

Woodland Tradition

Hunters, Gatherers, Fishers and Gardeners **Southern Wisconsin: 500 B.C. to 1200 A.D.** **Northern Wisconsin: 500 B.C. to 1700 A.D.**

Introduction

The Woodland tradition begins about 500 B.C. You may think that since it is only about 2500 years old, not as old as some other traditions, that archaeologists would know more about these people and their lifeways than they do about the older traditions. It is true that archaeologists know much more about the Woodland tradition than about the older traditions, but archaeologists still have problems discovering all that they want to know about these people. Many of the items that were left behind have decomposed and therefore, little or no trace of them is available for archaeologists to discover.



Woodland scene

The environment of the people in the Woodland tradition was very similar to today. The hunting and gathering lifeways of the Woodland people were not radically different from the previous lifestyle of the Archaic people. Archaeologists, however, have discovered some differences. Woodland people buried their dead in man-made mounds, made pottery and began to grow plants in small gardens. Archaeologists can see the beginnings of these activities at the end of the Archaic period but Woodland people really developed these activities much further. These changes suggest that people were creating new technologies and making social changes. They also indicate that people were moving around less and were starting to develop stronger territories.



Woodland potsherd



Mound

During this time the population increased, which put an increased demand on resources. This resulted in increased tension among people. These things make Woodland people unique from past people. Remember, groups of people didn't just leave and new people with new ways move into Wisconsin. Instead, new ideas and ways of doing things slowly evolved and consequently changed these people's lives. Archaeologists can speculate about these changes by studying the artifacts people left behind.

See also [*Archaeological Basics-Site destruction*](#)

Red Ocher Culture

A unique culture called the Red Ocher Culture existed in the time between the end of the Archaic and the beginning of Woodland. This culture showed more social complexity than earlier people. The people were involved in long distance trade of exotic materials and practiced elaborate burial practices. A characteristic of this culture was its unique burial practices of using red ocher to decorate or cover the corpses of their dead. Red Ocher is ground up iron ore that is red in color.

Objects made from exotic materials were placed with the burials to mark the individual's status. Copper ornaments, marine shell beads and ceremonial blades (knives or points that were thinner and larger than could be practically used) have been found buried with some individuals. The trade networks and use of copper by the Red Ocher people have their beginnings in the trade and copper use of the [Old Copper Culture](#). Red Ocher people used copper more to make ornaments (beads, rings) than tools, like the Old Copper Culture people did. Not all Archaic or Woodland people were involved in the Red Ocher Culture. This is a unique set of lifeways that only involved some people.



"Turkey tail" projectile points are characteristic of the Red Ocher culture.

Back to [Archaic-Old Copper Culture](#)

Food [Hunting, Gathering, Gardening]

Woodland people were mainly hunters and gatherers. They continued a very successful adaptation to the rich environment and resources of Wisconsin. During this time, rivers and lakes became a particularly important source for plant and animal resources. Deer were an important food source as were small animals such as beaver, raccoon, muskrats, squirrels, fish, turtles, fresh water mussels, waterfowl and birds. Fruits, nuts, berries, wild rice and starchy seeds were gathered along with other plants for food and medicinal purposes. For thousands of years people had been collecting and probably encouraging plants to grow. Gourds were useful as containers, especially before pottery.



Gourds

Throughout the Woodland period, archaeologists find that people were beginning to grow a few plants in gardens. This was not full scale farming, rather, people planted a few seeds in small gardens. First squash and then sunflowers were grown in small gardens. By the end of this period some corn was being grown.

See also [Archaeological Basics-Plant remains](#)



Pipe

Some plant materials were used for more than just food. Squash and gourds were used for vessels and food. Textiles and hides were dyed with natural dyes. Tobacco and pipes began to be used during Woodland times.

Tools

The toolkit for Woodland people contained many of the same items used by previous groups, such as spear points, knives, modified flakes and hammerstones. The **mano** and **metate** were used to process plant materials. Spears and nets were now used for fishing.

At the end of the Woodland period people begin to use a new tool, the bow and arrow. The bow and arrow was an effective tool for individual hunters. The projectile points, or arrowheads, that archaeologists find are smaller than those used for spears by previous groups. **Abraders**, sometimes used for straightening arrow shafts, are also found.



Bow and arrow



Toolkit. From left: top row-core, flakes, hammerstone. Middle row-2 bifaces, 2 points, scraper, retouched flake; Bottom row-drill, graver.

See also [Archaeological Basics-Point styles](#)

Pottery

Another new technology for Wisconsin's Woodland people was pottery. Woodland people made their pots from local clays. They learned that if they added **temper**, small ground up rocks or sand, to their clay it would help prevent shrinkage and cracking during drying and firing.

Coils or slabs were used to build the pots. After the clay pots dried in the air, they were baked in an open fire. Woodland pots have straight sides and cone shaped bottoms. Paddles covered with cords were used to shape the pots. Some pots were decorated with incised lines. Others were decorated with cord or fabric pressed into the wet clay.

The decoration on pottery changes through time just like the shape of projectile points. Archaeologists can use the type of temper and designs on pots to help tell their age. The oldest pottery has incised lines, made with a stick or a fingernail. Later pottery often has fine decoration made with a stick wrapped with a cord and pressed into the clay, or a stick carved with notches to make a dentate pattern. The latest Woodland pottery has elaborate sets of cords, perhaps woven, pressed into the clay.



Pot shapes and designs change through time. The oldest pots are on the left, the most recent Woodland pots are on the right.

