

Section 1

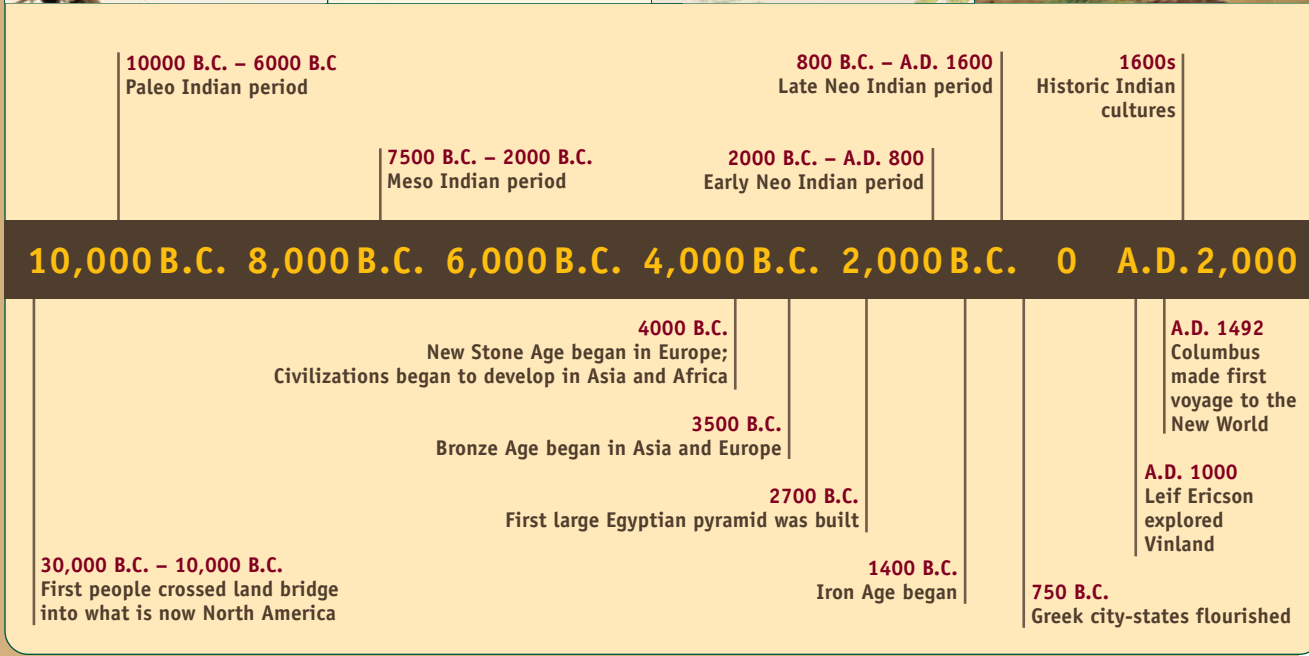
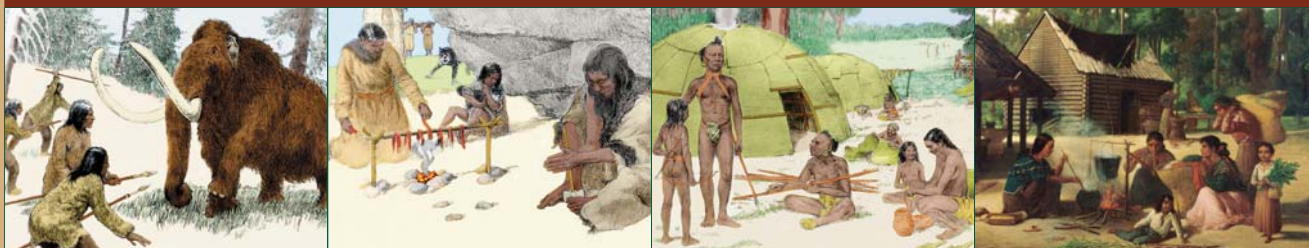
Prehistoric Cultures

As you read, look for:

- the role of archaeology in the story of prehistoric cultures,
- the importance of the Poverty Point site, and
- vocabulary terms **archaeologist**, **midden**, **nomad**, **atlatl**, **mound**, **artifacts**, **agriculture**, and **temple mounds**.

Although the first people did not leave written records of their culture, they left hints about their lives. Clues are found at places where they prepared food, made tools, built shelters, and conducted ceremonies. These discoveries are interpreted by **archaeologists** (scientists who study the items left behind by ancient peoples).

Figure 15 Timeline: 10,000 B.C. – 1600 A.D.





