

The Ancient Ones

We are not the first people to live in this region. Long before European travelers entered Missouri, people were here, living out their lives. For thousands of years cultures flourished, declined, and then rose again. This legacy of the ancient ones is mostly lost to us today. Materials from the archeological record give us only the faintest hint of the richness of their spirit, the depth of their culture. But the study of Missouri's archeological past is essential. In the ancient past, we can find perspective on our own era. We are not the first to tread this ground we call Missouri.

Have you ever thought about the past? I don't mean the past like yesterday or last week, I mean the past like thousands of years ago. Well, today we're going to take a look at Missouri's archeological past, and it goes a long way back. C'mon!

This is Miller Cave. Archeologists tell us that people used to call this place home. It was used as a habitation for a long period of time—a long time ago. Nice house, huh? A room with a view...c'mon. This - look at this! Careful, it's wet. Dr. Richard Edging, is an archeologist who works with the United States army corps of engineers. Since Miller Cave is located on the property of Ft. Leonard Wood near Waynesville, Missouri, it's the Army's job, and Dr. Edging's to take care of this archeological site. Let's listen in....

Miller Cave is special because it's a cave site and it's unique because it has the complete history, or prehistory of the fort all in one site. And what I mean by that, the earliest people that came into this river valley was about seven thousand BC, we have evidence from that; we also have evidence from the end of the sequence, around AD 1400, right before the time of Columbus. So it's a very unique site in the fact that we have a complete sequence from top to bottom in this cave. It's also unique because it was dug in the 1920's by the Smithsonian and the St. Louis Academy of Science, and so we get a real interesting look at how archeology was done in the 1920's, we have a report from that era, and we can compare how we do things with the St. Louis Academy of Science and Gerald Falk who was the excavator at that time.

Most of this series deals with events that have taken place within the past three hundred years, but people have lived in this area called Missouri for at least 11,000 years. Okay, let's look at it this way, if every inch on this tape measure represents 100 years, then the past 300 years, the time traditionally discussed in a historical record, is about this long. In this unit, we're discussing the archeological record, the total amount of time people have lived in this area, that's more than 11,000 years.

We've got a lot of ground to cover! In order to discuss such a large period of time, archeologists dealing with Missouri pre-history have divided the ancient past into four periods: the Paleo-Indian, the Archaic, the Woodland and the Mississippian. While each of these periods have certain defining characteristics, it's important to remember that these periods were developed by archeologists, to help us order this vast expanse of time. People living back then didn't think of themselves as Woodland people or Mississippian people and the things we use to define the periods, like the development of pottery or large-scale agriculture, didn't pop up overnight. They occurred gradually, over hundreds of years.

The study of archeological sites and facts gives us a glimpse of the past. But it's a very incomplete record. What we know about these ancient peoples is based on what's been preserved over time. There's a lot we don't know.

Eleven thousand years ago, things were a lot different around here. Glacial ice still covered much of North America. And huge creatures like mastodons and mammoths roamed this area we call Missouri. People were here too. How do we know? Archeologists have found projectile points directly associated with mastodon bones right here in Missouri, at a place called Mastodon State Park. So we know that people

hunted, or scavenged these ancient animals, but we don't know much more than that. A few stone artifacts are all that have been preserved from this early era.

We know a bit more about people living in what archeologists have designated the Archaic Period, from 9000 to 3000 years ago. Sometime during this period the climate shifted, it became warmer and drier. Prairies expanded and forests decreased. That is when we find the first evidence of habitation on sites such as Miller Cave. The variety of projectile points increased during this period. A device called an atlatl was used, simply a throwing stick attached to a spear, it greatly increased the range and accuracy of a thrown spear. Other tools begin to appear—stones, for grinding grains and nuts, axes for cutting trees. Archeologists have even found more personal items preserved from this period. These woven grass shoes were found in a dry shelter cave in eastern Missouri. Pretty stylish footwear. People who lived in this time were hunters and gatherers, but they became less nomadic over time. By the time we designate as late archaic, many changes were occurring. People began living in larger, more settled groups. Horticulture was being practiced in some parts of Missouri. Gourds and squash were grown; pottery makes its first appearance. Evidence of larger, year-round occupation of sites can be found. And long-distance trade between the Great Lakes and the coast was established.

Many people living in the era we call the Woodlands Period used pottery. The variety of types and the decoration of pottery increases during this period. In the late Woodland Period, corn began to be cultivated, along with other grain plants. The bow and arrow made its first appearance as signified by tiny arrowhead points. Throughout the Woodland Period, large mounds were constructed to bury their honored dead and serve as ceremonial grounds. What was life like for people back then? Many different types of settlements can be found, from small short-term camps to large permanently settled villages. Even though pottery production and plant cultivation was probably widespread, that doesn't mean that everyone was living the same way. In the Ozarks, the people maintained a hunter and gatherer existence while others lived in large settlements.

People who lived in the era we denote as the Mississippian Period, are best known for their large, flat-top earthen mounds such as temples and homes built on them. The area around St. Louis had many of these large mounds that were leveled as the larger settlements grew. Although there were settlements of all sizes during this period from small hamlets to huge fortified villages, corn agriculture became a main way of life for many people. Beans, squash and other plants were also grown. Archeology and early historic accounts have shown that there were complex societies and political systems built around this agricultural society at many sites.

The pottery from the Mississippian Period is amazing. The designs and forms are varied and artistic. Could they be giving us a glimpse into the face of the past?

Sometime during the fourteenth century, many of the large villages and towns in Missouri and the Midwest were abandoned. Why they were abandoned and where these people went is a major concern to archeologists. Environmental causes and warfare give some explanation to this exodus, but it wasn't long before a whole new era would begin. It's known that a group of Spaniards from Hernando Desoto's expedition reached the bootheel of Missouri in 1541. After European contact, swift changes took place. Metal axes, kettles, and other trade goods such as glass beads were introduced, but they came with a price. European diseases and conflict decimated the population. Within 300 years, virtually all lands belonging to Native Americans would, through treaty or force of arms, become ceded to the United States government. And most native peoples had been moved out of the state. Archeologists continue to work with what they discover to help better understand the lifestyle of these people.

The study of Missouri's ancient past continues today. Scientists using new methods and techniques, continue to learn more about the people that came before us. More and more, archeologists are concerned with preserving the archeological record. Though Gerald Fout's work in 1920 provided a lot of important information about the people that lived here in Miller Cave, the excavation techniques of the day destroyed a lot of the information that could now be gathered with modern techniques.

Cultural resource management at Ft. Leonard Wood and archeology in general is very important because I think it allows people to realize that people were here for thousands of years. There's a continuity with the past that we need to realize. It's very important that people remember that these are important archeological sites and they should be preserved for future generations.

Missouri's ancient past is all around us. You can find evidence of it at local museums all around the state. Check it out. It's an important part of your Missouri heritage.