

# A Brief History of Ross County, Ohio

## The Pre-Contact Peoples of Ross County

People have lived in Ross County for thousands of years. Indigenous pre-contact cultures (cultures that lived here before contact with Europeans) and historic Native American tribes, such as the Shawnee, made Ross County their home long before settlers arrived. The earliest peoples who lived here did not leave written records, but we have learned about them through the artifacts and the monumental earthworks they left behind. Below, we briefly outline what we have about the First People of Ohio who lived during the major pre-contact time periods: the Paleo; the Archaic; the Woodland, which includes the Adena and Hopewell Periods; and the Late Pre-Contact Period.<sup>1,2</sup>

Many different cultures lived during each of these periods. Some were probably descendants of other cultures, and some may have moved in from other areas. Dr. Bradley T. Lepper has written, “To ask, ‘What happened to the Paleoindians?’ is like asking, ‘What happened to the “covered wagon people” or the “Model T Ford people.” They didn’t mysteriously vanish; they became something else.”<sup>3</sup>

Over time, people adapted the methods they used to produce tools, pottery, and other artifacts, which resulted in distinct artifact styles. Archaeologists use these style differences, especially in projectile points, to differentiate one period from another.

Archaeologists and collectors use the term “projectile point” or “point,” instead of “arrowhead,” to describe most stone points because bows and arrows didn’t come into use in what is now the United States until about 800 years ago. These terms are also used because we don’t know whether the points were used as spears, darts, knives, or scrapers. Indigenous craftsmen made points from stones, such as flint, which they shaped, sharpened, and attached (hafted) to wooden handles to create tools for hunting, processing meat and hides, and other uses

We also don’t know how the pre-contact ancestors of Native Americans referred to themselves and their cultures. While it’s not ideal, archaeologists have often named a newly identified culture after the owner of the land or the name of the location where the discovery was made.

### **The First Inhabitants of the Scioto River Valley: The Paleo Period (12,000–8000 BCE)<sup>4</sup>**

The story of people in Ohio begins toward the end of the Wisconsin Glaciation, the most recent of the Ice Age glaciations. It covered large portions of North America, including much of present-day Ohio and nearly two-thirds of Ross County. The Wisconsin Glacier reached its maximum coverage in Ross County about 25,000 years ago and had retreated from Ohio by about 12,000 years ago. Across North America, as plants and animals moved into the barren post-glacial landscape, humans followed. People may have been drawn to the Scioto River

Valley by its abundant natural resources, such as elk, caribou, bison, other large mammals, including mammoths and mastodons, and plants for food, clothing, and shelter; and flint outcrops for stone tools. Archaeologists think that people began to move into the Scioto River Valley as early as 13,000 years ago.

The earliest peoples in Ross County are known as the Clovis people, named for the site near Clovis, New Mexico, where archaeologists first identified their distinctive spear points in association with Ice Age mammoths and mastodons. Clovis points are characterized by their lance-like shape and channels, or “flutes,” that run down one or both sides of the stone base for attaching a handle. Archaeologists have found fluted Paleo points, knives, and scrapers throughout North America and in nearly all of Ohio’s 88 counties.

During the Paleo Period, people survived as hunters and gatherers. They lived a nomadic lifestyle in small groups of 40 to 60 people, hunting animals and gathering edible plants. They may have remained in one place for just days, weeks, or months, depending on the availability of food sources.<sup>5</sup>

By the end of the Paleo Period, as mammoths and mastodons became extinct, hunters relied more heavily upon bison, elk, caribou, bear, and a variety of smaller game animals.

### **Warmer Climates Bring Diversity: The Archaic Period (9000–1000 BCE)**

Over time, the climate in Ohio became warmer and drier. The archeological record suggests that these climatic changes caused Scioto River Valley inhabitants to alter their lifestyles. The Archaic Period, which covers about 8,000 years, is characterized by an increase in population and the use of a greater variety of stone tools.

Indigenous peoples continued to live as hunters and gatherers throughout the Archaic Period. Families moved seasonally and set up small, temporary camps. Hunters concentrated on hunting deer, bear, rabbits, birds, and other small game. Forests and grasslands provided a variety of plant foods, such as nuts, berries, and seeds, as well as materials for homes and tools.

By the end of the Archaic Period, the environment of the Scioto River Valley was much like it is today. Indigenous peoples became more settled. Archaeologists have found evidence for extended family groups and areas of repeated occupancy along creeks and rivers.