Map 19 Bering Land Bridge

Map Skill: Why is the Bering land bridge important in understanding how some of the earliest people came to America?

island off the coast of California. Tools dated to be about 8,000 years old closely resemble tools used for boatbuilding by Indians in the twentieth century.

Archaeologists have separated Louisiana prehistory into four stages. Those time periods are divided by changes in movement, weapons and tools, food, and religious practices. Changes happened very gradually, and these four periods are just useful ways to organize prehistory.

Paleo Indians

The oldest known Indians in Louisiana date to the Paleo Indian period. (The word *paleo* means “ancient.”) Scientists believe these first people came to North America from Asia on a land bridge that connected what is now Alaska and Siberia. The estimated date for this migration is about 10,000 B.C.

The Paleo Indians traveled in small groups and followed the animals that provided food and clothing. They traveled east and south, gradually spreading over the North American and South American continents.

Archaeologists even dig through ancient garbage dumps, called **middens**. Their findings explain who left the items, when they were left, and what happened at those locations. Scientists have studied sites that existed thousands of years before any European set foot in Louisiana. They determine the age of materials found at a site by using *radiocarbon dating*.

The work of archaeologists is like doing a jigsaw puzzle with many pieces missing. They use the information they can gather to try to determine the whole picture. Sometimes when they find another piece of the puzzle, they change their conclusions about what they are seeing. Some archaeologists have a new theory that early people may have come to North America by boat. They base this theory on discoveries at a site on an

Lagniappe

Radiocarbon dating measures the amount of radioactive decay of the element carbon 14 in once-living material. Scientists know how much decay should occur each year and can estimate the age of the material based on the amount of decay.



When these **nomads** (wanderers) reached Louisiana, they found a good hunting area with a dependable source of food. They ate a wide range of animals and plants. Small groups of people hunted game using three-inch stone points attached to wooden poles—spears. The hunters used the primitive spears to kill prehistoric elephants, called mastodons. These spear points have been found throughout Louisiana—on ridges and hills, at salt domes, and other places. The stone used for the spear points probably came from Arkansas or Texas.

Stone points give us clues about how these people lived. The points would have been used for hunting. The Paleo people probably made clothing from animal skins and lived in temporary shelters. They would have moved around to find the animals they hunted.

