Alabama Indians

RUSSELL CAVE
8000 B.C.

The First Alabamians

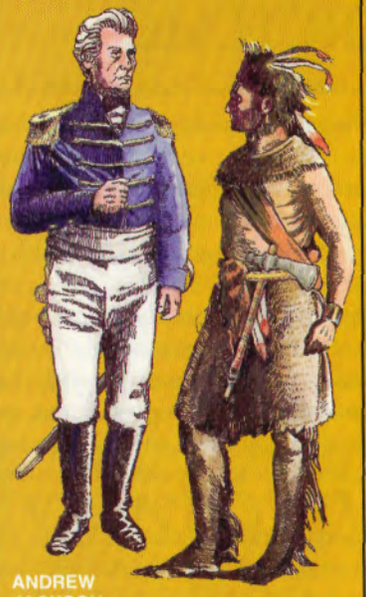
TWELVE THOUSAND years ago or more, primitive hunters followed huge mastodons and ground sloths into Alabama's valleys. The great beasts died out, but the hunters survived. Slowly, unevenly, their descendants built the remarkable cultures found almost 500 years ago by the first Europeans.

MABILA
1540

CHIEF TASKALUSA

HERNANDO DE SOTO

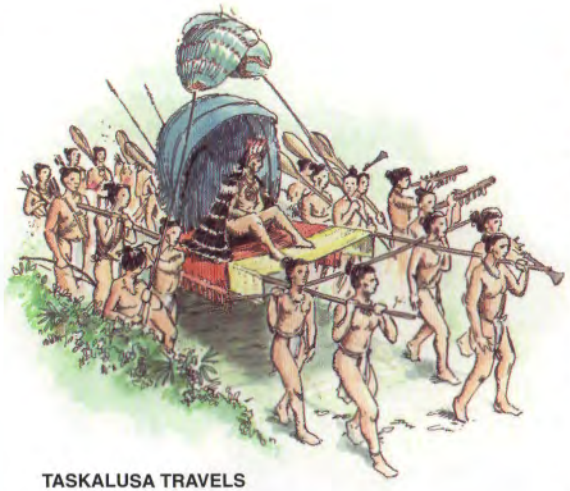
CREEK WARS
1814



ANDREW JACKSON

RED EAGLE

Alabama Indians



TASKALUSA TRAVELS
1540

Alabama Indians and the Europeans

CREEK VILLAGE
1810

SPANISH sailors peeked into Mobile Bay in 1519, but in 1540 Hernando De Soto's army gave Europeans their first look at Alabama. His army forced its way across 300 miles of Alabama — from the northeast corner deep into the coastal plain and back north on the western side. Somewhere in south Alabama at Mabila, they fought history's greatest battle between the European and Indian cultures.

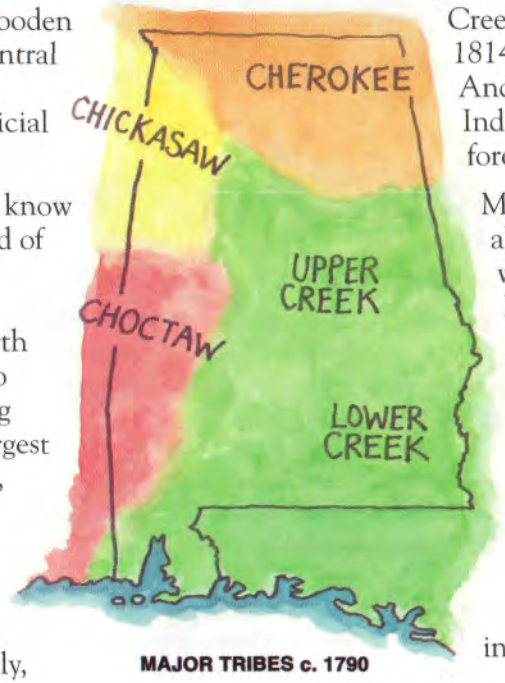
De Soto's writers told of independent provinces with walled towns where subjects carried their princes on litters. Wooden houses surrounded central plazas dominated by temple-crowned artificial mounds.

The Spaniards didn't know they hastened the end of an elaborate culture already in decline. Retreating to the north from Mabila, De Soto passed without noting what was long the largest city in the Southeast, today's Moundville.

In a few years other Spaniards found that populations along De Soto's route rapidly, and often mysteriously, decreased. Many separate groups disappeared or were absorbed by others. Probably the independent nations De Soto plundered became the Cherokee, Creek, Choctaw, and Chickasaw tribes.