Archaic Period cultures developed unique side- and corner-notched and stemmed points, which were designed so that points could be attached to a handle (hafted). They also produced ground and polished tools, such as pestles and axes, from granite and other hardstone materials. Hunters used a spear-throwing tool, called an atlatl, which they could use with great force and accuracy. A typical toolkit also included tools made from antlers and stones (hammerstones) for knapping flint; flint scrapers and serrated knives; and bone tools and sewing needles.

### **The First Farmers of the Scioto River Valley: The Woodland Period (1000 BCE–1000 CE)**

The Woodland Period is characterized by the domestication of nutritious crops, including sunflowers, squash, goosefoot, and cultivated grasses such as maygrass and little barley. During this time, the Indigenous Peoples developed Ohio's earliest pottery and constructed the first earthworks and mounds. They also began to settle into communities and take up gardening. Archaeologists divide this period into the Early, Middle, and Late Woodland.

**Early Woodland (1000–200 BCE):** The archaeological evidence from this period, also called the Adena Period, suggests that people lived in small, dispersed settlements of one to five houses. Most of our understanding of their houses comes from mortuary structures found beneath Adena burial mounds. These buildings were circular, double-posted wood constructions, 10 to 45 feet in diameter, and covered by hides, bark, or mats.

During the Adena Period, people built tall, conical burial mounds, which in some places were encircled by earthen walls. Mounds range from a few feet to more than 70 feet tall and 300 feet in diameter.<sup>6,7</sup> These mounds and earthworks may also have been used for rituals and ceremonies. The Story Mound in Chillicothe is an example of Adena Period burial mounds.

This period was named for the 1911 archaeological excavation of a 24-foot-tall burial mound on the grounds of Thomas Worthington's Ross County home, Adena. Like so many others, this mound has since destroyed.

**Middle Woodland (200 BCE–500 CE):** This is the Hopewell Period. During this time, generations of people built monumental mounds and large, complex geometric earthworks, which have been named World Heritage Sites. This period has been described as "one of the greatest explosions of cultural expressions known in ancient North America."<sup>8</sup>

Archeologists named this period after the 1891–1892 excavation of the mounds on Mordecai Hopewell's farm, now known as the Hopewell Mound Group. Here, an earthen wall, more than two miles long and as high as six feet tall, once enclosed more than 110 acres and 29 burial mounds, including the largest of all known Hopewell burial mounds.<sup>9</sup> Other Hopewell Period earthworks, including those in Ross County, incorporated massive walls that formed squares, circles, octagons, and other geometric forms, and enclosed hundreds of acres. They also included wooden structures, though none of the structures within the enclosures were homes.

The Indigenous Peoples who built these earthworks understood geometry, engineering, and astronomical observations. As with medieval cathedrals, the construction of the mounds and earthworks required planning for large-scale coordination of labor and resources. These earthen complexes served as ceremonial sites, though some were also burial mounds, for celebrations and rituals that may have drawn people from hundreds of miles away, perhaps on pilgrimages. The objects buried in the mounds—including items made of obsidian from the Yellowstone area, shells from the Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico, and copper from Lake Superior—indicate an extensive cultural exchange.

Many earthworks' walls, mounds, and gateways align precisely with the Sun's annual cycle, the solstices, and the Moon's complex 18.6-year cycle, called the lunar standstill.<sup>10</sup> The squares, circles, and octagons that make up the complexes were built with the same techniques and the same standard unit of measurement across multiple sites that spread across more than 100 miles.

In 2023, the United Nations' organization, UNESCO, acknowledged these earthworks for their "outstanding value to humanity" when it inscribed a group of eight Hopewell sites as a UNESCO World Heritage site, known collectively as the Hopewell Ceremonial Earthworks. Five of these are in Ross County: the [Mound City Group](#), the [Hopewell Mound Group](#), [Hopeton Earthworks](#), [Seip Earthworks](#), and [High Banks Works](#).<sup>11</sup>

Archaeological excavations suggest that throughout this period, people lived in small, scattered hamlets where they tended gardens and gathered plants, hunted and fished, and came together to work on their large ceremonial sites. For everyday use, hunters developed distinctive corner-notched points and unique one-sided bladelets that craftsmen made from flint cores. Hopewell craftsmen prized the Vanport flint outcrops at [Flint Ridge](#) in Licking County, Ohio, which they used to create their most prized artifacts.