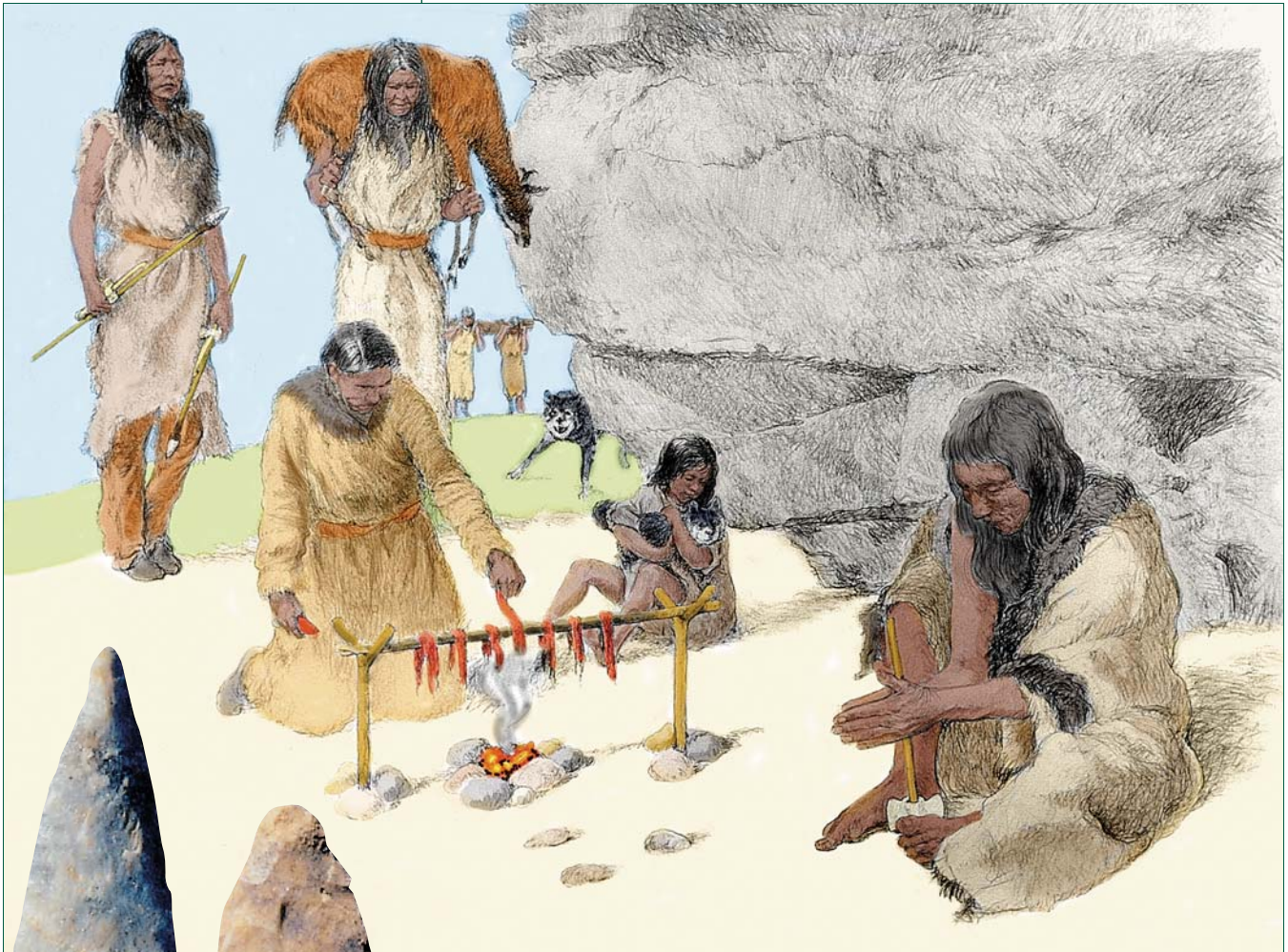
Meso Indians

After about 7500 B.C., the climate changed and some large animals like mastodons began to die out. The Indians hunted smaller animals like deer and rabbit and no longer followed the migrating herds. This lifestyle change signals a new prehistoric period—the Meso Indians. These people were still nomadic, but they stayed in one place longer.

Using stone-tipped weapons (above), Paleo Indians killed mammoth and other large animals (top). These large hairy elephants were native to the New World until about 6000 B.C.

Lagniappe

Mastodons were just slightly shorter than today's elephants but more heavily built.



Above: This campsite was typical of the Meso Indians, who relied on gathering natural food and hunting smaller animals after the large game died out.

These Indians ate a wider range of foods. The natural environment provided many species of birds, mammals, fish, clams, reptiles, seeds, roots, nuts, and fruits. The people gathered hickory nuts, pecans, acorns, persimmons, huckleberries, and elderberries. They hunted deer, rabbits, raccoons, and squirrels.

The Meso Indians adapted their hunting weapons for smaller game. For example, they added a throwing stick with weights, called the **atlatl** (at LAT l), to their spears. The weights were made of clay, stone, or shell. These improvements helped hunters throw their spears farther with more power. For this kind of hunting, the spear points were more varied in size and shape and were made from local stone.

Because they did not move around as much, the Meso Indians built more permanent houses. Their structures were covered with branches or thatch and built on posts in the ground. Near these houses, the Meso Indians also built **mounds**. The first mounds may have been built as early as 5000 B.C., and those in Louisiana existed by 3000 B.C. These early mounds were probably used during special ceremonies, but they were not used for burials.

The Meso Indians left behind many different kinds of **artifacts** (objects they made and used). Archaeologists study the artifacts to learn how earlier people

Lagniappe

The early Neo Indians rolled coils of clay into a shape and then smoothed them to form a container. Often they pressed fingernails, twigs, or tools into the surface or rocked a small tool across the wet clay to create designs. After decorating the pots, they fired them by slow baking.

lived. These artifacts included shaped and polished stones for bowls and jewelry. They also made baskets, bone needles, fish hooks, beads, hairpins, tortoise shell rattles, and shell ornaments. Their improved tools included stone axes for chopping down trees and awls for making holes in wood or leather.

