

# **Native Americans of the Southeast Cultural Area**

**By Jennifer Kenny**

The Eastern Woodland area is the eastern part of the United States, which runs from the Atlantic Ocean to the Mississippi River. It includes the Great Lakes. Most scientists divide the region into the Northeast and the Southeast cultural areas. The southeastern portion ran from the Ohio River south to the Gulf of Mexico. The climate is humid and is well watered.

The Native Americans in this area were here before the year 500 AD. They were originally nomads who hunted, fished, and gathered roots and seeds. Then they cultivated maize, or corn, and that revolutionized their lives and permitted the development of complex societies.

Around 800 AD, the Mound Builders (or Mississippian) or Temple Mound culture built great earthen burial mounds. They built the city of Cahokia, which at one point may have had more than 20,000 people. It was as large as the large cities in Europe of that time. The Mound Builders were master farmers who settled along rivers. They also built massive earthworks to support their temples and their rulers' homes. The city declined by the year 1200 AD.

The farmers in this area were experts. Maize, beans, squash, and sunflowers were the staple crops. The Cherokees and others had three kinds of maize. They roasted one kind, boiled one kind, and ground one into flour for cornbread. If the soil was thought to be too sandy, they would move their fields to keep their crops healthy. The Natchez and Muskogean were farmers in this area who used hoes with stone, bone, or shell blades.

The Native Americans used bows and arrows to kill deer. They used blowguns with poison darts to hunt turkey and small game. They used spears, traps, and enclosures set in waterways to capture fish. They also collected nuts, fruits, edible roots, stalks, and leaves which could then be stored in baskets. Further south, the men hunted alligators.

The Indians in this area lived in villages. Villagers governed their own affairs. A head chief who discussed community matters led village councils. Some tribes organized into chiefdoms, which had a supreme ruler. Social rank was determined by birth.

The Natchez were sun-worshippers. A leader known as Great Sun, who according to the Natchez was a living god, ruled them. His relatives were the high priests called Suns. Then came the nobles, followed by the commoners, who did the farming, hunting, and mound building. The Cherokee and Choctaw were more democratic and less formal. Their leaders were determined by achievement.

The homes and the public buildings were rectangular (although sometimes circular). They were constructed of wattle and daub. Branches and vines were woven over poles (wattle) and covered with mud or clay (daub). Sometimes thatch or animal hides were used as a covering also. In swampy areas, the Seminole people built chickees. These were open-sided houses on stilts. They had wooden platforms and thatched roofs.

To travel, the Native Americans traveled by foot on trails. They also used dugout canoes to travel on water. In warm weather, the men wore clothes made of deerskin. The women wore wraparound skirts made of plant fibers with shell necklaces. In cooler weather, the men wore deerskin shirts, leggings, and moccasins. The women wore deerskin capes and moccasins. During special ceremonies, the leaders and priests wore capes of feathers.

Other important people were the shamans. Shamans were medicine men. The shamans led rituals to ensure adequate food supplies, especially for planting and harvesting.

One important ceremony was the Green Corn Ceremony (or Busk). This was an annual mid- to-late summer festival performed by the Cherokee or Creek when the corn was ready for roasting. It represented renewal and thanksgiving. It lasted four to eight days and involved fasting, dancing, and feasting. A new sacred fire was lit.

Every house got its fire from this sacred fire. New tools, weapons, and clothing were made as well. Wrongdoings were forgiven except for murder. Black drink was sipped as a beverage used to purify the people spiritually.

The Indians in this area enjoyed some leisure activities during their free time. Chunkey was a popular sport among the Temple Mound Builders. One player rolled a disk made of polished stone down a court. He and his opponent threw wooden lances to show where they thought the disk would fall over.

People in this area also played lacrosse. A week to a month before a game, players would only eat animals that had the characteristics they needed to have in order to win. For example, they would eat raccoon because it was fierce and shrewd when attacked. They wouldn't eat rabbit, though, because it became frightened and ran about in a confused manner. They didn't want that characteristic passed on to the players! Each player carried two sticks with webbed ends to catch and throw 3-inch balls. Some early balls were made out of wood. Others were made of deerskin stuffed with hair. Teams often had 100 players each!

Diseases from Europeans devastated the Native Americans in the Southeast. Many of the tribes were displaced; they were forced to leave the area. One example is the Cherokees' Trail of Tears. Many Indians whose ancestors were from this area still live on reservations in Oklahoma. Some are trying to reestablish the unity of their tribes.