**Late Woodland (500–1000 CE):** During this period, Indigenous cultures did not construct mounds or earthen complexes; however, they did use the Hopewell mounds for their own burials. They were becoming farmers and moved around less, lived in larger communities, and cultivated more crops, including, by the end of the period, maize.

By 1200 CE, the bow and arrow had begun to supplement the atlatl for hunting, and, as a result, during the Late Woodland period, hunters started making smaller, thinner, triangular points for their arrows.

**Late Pre-Contact Period (1000–1600 CE):** In the Late Pre-Contact Period, the ancestors of Native Americans built rectangular homes around an open area in larger, more permanent settlements; they protected some with a wooden fence or stockade. During this period, people grew maize, beans, and squash—the three sisters of agriculture—and continued to hunt, fish, and gather plants for food.

Communities moved every 10 to 15 years as their homes became uninhabitable and they depleted the soil and supply of game. In the Late Pre-Contact Period, tool kits included hammerstones and other flint-knapping tools; tools made from deer and turkey bones, such as hooks and needles; and hoes made from freshwater mussel shells and other materials for cultivating crops.

## Ross County 1600 to 1800

In the early 1600s, Late Pre-Contact peoples were no longer living in the Ohio River Valley,<sup>12</sup> and the Shawnee, a woodland Algonquin-speaking tribe, had moved in and were living in large

farming communities.<sup>13</sup> In the 1670s to 1680s, the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) drove out the Shawnee and all other tribes to secure the land for their hunting territory for the European fur trade. The Shawnee, with their allies the Delaware and Wyandotte, returned to the Ohio River Valley in the 1730s, including along the Scioto River.<sup>14,15</sup>

Shawnee villages usually included a large council house, for religious ceremonies and other meetings, and bark-covered longhouses where families lived during the summer. Villages were located near their fields where women cultivated maize and other food plants. Women also gathered plants for food and other uses. Men hunted and served as warriors. In the fall, extended families moved to their hunting camps.<sup>16</sup>

The name “Chillicothe” comes from the Shawnee word *cha-la-gaw-tha*, which means “principal town” and refers to the home of the principal leader. As leaders changed, so did the location of the principal town. Curiously, there was never a *cha-la-gaw-tha* in Chillicothe. There were *cha-la-gaw-thas* nearby, including in the Hopeton area, north of Chillicothe; in Frankfort; and south of Circleville near Westfall. Shawnee also established a center in Piqua, north of Ross County, and three miles north of Xenia, known as Old Chillicothe and now home to the [Great Council State Park](#).<sup>17</sup>

Along with Native American tribes, the French and British claimed territories west of the Appalachians, south of Lake Erie, and north of the Ohio River, called the Ohio Country. What followed was a mixture of trade, co-existence, and violence between Native American tribes, the British, the French, and settlers. Ross County was part of the French territory of Louisiana until the French ceded their claim to the British in 1763 at the end of the French and Indian War. The British Government restricted colonial Americans from moving west of the Appalachians, reserving the Ohio Country for Native American tribes, but settlers continued to push into the area and pressure the Native American tribes to move west. As the Shawnee leader, Hokolewskwa (Chief Cornstalk), said in 1775, “We are often inclined to believe that there is no resting place for us and that your Intentions were to deprive us entirely of our whole Country.”<sup>18</sup>

After the American Revolution and the lifting of restrictions by the new United States government, settler movement into the Ohio Country increased. Several states claimed sections of the Ohio Country, but the states ceded most of their land to the new federal government. These lands became part of the Northwest Territory. Connecticut and Virginia reserved parts of their claim to compensate their Revolutionary War veterans. Virginia reserved land between the Scioto and Little Miami rivers—the Virginia Military District—for their veterans. In 1790, Nathaniel Massie was appointed as a surveyor of the district. Over the next 10 years, he oversaw the survey of 750,000 acres and became a major land speculator. Among his claims was land between the Scioto River and Paint Creek, where he planned to establish a town, which became Chillicothe.<sup>19</sup>

In the Ohio River Valley, violence between the Native Americans and settlers continued until the Battle of Fallen Timbers in 1794 and the Treaty of Greenville, which followed in 1795. Under the

terms of the treaty, the Shawnee and other Native American tribes ceded two-thirds of Ohio to the United States and moved out of the Ohio River Valley.