Early Neo Indians

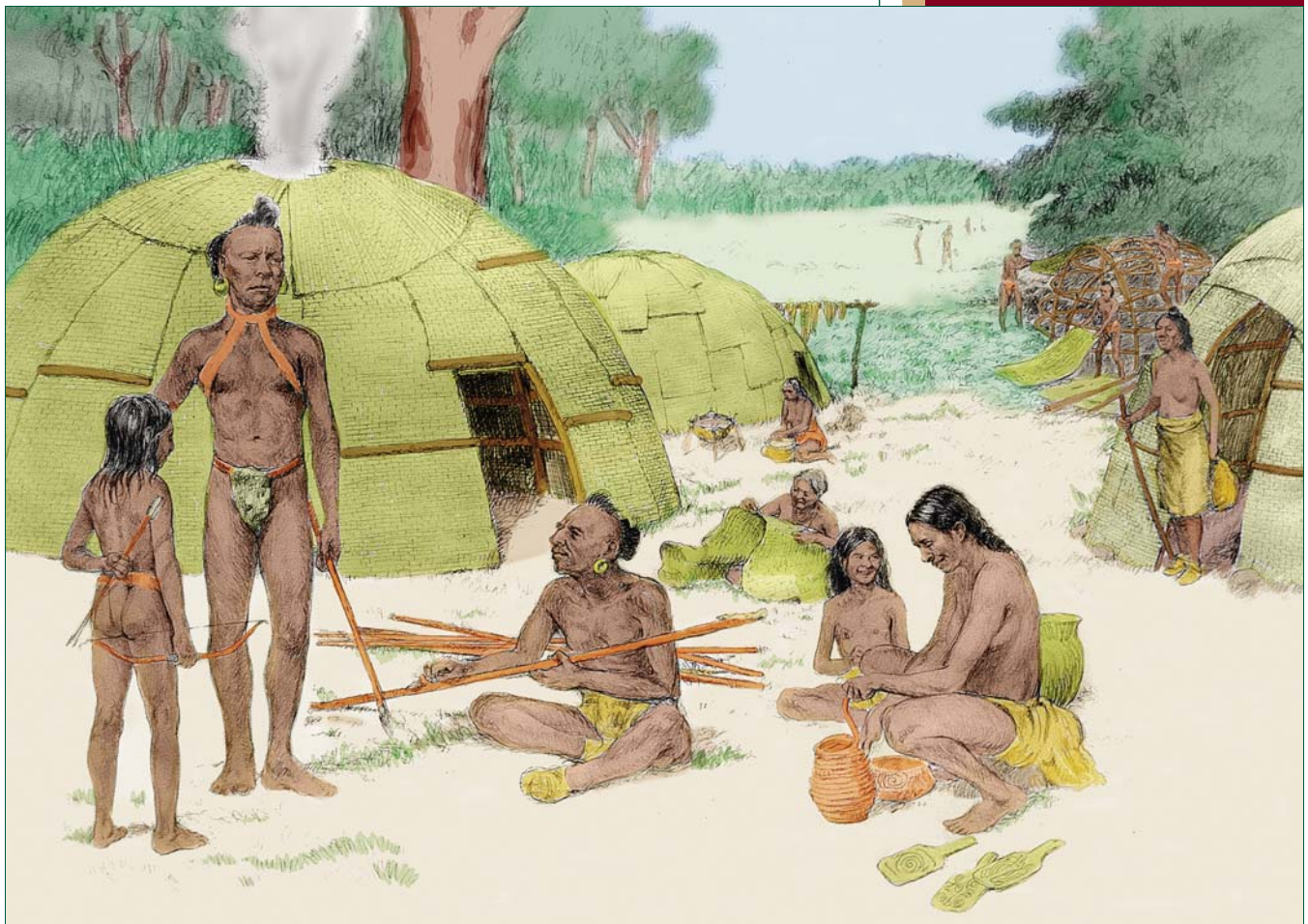
Learning to make pottery marks a big change in the lives of early Indians. Evidence of pottery-making marks the next prehistoric period. Louisiana Indian pottery was first made around 1000 B.C. Some pottery was plain, and other pottery was decorated with careful artistic designs.

Archaeologists have found large amounts of shards (broken pieces of pottery) at sites dated to this period.



Above: This pot is dated during the Early Neo period.

Below: The expansion of farming allowed more stable settlements for the Neo Indians. They were then able to build more permanent shelter.



Spotlight

Poverty Point

The **Poverty Point site**, built by the Neo Indians, is that culture's largest earthworks. The large complex of mounds covers more than a square mile, about 400 acres. Viewing it from the air is the only way to see the entire structure at once.

The huge design consists of six semicircular ridges, one inside the other, divided by four aisles. For this amazing creation, workers mounded 30 million loads of dirt. Scientists believe that each load weighed about 50 pounds and was carried to the site in baskets or animal hides.

The purpose of this tremendous human effort remains a mystery. A recent theory suggests the aisles may have been used for astronomical observations. Two of the aisles line up with the winter and summer solstice sunsets.

The Poverty Point people undoubtedly gathered there for ceremonies and celebrations. Artisans (skilled crafts persons) and traders probably lived at Poverty Point throughout the year. Artifacts include trade goods from as far away as the Great Lakes region and the Appalachian Mountains.

