Quick Study

Woodland Period (1000 BC to AD 1000)

Woodland can be a confusing term. Some archaeologists avoid it because people unfamiliar with the peculiar usages of archaeology think it refers to the "Eastern Woodlands," which denotes those billions of acres of river-laced forests in the eastern half of North America.

So a clarification is in order. Like with the terms Paleoindian and Archaic, most archaeologists use Woodland in a specific way. They use it to refer to characteristics of a cultural tradition and the period in which that tradition was dominant.

In North Carolina and much of the East, the Woodland period is marked by the presence of three key traits:

- manufacture of clay pottery;
- semi-permanent villages, or settlements occupied by people for several months each year, but not year round;
- horticulture, or the planting of gardens to supplement foods hunted and gathered.

These traits began during the late Archaic, but were not widespread in the Southeast until later. While the Woodland's time frame varies considerably throughout eastern North America, it follows on the heels of the Archaic.

In North Carolina, Woodland characteristics appear by 1000 BC. Archaeologists disagree about when it ended. Some, emphasizing continuity, prefer to see it last until the arrival of the Europeans around AD 1600. But other archaeologists see enough social and political changes occurring to end the period at AD 1000. The latter approach is the one adopted here.

Another caution is in order about archaeological terminology. Just because tribes followed a Woodland lifeway, this doesn't mean they were identical. Individual tribal customs and beliefs varied greatly. Also, tribes differed ethnically and linguistically. What tied everybody together were the general cultural traits defining how they lived.

Key Characteristics

- Group territories become smaller and more well-defined. Populations increase.

- Horticulture begins. The plants in the earlier Archaic "natural stands" are purposefully cultivated. Using digging sticks or stone (and sometimes shell) hoes, people plant and harvest marsh elder, squash, bottle gourds, sunflower, maygrass, and goosefoot from small gardens. The Eastern Agricultural Complex is what archaeologists label this group of wild, local seed plants the Southeastern people have domesticated. These native plants give strong evidence that agriculture evolves independently in the Southeast.

- Acquired by trade, corn shows up in the Southeast for the first time about AD 200. But people don't use it much.

- Hunting and gathering wild food remains very important, even though people have gardens. Most food comes from acorns, hickory nuts and a variety of other nuts, fruits, and wild vegetables. White-tailed deer is the primary source of meat. But bear, turkey,

raccoon, fish, and waterfowl are also important.

- Estuarine resources like fish and shellfish are very important foods for people on the Coastal Plain. They may provide quantities of reliable foods equal to that obtained by hunting, gathering, and gardening combined.

- People live in small, semi-permanent villages. These are stable settlements occupied by people for several months each year, but not year round. Over time, villages are drawn closer and closer to the floodplains of rivers or major stream tributaries, where fertile, soft soils are easily hoed for gardens. Groups also spend parts of the year in seasonal camps where they hunt, fish, or gather wild foods.

- House shapes may vary from region to region. Patterns left by stains of decayed house posts (which archaeologists call postholes) suggest some people built rectangular homes, while others lived in round houses.

- People build houses by putting saplings side by side and upright in the ground. Sticks are woven between them and covered with bark, thatch, or mud. Roofs can be made in one of two ways. The saplings forming the wall are pulled together at the top and tied, or other saplings are placed horizontally over the outside walls and supported on posts placed in the center of the house. A clay-lined hole, which hardens from heat, is left in the roof for smoke from a centrally placed fire to escape.

- Pottery becomes widespread. Pottery making actually begins late in the Archaic Period, when some Coastal-Plain peoples make a rough, easily breakable vessel. But during Woodland times, clay pots start being made everywhere in the Southeast.

- Several pottery styles occur in North Carolina during the early Woodland. Potters use crushed steatite, quartz, or sand for temper; temper is anything potters add to wet clay to help keep the vessel from breaking during firing. Most pots have tapered bottoms, which lets the vessel sit upright in the deep ash of cooking hearths. People decorate their pottery by stamping the surfaces with either cord or textile-wrapped or carved wooden paddles before firing. Some North Carolina styles and surface decorations are influenced by contacts with people in other regions, like Georgia, Tennessee, and Ohio.

- Most archaeologists think pottery making goes hand in hand with people's increasing reliance on wild and domesticated seed crops and more permanent settlement.

- The bow and arrow comes into use, apparently replacing the spear and atlatl. Archaeologists think the transition happens in the middle of the Woodland period because the stone projectile points change shape and size about that time.

- Typically, Woodland people place few offerings in graves. When they do, the objects seem to be useful or personal items, such as stone arrow tips, chisels, smoking pipes, clay pots, or jewelry.

- Trade and the interactions resulting from it influence Woodland cultures. A dramatic

example occurs in the Appalachians. There, the influences are not from a particular culture or political power, but from what is essentially a widespread religion archaeologists call Hopewell. By its set of unifying beliefs and symbols, it draws together people who share neither language nor culture; its network of contacts span from Mississippi to Minnesota, from Nebraska to Virginia.

- North Carolina's Appalachian people apparently get drawn into the Hopewell network because they control access and distribution for mica—a shining, workable mineral that Hopewell-affiliated peoples valued. Through trade contacts, the Appalachian people adopt some Hopewell habits. They shape clay into figurines of animals or people; they develop a more complex social structure, as certain people gain status because of trade or religious influence; they construct earthen mounds in key villages to serve as platforms for structures. Generally, however, most of North Carolina's Woodland people have an egalitarian social structure.