Alabama Indian cultures then felt the impact of power struggles among Spain, France, and England. In the 1700s, the French established Mobile and inland trading forts. British traders from the Colonies pressed deep into Indian nations. Tribes warred among themselves, allied at times with the various European powers depending upon which side offered them the best advantage at the time.

The Revolution replaced ambitious rival Europeans with land-hungry Americans. Treaty after treaty opened large areas in Alabama to whites, until the Creeks rebelled in 1813. In 1814, Americans under Andrew Jackson and their Indian allies settled the issue forever at Horseshoe Bend.



MAJOR TRIBES c. 1790

Many Indians in Alabama already lived much like white settlers. Farmers and hunters, they often built villages of log houses. As the Indians adapted to white ways on their remaining lands, they became known as the "Civilized Tribes." Sequoyah developed his famous Cherokee alphabet while living in northeast Alabama.

But nothing stopped the wave of American pioneer expansion. The final push came in the 1830s with government relocation of most southeastern Indians to land in Oklahoma, an upheaval known as the Trail of Tears.

Prehistoric Alabamians

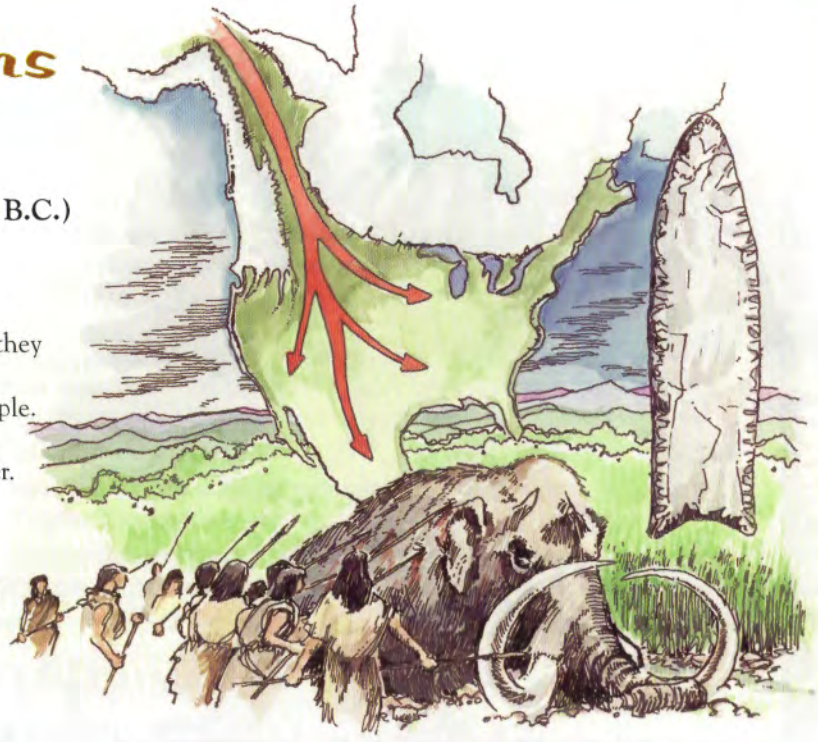
PALEO INDIANS

The First Families of Alabama (from 10,000 B.C. to about 7000 B.C.)

Their ancestors probably came into America across the land bridge between Alaska and Siberia 20,000 or more years ago. By at least 12,000 years ago, these hunters migrated, following game across North America into the timbered land that is now Alabama. In addition to smaller prey, they sought mastodons, giant bison, and other animals now long vanished. Paleo Indians roamed in small family bands of no more than 25 to 30 people. They lived off the land, gathering plants and hunting the huge Ice Age beasts whose meat was food and whose skins provided clothing and shelter.

It was life with one primary focus — survival.

Today these nomads' distinctive stone spear points and scrapers are found throughout Alabama. In the late Paleo period they developed better tools and increased their hunting skills. Then the climate warmed and the Ice Age faded.