Although this society is dated during the Neo Indian period, the Poverty Point Indians continued the traditions of the Meso

Indians. They used spears with atlatls instead of bows and arrows; pottery had not yet replaced their carved sandstone and soapstone containers. The most commonly found objects—clay cooking balls—lined the cooking pits.

Later, the Poverty Point Indians made pottery vessels and ornamental clay and stone figurines. They made beads from copper, clay, and exotic stones

Right: The largest mound at Poverty Point is believed to have been in the shape of a flying bird, with a main ramp up the tail and side ramps up each wing. The mound stands at the apex of the system of semicircular ridges (see photo opposite page, above).





Above: In its time, the Poverty Point site had the largest, most elaborate earthworks anywhere in the western hemisphere. This scale model gives visitors an idea of what the site looked like. The semicircular ridges can only be seen easily from an airplane.



and crafted elaborate pendants in the shape of birds, insects, miniature tools, and geometric shapes. Other artifacts included bolas, weapons weighted by teardrop-shaped stones called *plummets*.

The Poverty Point culture had disappeared by 600 B.C., and no evidence has been found to explain why. War and conflict usually leave signs as clues for later generations. Those who study Poverty Point must look for other reasons to explain its end. One theory suggests a change in the religious beliefs. Visit the Poverty Point site and form your own opinion.



Top: This burial mound is located at the Marksville State Commemorative Site.

Above: Artifacts such as this ceramic pipe found at Marksville were often buried with the dead.

During the early Neo Indian period, people built villages and lived there seasonally, relying on the food available in the area. The development of the bow and arrow around 500 A.D. made hunting deer easier. The bow was made of a bent branch, such as hickory, with deer tendons to draw the arrow. The arrow shaft was made of local wood, and a stone point completed the arrow.

Mainstays of the early Neo menu were wild grapes, palmetto, fruits, pigweed, and amaranth.

Figure 16 Prehistoric Cultures

Paleo Culture	10000 – 6000 B.C.
Meso Culture	7500 – 2000 B.C.
Early Neo Culture	2000 B.C. – A.D. 800
Late Neo Culture	A.D. 800 – 1600

was a seed-bearing plant that is now considered a weed. Fish, deer, and shellfish added more variety to their diet.

The early Neo Indians made more elaborate ornaments than people from earlier time periods, and they traded for many items. They had copper ear spools and bracelets, beads, animal tooth pendants, pottery pipes, and figurines. These artifacts, along with other status symbols like marine and freshwater shells, were often buried with their dead in mounds.

Late Neo Indians

The late Neo Indian period refers to the time from about 800 A.D. until the Europeans arrived in the area. During this time, villages were larger and were located near waterways, which the Indians used for travel and as a source of food. People built more permanent houses of *wattle and daub*, woven sticks covered with mud.

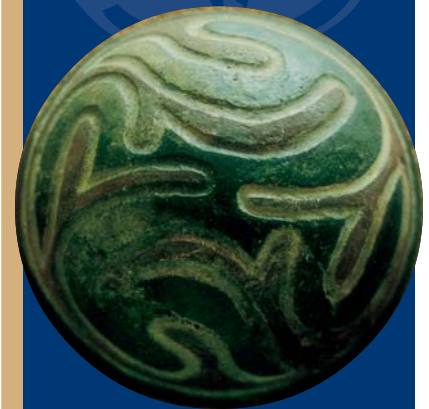
The late Neo Indians switched from gathering to **agriculture** (farming). By this time, they may have lived in one place year-round, so they could plant and harvest crops. Maize (corn), beans, squash, and pumpkins were their main crops. They grew those crops using a method called *intercropping*. This involved planting two or more crops with different harvest times in the same plot of land. The beans and pumpkins could sprout, grow, and bear vegetables and fruit in less time than it took the corn to mature.

During this late prehistoric period, the Indians built temples atop their mounds. These **temple mounds** were used for religious ceremonies. An open plaza between two or more mounds served as the ceremonial ground. At the Medora site in West Baton Rouge Parish, for example, there was a 400-foot plaza located between two mounds.



Map 20 Mound Sites in Louisiana

Map Skill: Is there a mound site in your parish?



Above: Late Neo pottery became more elaborately decorated with carved designs and colors used to highlight the design.

Check for Understanding ✓

1. What kinds of places provide clues about the lives of ancient people?
2. Why did the Paleo Indians follow the movement of animals?
3. What are some artifacts left behind by the Meso Indians?
4. Why was the development of the bow and arrow so important?
5. What was the purpose of temple mounds?