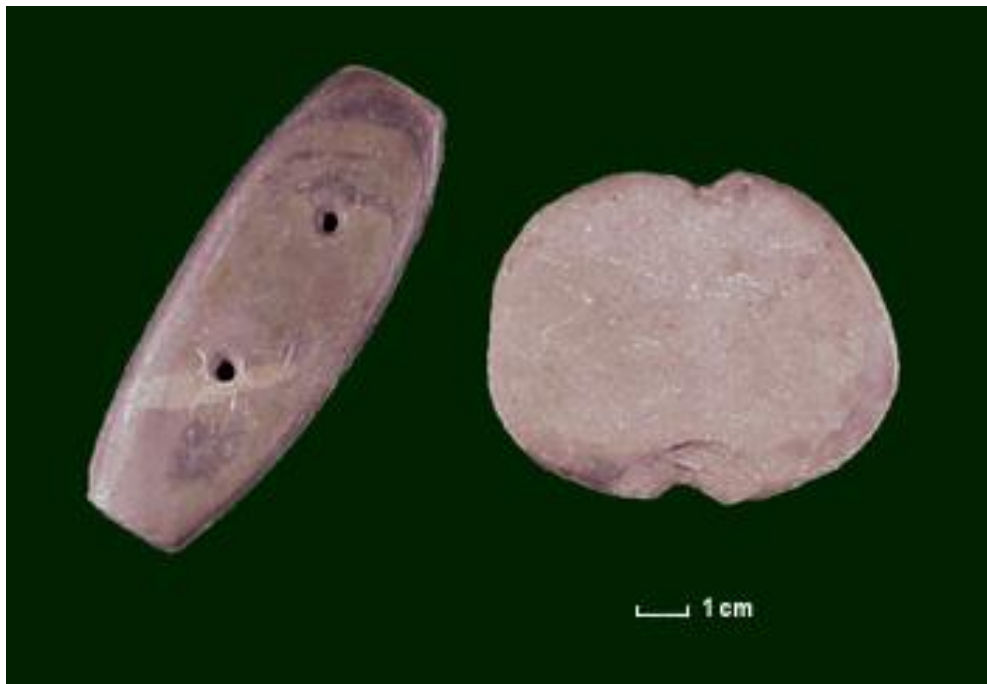
Large side-notched points from Lake County.



Ringler dugout soon after discovery in 1976.



Archaic slate bannerstones (atlatl weights).



Archaic slate gorget (l) and stone netsinker (r).

WOODLAND POTTERS

Around 3,500 years ago in northeast Ohio, Native American groups experimented with new technological innovations such as stone and ceramic cooking pots and began to form larger, more substantial seasonal camps. On sites dating to the early decades of this 'Woodland' period, archaeologists find fragments of crude steatite or "soapstone" vessels and thick fragments of the first pottery to be used in the region. Both the steatite and ceramic containers were fashioned in the shape of large flower pots with flat bottoms and out-sloping sides. The stone pots still show the deep carving marks made by prehistoric craftsmen who most likely did not live in northeast Ohio but did their work close to the natural sources of steatite in southeastern Pennsylvania or Maryland. In contrast, the heavy sherds of this early Woodland pottery were made from a mixture of local river clays and crushed granite rocks that were dropped in northeast Ohio by the retreating glaciers at the end of the Ice Age. Amazingly, these early pots still bear the impressions of woven fabrics on their inside and outside walls. These impressions are our only traces of what must to have been a very sophisticated industry in weaving baskets, cordage, mats, and textiles. This method of texturing the surface of pottery vessels was done while the clay was still wet, prior to firing in a shallow pit rather than a kiln. The use of stone and clay pots allowed direct cooking (most likely boiling) of foods over a fire, a great improvement over the hot-rock boiling methods that were undoubtedly used during the Archaic period. These durable containers also kept precious foods safe from burrowing rodents and other vermin.



Steatite vessel fragment from Lake County.



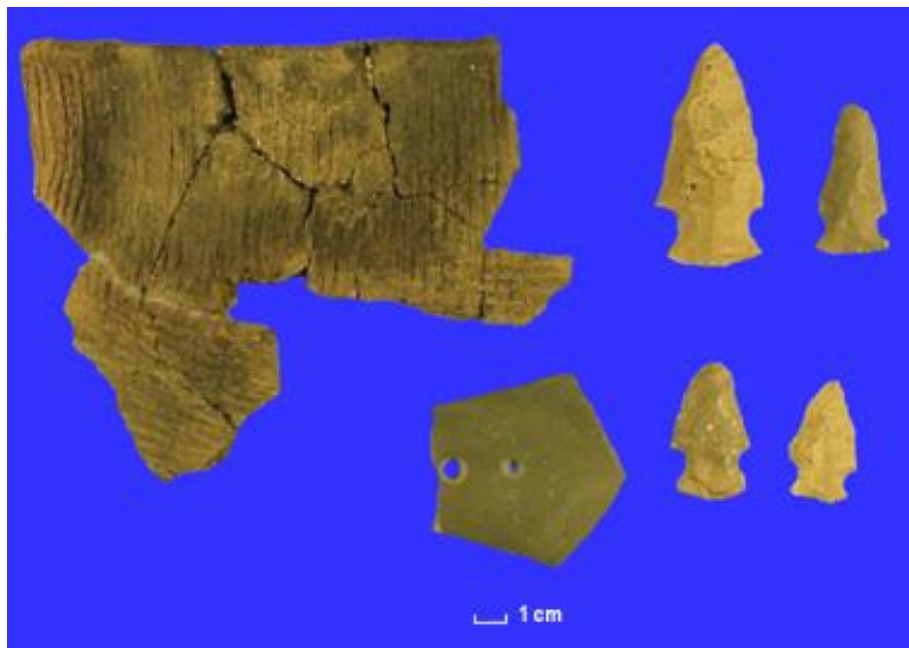
1848 map of Burrell Fort in Lorain County.