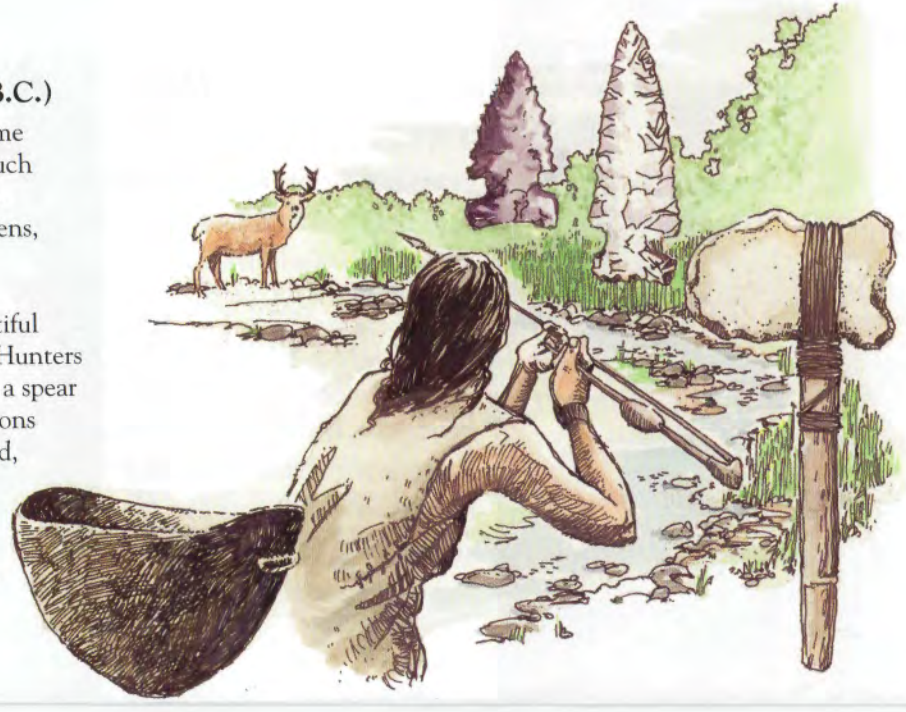
ARCHAIC

Hunters and Gatherers (from about 7000 B.C. to 1000 B.C.)

As the weather and environment changed, the great beasts became extinct. Now Native Americans focused more on smaller game such as deer, turkey, rabbit, and even skunk, fox, and wildcat. Streams provided fish and mussels. Gathering nuts, berries, roots, and greens, Archaic Indians had a varied, healthy diet.

Archaic people established more permanent camps close to plentiful food sources, making seasonal trips to the best hunting grounds. Hunters gained distance and accuracy with the introduction of the atlatl, a spear thrower. Craftsmen chipped out an array of stone tools and weapons and carved fine stone and shell ornaments. Carved stone pots and, later, simple pottery permitted cooking and food storage.

Cultures did not advance evenly in all parts of the state. While some groups still lived an Archaic way of life, others had already taken a major step into the next phase of sophistication.



WOODLAND

Crops, Pots, and Burial Mounds (from about 1000 B.C. to 800 A.D.)

Cultivation began when Indians discovered they could grow food in addition to gathering wild plants. This more dependable food supply did away with the need for seasonal migration and Woodland people started settling in villages. While hunting and fishing remained important, the focus of life had shifted.

Now there was time to develop art and religion. Pottery not only was useful, but it often flourished into an art form. Intricate designs graced beautifully shaped vessels. The Woodland people mastered carving, leaving behind both fanciful and lifelike stone effigies of themselves and the animals surrounding them. Artists also fashioned shells and stones into decorations.

Complex religious rituals resulted in creating burial mounds which today are widely scattered throughout the state. Trade with other groups brought conch shells from the Gulf of Mexico and copper from the Great Lakes.

The prosperity of the Woodland Indians ushered in the next and grandest era of prehistoric Alabama Indian culture.

MISSISSIPPIAN

The Temple Mound Builders (from about 800 A.D. to 1500 A.D.)

It was a society based on raising corn. Bolstered by extensive trade, the economy supported an art community and great public works. Mississippians developed elaborate rituals and a complex social structure. Across the South into the Midwest, they built mounds to support temples and the homes of their nobles.

Skilled artists worked with stone, pottery, bone, and copper, creating beautifully formed and decorated objects. The society was structured with classes of priests, nobles, warriors, craftsmen, and workers.

As many as 3,000 people once lived at Moundville, Alabama's best known Mississippian site. For 500 years no city in the Southeast again reached that size. Here some 29 mounds, protected by a palisade, overlooked the river plain. Smaller centers flourished on other rivers. Satellite villages grew up along the streams for many miles around these major religious and market centers, some 12,000 people total allied with the Moundville chiefdom.

Archaeology at Moundville Archaeological Park shows no Native American contact with the white man. A sophisticated culture flourished then declined as political instability tore apart the fabric of their society.