

THE PALIMPSEST

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Ancient Indians of Iowa

Conflicts, migrations, and economic changes mark the sequence of events during the thousands of years of Indian development in Iowa. It is a complicated story and much of it remains buried in the ground waiting to be uncovered by the archeologist's trowel and screen. Viewed broadly, the details of life in these ancient times can be grouped into some general developments or turning points in the archeological record. In some situations the introduction of technological, economic, or religious ideas spread rapidly across the Midwest changing the Indians' way of life wherever they were encountered and accepted.

When were North America and South America first settled by the Indians? Archeologists are not yet certain because the evidence is not secure. Generally a date of somewhere around 20,000 years B.C. appears to be a reasonable estimate for the initial migrations of Indians into the American continents. Some migrations may have occurred even earlier.

Paleo-Indian Hunters

The earliest Indians and their descendants are termed Paleo-Indians. Many of these men hunted large animals which are now extinct such as horses, camels, giant bison, giant sloths, woolly elephants, and similar fauna in addition to smaller animals. The retreat of the continental ice changed the habitat and range of these large animals which had become specialized, probably oversized, and too dependent upon an ice age environment. One by one the great Pleistocene animal species became extinct for reasons not yet known. Changes in climate and fauna created a situation of transition in almost every aspect of the Indian's way of life. The great continental ice sheet retreated from northern Iowa around 11,000 B.C. The oldest known evidence of Paleo-Indians within our state probably dates from about 10,000 to 8,000 B.C.

Archaic Hunters and Gatherers

For thousands of years after even the memory of the ice age had been forgotten, men inhabiting the prairies and wooded river valleys of Iowa made their living by hunting bison and other animals, and supplemented it by collecting roots, seeds, and berries. Gradually more and more dependence was placed upon seed gathering in the basically hunting economy. The Archaic sequence in Iowa lasted from about 8,000 to 1,000 B.C. A number of interesting Archaic cultures flourished

within the state. In the western counties around 6,500 B.C., one ancient group hunted a species of bison now extinct. Excavations have revealed the details of how these bison were trapped and killed. More recent Archaic cultures in western Iowa hunted the modern species of bison and, judging from their seed grinders of stone, spent more time gathering food.

Woodland Mound Builders

Woodland cultures, characterized by the introduction of religious mound cults and pottery, continued to be primarily oriented towards a food technology consisting of hunting and gathering. There is some evidence that populations increased in Iowa during Middle Woodland times. Habitation sites are larger and burial mounds are large, complex, and very common. The increase in archeological remains, dating from Middle Woodland times, is a phenomenon present in archeological sequences throughout the Midwest. It is frequently suggested that the explanation for the increase in site size and complexity can be related to the introduction of primitive agriculture. Although this is a reasonable conjecture, clear-cut evidence is not available from Iowa.

Woodland religious cults spread widely through the Midwest and some of these seem related to a relatively secure subsistence economy. One group of related burial cults is termed Hopewell after a type site in Ohio where it was first discovered by

archeologists. Hopewell religion emphasized death and presumably life after death. Religious expression was concentrated in ceremonialism, elaborate burials, and rich ornamentation of the dead. Another major cult, which developed somewhat later in Wisconsin, is named Effigy Mound after the characteristic shape of large and elaborate mounds built to resemble bears, beavers, birds, and other objects. The spread of these two religions into Iowa marks a new orientation creating in the minds of the Indians a greater security and a greater emphasis upon ceremonial development.

Agricultural Tribes

Most of the local cultures were driven into refuge areas or absorbed by groups of numerous and well organized tribes. The domination of Iowa by these agricultural communities marks an important population increase.

The ultimate cultural origins of these invaders appear to be remotely derived from the independent civilizations in Mexico. Either by diffusion or direct settlements, some fundamental ideas of city life spread northward from Mexico into country adjacent to the Lower Mississippi River. Two major cultural traditions represented in Iowa are the Upper Mississippi and the Missouri patterns.