While the Treaty of Greenville was still being negotiated, Massie and his surveying party attacked a camp of Shawnee at Reeves' Crossing near the present Ross County village of Bainbridge. This was the last fight between settlers and Native Americans in Ross County.

After the War of 1812 and the death of Tecumseh, the Shawnee and other Native American tribes signed a treaty with the U.S. government that left them with only a few small reservations in Ohio. The Indian Removal Act of 1830 forced the remaining survivors to move hundreds of miles from their ancestral homes in Ohio to Kansas and Oklahoma.

Today, in the monumental mounds and earthworks across Ross County, we can see remnants of the creative and innovative Indigenous Peoples who lived here for hundreds of years, and we can find their artifacts buried in the soil that sustained their cultures for thousands of years. These were the First Families of Ohio. Their history is our history.

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<sup>1</sup> Lepper, B. *Ohio's Indigenous History is Part of Everyone's History*. (2021, Oct 25). Ohio History Connection. <https://www.ohiohistory.org/ohios-indigenous-history-is-part-of-everyones-history/>.

<sup>2</sup> NRCS East Region *Projectile Point Identification Guide*. USDA, Natural Resources Conservation Service. [https://efotg.sc.egov.usda.gov/references/public/DE/Cultural\\_Resources\\_Point\\_Guide.pdf](https://efotg.sc.egov.usda.gov/references/public/DE/Cultural_Resources_Point_Guide.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Lepper, BT. *Ohio Archaeology: An Illustrated Chronicle of Ohio's Ancient American Indian Cultures*. Orange Frazer Press. Wilmington, OH. 2005.

<sup>4</sup> National Park Service (NPS). *Ohio's Prehistoric Past: Hopewell Culture National Historical Park*. (2021, July 22). <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/ohio-s-prehistoric-past.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> Anderson TG and Schoen B, ed. *Settling Ohio: First Peoples and Beyond*. Ohio University Press, 2023.

<sup>6</sup> *Ohio's Prehistoric Peoples*. What's the Point? Ohio Public Library Information Network. Ohio History Connection. <https://www.point.oplin.org/people>

<sup>7</sup> NPS. *Ohio's Prehistoric Past*: <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/ohio-s-prehistoric-past.htm>

<sup>8</sup> Lepper, BT. *Ohio Archaeology*. 2005.

<sup>9</sup> NPS. (2024, July 10). *Hopewell Mound Group*. World Renowned Sacred Spaces - A Place for Reflection in the Past and Today. <https://www.nps.gov/hocu/learn/historyculture/hopewell-mound-group.htm>

<sup>10</sup> *Hopewell Ceremonial Earthworks. Nomination to the World Heritage List*. (2022). World Heritage Convention. UNESCO. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1689/documents/>

<sup>11</sup> UNESCO. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1689/documents/>

<sup>12</sup> *Chillicothe History*. City of Chillicothe. [https://www.chillicotheoh.gov/our\\_community/history.php](https://www.chillicotheoh.gov/our_community/history.php)

<sup>13</sup> Anderson T & Schoen B, ed. *Settling Ohio. First Peoples and Beyond*. Ohio University Press; 2023.

<sup>14</sup> Feight, AL. *Lower Shawnee Town*. Scioto Historical. <https://sciotohistorical.org/items/show/35>

<sup>15</sup> The Absentee Shawnee Tribe of Indians of Oklahoma History. <https://www.astribe.com/about-us>

<sup>16</sup> Eastern Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma. *History. About the Eastern Shawnee Tribe*. <https://www.estoo-nsn.gov/history>

<sup>17</sup> *Chillicothe, Ohio*. Ohio History Central. Ohio History Connection. [https://web.archive.org/web/20201130081125/https://ohiohistorycentral.org/w/Chillicothe,\\_Ohio](https://web.archive.org/web/20201130081125/https://ohiohistorycentral.org/w/Chillicothe,_Ohio)

<sup>18</sup> *Cornstalk (Hokoleskwa)*. Ohio Department of Natural Resources. <https://ohiodnr.gov/go-and-do/see-the-sights/historic-places/great-council/explore-more-cornstalk>

<sup>19</sup> Wallis, J. (2016, July 26). *Highland, other counties came from Virginia Military District*. The Times-Gazette. <https://www.timesgazette.com/2016/07/26/highland-other-counties-came-from-virginia-military-district/>