and little evidence that people lived inside the walls. Other sites reveal more in the way of living debris and long-term residence. Today, it appears that the functions of these hilltop enclosures varied dramatically through time and across northern Ohio, with some sites used solely as ceremonial enclosures, much like the larger versions constructed by Adena and Hopewell culture societies in southern Ohio. Other enclosures, such as Seaman's Fort in Erie County or Leimbach Fort in Lorain County, provide rich evidence of Woodland settlements that include small circular to oval-shaped dwellings, cooking and food storage pits, human burials, and thick midden (trash)

deposits containing Woodland pottery, stemmed projectile points, and bone tools.

At some hilltop enclosure sites, small, low mounds were constructed by the Woodland inhabitants. These mounds are usually found outside the enclosure walls, and those that were opened, usually in the 1800's, contained the remains of just a few individuals and sparse grave offerings or none at all. In general, Woodland period mounds in northeast Ohio are much smaller and less elaborate than their Adena and Hopewell (i.e., early to middle Woodland period) counterparts in southern Ohio. It also seems that these small mounds were constructed well into the late decades of the Woodland period and even later.

Many other middle to late Woodland period campsites or small villages without mounds have been documented in northeast Ohio, but few have been extensively excavated. These sites show little evidence of cultural influences from the large Ohio Hopewell culture ceremonial centers around Chillicothe in southern Ohio. At only a few places, like the Szalay site in the Cuyahoga River Valley or the Esch mound complex near Huron Ohio, do substantial numbers of genuine Hopewell artifacts, or good local reproductions, turn up. Instead, at places like the Huntington Road site in Lake County, inhabitants of the northeast Ohio settlements carried on the traditional hunting, gathering, and fishing lifeway without participating much in the Hopewell long distance exchange network or elaborate burial ceremonialism seen in the south.



Pottery, gorget and points from Huntington Road site.

Before the Woodland period ended about 1,000 years ago, there occurred an important change in the form and size of flint projectile points. The normally large and widely notched points of the middle Woodland period made way for much smaller, thinner, and finely notched points as well as the first un-notched, triangular points. This shift from relatively large and heavy to smaller and lighter points reveals a changeover from the exclusive use of the spear propelled by an atlatl to the first use of the bow and arrow.

LATE PREHISTORIC FARMERS AND VILLAGERS

Between 1,000 and 800 years ago in northeast Ohio, native populations began to cluster into much more permanent settlements located along almost every large river valley that drains into Lake Erie. By 800 years ago, these settlements became permanent villages that housed dozens of families that lived together from at least late spring to early fall and in some cases year-round. The archaeological remains of these related, Late Prehistoric period societies are collectively known as the *Whittlesey* cultural tradition (named after the nineteenth century Ohio scientist and antiquarian, Charles Whittlesey). Over the last century, most of the archaeological work done in this area has focused on Whittlesey tradition sites, mostly because they are highly conspicuous and rich in artifacts.

The remains of Whittlesey tradition village sites are typically found on high ridge-tops with steep bluff edges overlooking the major river valleys. Numerous excavations at large and once well preserved sites such as Tuttle Hill, Reeves, South Park, and Fairport Harbor reveal distinct patterns of soil stains (called 'post molds') from rectangular and circular house walls; fire-reddened hearths or fire-pits; roasting pits containing abundant fire-cracked rock; and deep storage pits. Found in the fill of many of these pits are the remains of their distinctively decorated pottery, triangular arrow points, and other debris of village life. The charred remains of maize (corn), beans, and squash mark the Whittlesey tradition as the first fully agricultural society to develop in northeast Ohio. Abundant bone remains of mammals, birds, and fish, as well as freshwater clam shells, tells us that many of the traditional wild foods were not abandoned when maize cultivation began.



Artist's rendering of the South Park village at A.D. 1600.

Unlike at least some of their Woodland predecessors, the hilltop settlements of the Whittlesey Tradition were apparently selected, at least in part, for defense. A few of the more extensively excavated Whittlesey sites reveal the remains of log stockades in addition to earthen walls and ditches. Also, some of the burial remains found during excavations contain chert arrow points and traces of violent wounds which undoubtedly resulted from some form of native warfare. In addition to the need for defendable landforms, villages were deliberately located on well-drained, sandy soils of the glacial beach ridges of Lake Erie. These landforms often contain natural springs and serve as routes of traditional trail systems.

All this came to an end by 350 years ago when the last remaining tribal groups of the Whittlesey tradition abandoned northeast Ohio forever. Why they left and where they went remain mysteries. All we know is that at this time the Five Nations Iroquois in central New York carried out devastating raids on many of their neighbors as part of the so-called "Beaver Wars." The Whittlesey people were most likely among the victims of these wide-ranging conflicts. The earliest historical accounts note that by 1650, northern Ohio was devoid of native inhabitants and served as the primary 'war road' of Iroquoian raiders. Not until the mid-1700's were other refugee Native American groups such as the Wyandot, Ottawa, and Mingo able to resettle parts of northern Ohio. But they too were gone a mere century later, forced to cede their lands to the United States and move across the Mississippi River. In this way, the 13,000 year-long native occupation of what became the Western Reserve ended forever.



Fragment of Whittlesey Tradition cooking pot.