The Mississippi pattern developed its most complex cultural expression in the central Mississippi Valley. It is characterized in that area by

extremely large temple mounds, large fortified towns, and systematic agriculture. These Mississippi cultures were more successful than those around them. Eventually they expanded and occupied 2,000 miles of river territory as far north as St. Louis and beyond. These communities did not become initially established in eastern Iowa because the prairies formed an ecological barrier to their way of life. However, the adjustment of combining buffalo hunting with systematic agricultural practices was eventually made. It led to a spectacular cultural development around 1300 A.D. The archeological name for this culture is Oneota and includes a series of related tribes who spread over eight states in the upper Midwest.

The Missouri River was occupied by another branch of agriculturists. They settled in western Iowa and adjoining states without meeting effective opposition, and some of the local tribes may have eventually taken over the agricultural pattern of the plains Indians. The settlement of western Iowa by these groups began about 900 A.D. and lasted until about 1550 A.D. One major group, variously known as Glenwood or Nebraska culture, built pithouses in southwestern Iowa. A second group, termed Mill Creek culture, built villages in northwest Iowa, some of which may have been fortified.

Thus, along both major rivers forming the eastern and western boundaries of Iowa were gate-

ways to new cultural developments. The eastern Oneota Indians eventually expanded west and, in historic times, were known as the Ioway, giving their name, through the Iowa River, to the state.

Failure to Adjust to European Diseases

The dispersion and extinction of the Indians under the impact of western civilization marks the final turning point of the archeological sequence. On the whole the Indian tribes did not effectively resist the European penetration and occupation of North America. The military failure of the Indian tribes to hold off the European migrations is one of the most striking events in the history of western civilization. The victory was only partly due to the technological superiority of the European invaders. The Indian defeat was largely caused by social disintegration and their inadequate biological resistance to some common diseases.

Social disintegration in the face of growing European dominance was partly responsible for the ultimate aboriginal defeat. The Indians were in no mood to unite against a common foe. They were divided into a multitude of small tribes, having no common language, and bearing ancient grudges and hatreds of rival tribes.

The major tribes frequently became satellites of rival colonial powers, and with respect to the fur trade, one tribe fought another in an extension of European rivalries. Throughout the Americas, the Indians were divided and then conquered.

Subjugation does not imply population decline, and the startling fact of the elimination of one tribe after another must largely be attributed to the Indian's biological susceptibility to introduced diseases. During the long separation of the New World and Old World populations, subtle biological differences developed in resistance to certain diseases. In the Old World, smallpox, influenza, chicken pox, perhaps syphilis, and respiratory infections such as tuberculosis had long been present and the populations had developed relative immunity to the more deleterious effects of them. These diseases struck down the Indians with great violence, since they had developed no partial immunity. Desolate, deserted villages, as the result of smallpox or respiratory ailments, were not an uncommon sight to the early traders and explorers in North America. They, sometimes, reported whole villages of dead and dying with only a few recovered survivors.

The Number of Indians in Iowa

It is easy to gain a false impression of the ultimate population success of the agricultural tribes in Iowa. Although marked increases in population are evident, the final result did not create a really heavy concentration of Indians within the state. The French explorers noted the number of Indians and their estimates range from under 1,000 to 8,000 within the Ioway-Oto combined tribes. If these figures are representative for the

terminal prehistoric period for every seven to fifty-six square miles of land there was only one Indian. The answer to this remarkably low over-all density is that the Indians were never able to utilize the prairie except for occasional hunting trips, and the population clusters lay scattered along the major streams. The Indians never managed to effectively control and exploit all their environmental area within the state.

Dispersion of Iowa Tribes	1,700 to 1,850 A.D.
Prehistoric Oneota-Ioway	1,300 to 1,700 A.D.
Glenwood, Mill Creek Cultures	900 to 1,550 A.D.
Woodland Cultures	1,000 B.C. to 1,300 A.D.
Archaic Cultures	8,000 to 1,000 B.C.
Paleo-Indians	10,000 to 8,000 B.C.