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Original Inhabitants

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What is now the state of Florida was first settled by humans whose ancestors had entered North America from eastern Asia during the Pleistocene era, the Great Ice Age, about 12,000 years ago. Sea levels—as much as 350 feet lower than at present because of huge amounts of water tied up in Ice Age glaciers—exposed a large land bridge between Siberia and Alaska across what is now the Bering Strait. Hunter-gatherers in search of game and other foods easily crossed this land bridge which connected Asia and North America and was at least as wide as the distance from Orlando to New York City.

These early hunter-gatherers are called Paleoindians, and they entered Florida around 10,000 B.C., about the same time that they moved into other parts of what is now the United States. Evidently their nonsedentary lifestyle and a new world filled with plant and animal foods never encountered previously by humans enabled—perhaps encouraged—them to colonize the Americas quickly. Campsites of the Paleoindians are found across North America from Alaska to south Florida.

Some archaeologists argue that the Paleoindian migration was preceded by even earlier movements of people from Asia across the Siberia-Alaska land bridge into the Americas. But as yet the evidence for such a pre-Paleoindian presence in North America is tenuous. Certainly in Florida, the Paleoindians were the first human residents.

At the time of the Florida Paleoindians, the same lowered seas that created a transcontinental bridge across the Bering Strait gave Florida a total landmass about twice what it is today. The Gulf of Mexico shoreline, for instance, was more than 100 miles west of its present location. During the Paleoindian period, Florida also was much drier than it is today. Many of our present rivers, springs, and lakes were not here, and even groundwater

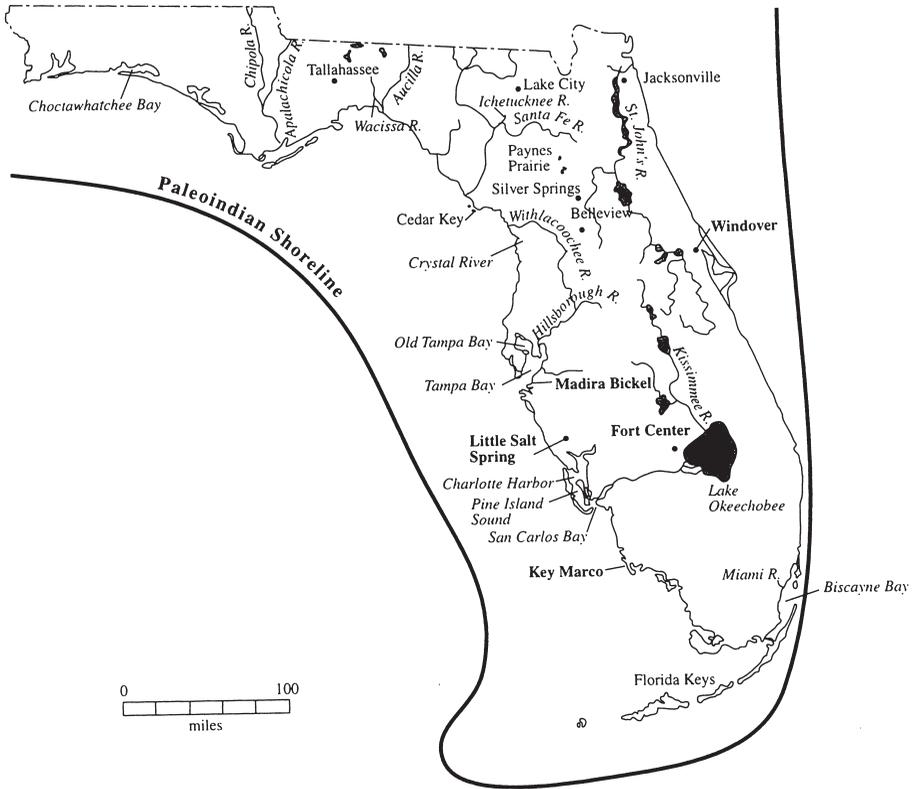
levels were significantly lower. Plants that survived were those that could grow in the dry, cool conditions. Scrub vegetation, open grassy prairies, and savannahs were common.

Sources of surface water, so important to Paleoindians and to the animals they hunted for food, were limited. The Paleoindians sought water in deep springs, like Little Salt Spring in Sarasota County, or at watering holes or shallow lakes or prairies where limestone strata near the surface provided catchment basins. Such limestone deposits are found from the Hillsborough River drainage north through peninsular Florida into the Panhandle. Paleoindians hunted, butchered, and consumed animals at these watering holes, leaving behind their refuse, artifacts that can be studied and interpreted by modern archaeologists.

Today, with higher water levels, many of these catchment basins are flowing rivers, like the Ichetucknee, Wacissa, Aucilla, and Chipola. Paleoindian camps with bone and stone weapons and tools, including distinctive lanceolate stone spear points, are found in deposits at the bottoms of these rivers, as well as at land sites nearby. With the stone tools are found bones of the animals the Paleoindians hunted, some exhibiting butchering marks. A number of the animal species hunted by Paleoindians became extinct shortly after the end of the Pleistocene epoch, perhaps in part because of human predation. They include mastodon, mammoth, horse, camel, bison, and giant land tortoise. Other of the animals that provided meat for the Paleoindian diet—deer, rabbits, raccoons, and many more—continue to inhabit Florida today.

After about 9000 B.C., as glaciers melted and sea levels rose, Florida's climate generally became wetter than it had been, providing more water sources around which the Paleoindians could camp. But as the sea rose, coastal areas were flooded and the Florida landmass was reduced. Less land and larger human populations may have influenced the later Paleoindians to follow a less nomadic way of life. They moved between water sources less frequently, and their camps were occupied for longer periods of time. Archaeological sites corresponding to these larger late Paleoindian camps have been found in the Hillsborough River drainage near Tampa, around Paynes Prairie south of Gainesville, near Silver Springs, and at other locations in northern Florida.

Paleoindian sites, relatively common in the northern half of the state in the region of surface limestone strata, also occur in smaller numbers in southern Florida. Paleoindian artifacts have been found as far south as Dade County.



Archaeological sites (*in bold*) and other Florida locations mentioned in chapter 1.

Over time the tool kits of the Paleoindians changed as people altered their lifeways to adjust to the new environmental conditions that confronted them. They began to use a wider variety of stone tools, and many of the stone points originally used to hunt the large Pleistocene animals were no longer made. These changes were sufficient by 7500 B.C. for archaeologists to delineate a new culture, the early Archaic.

The environment of the early Archaic peoples was still drier than our modern climate, but it was wetter than it had been in earlier times. Early Archaic peoples continued to live next to wetlands and water sources and to hunt and gather wild foods.

One remarkable early Archaic period site is the Windover Pond site in Brevard County, which contains peat deposits in which early Archaic people interred their dead. Careful excavations by Glen Doran and David Dickel of Florida State University revealed that during the period between 6000

and 5000 B.C., human burials were placed in the peat in the bottom of the shallow pond. The peat helped to preserve an array of normally perishable artifacts and human tissues, including brains, from which scientists have recovered and studied genetic material.

Artifacts recovered by the excavation team included shark teeth and dog or wolf teeth which had been attached with pitch to wooden handles for use as tools. Other tools were made from deer bone and antler, from manatee and either panther or bobcat bone, and from bird bone. Bone pins, barbed points, and awls were found preserved in the peat, along with throwing stick weights made from deer antler. The weights were used with a handheld shaft to help launch spears; the earlier Paleoindians probably also used throwing sticks.

Animal bones found in the pond, presumably from animals eaten by the people who lived there, were from otter, rat, squirrel, rabbit, opossum, duck and wading birds, alligator, turtle, snake, frog, and fish. Remains of plants, including prickly pear and a wild gourd fashioned into a dipper, were also preserved.

A well-developed and sophisticated array of cordage and fiber fabrics and matting lay in the Windover Pond peat. Fibers taken from Sable palms, saw palmettos, and other plants were used in twining and weaving. The early Archaic people of Florida, like the people that preceded them and those that would follow, had an assemblage of material items—tools, woven fabrics, and the like—well suited to life in Florida.

After 5000 B.C., the climate of Florida began to ameliorate, becoming more like modern conditions, which were reached by about 3000 B.C. The time between 5000 and 3000 B.C. is known as the middle Archaic period. Middle Archaic sites are found in a variety of settings, some very different from those of the Paleoindians and early Archaic periods, including, for the first time, some along the St. Johns River and the Atlantic coastal strand. Middle Archaic peoples also were living in the Hillsborough River drainage northeast of Tampa Bay, along the southwest Florida coast, and in a few south Florida locales. And middle Archaic sites are found in large numbers in interior northern Florida. The presence of a larger number of surface water sites than had been available in earlier times provided many more locales for people to inhabit.

It is clear that during the middle Archaic period Florida natives took advantage of the increased number of hospitable areas. Populations increased significantly. The people practiced a more settled way of life and utilized a larger variety of specialized tools than their ancestors had done.