See also [Native Technology-Pottery](#)

Settlement

Woodland people moved around less than previous groups as they continued to develop territories. They continued to move seasonally to take advantage of resources. The distance they traveled, however, was probably not as great as in the past and they probably didn't move as frequently. In the spring and summer, when resources were more available, several small groups (25 - 50 people) might meet to trade and socialize. These small groups would gather with other small groups to form larger groups of 100 to 500 people, close to lakes, rivers, streams or springs. This would be a good time for ceremonial activities including mound building. During the winter, when resources were scarce, the people would break up into smaller family groups and move to protected areas such as rockshelters. Camps developed along rivers and lakes in the summer, and inland or in more protected and sheltered places during the winter.

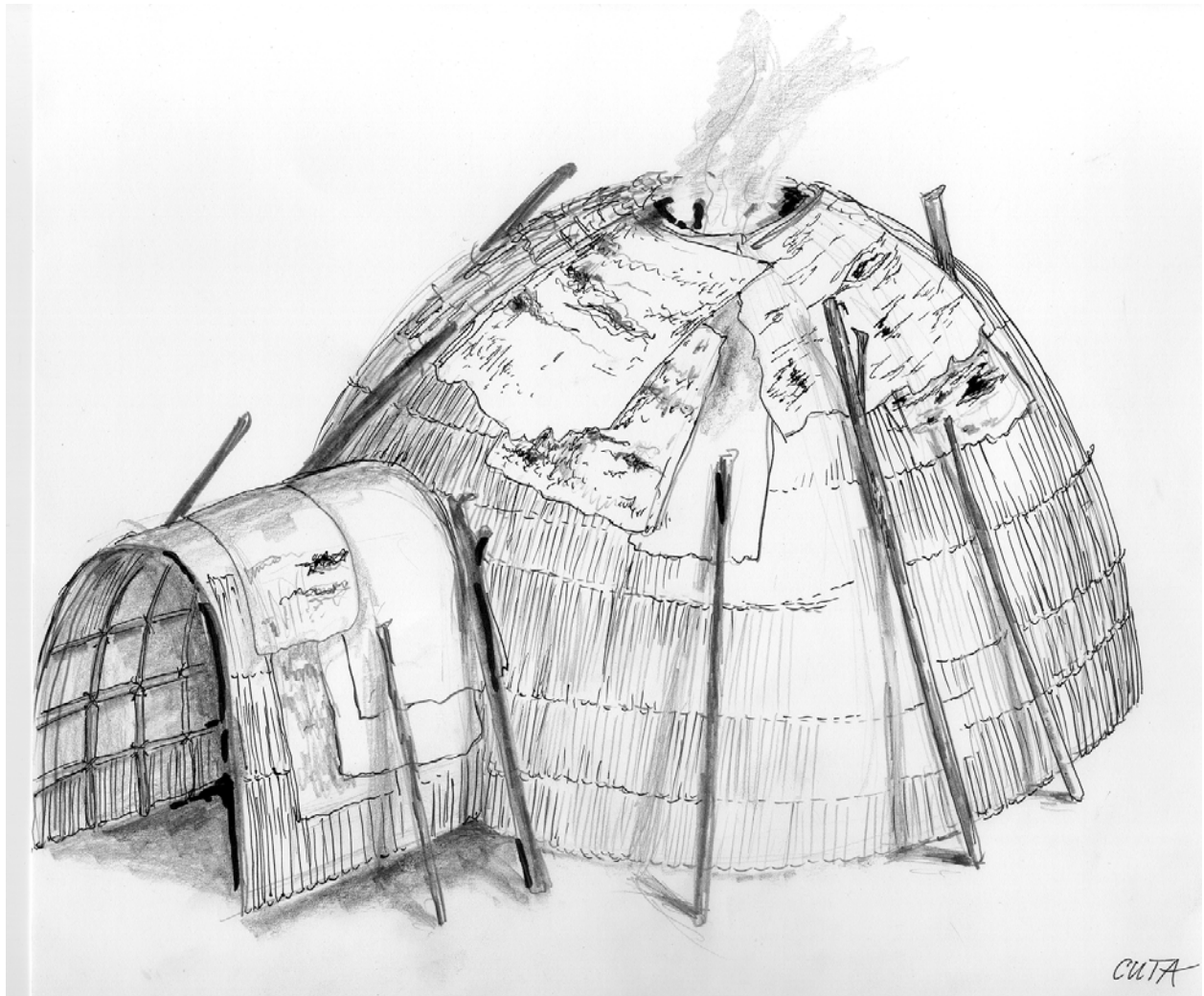


Typical Woodland Tradition site setting



Mound

Archaeologists know that Woodland people were making some type of seasonal shelters. Archaeologists haven't, however, found any actual structures. What they have found are **postmolds**. Postmolds are stains in the ground where a post used to be but has now rotted away. The only thing left is the stain of where the post used to be. Archaeologists have found postmolds arranged in circular, rectangular, oval and keyhole shapes. It seems that people built their houses in different shapes in different locations and times in Wisconsin. The things that Woodland people left behind suggest to archaeologists that, regionally, there were many differences in lifeways. The varied landscape and environments of Wisconsin were part of the reason for the variety of lifeways.



Artist's rendition of a Woodland house

Rock Art

Carvings or paintings on rock surfaces begin to appear during this time period. It is difficult to know if people first started using this means of expression at this time period or if examples of rock art from previous groups just have not been discovered or preserved. Archaeologists do see carvings (petroglyphs) and paintings (pictographs) on rock surfaces in Wisconsin.

Images include pictures of the different animals that were important in the lives of the people, particularly deer, elk, and bison. There are also pictures that may come from the myths and traditional stories that tell the history of the people. These images may include the thunderbirds. It is hard to know which images were made during this time or during later times, because rock art is difficult to date.



Rock art-petroglyph of deer.

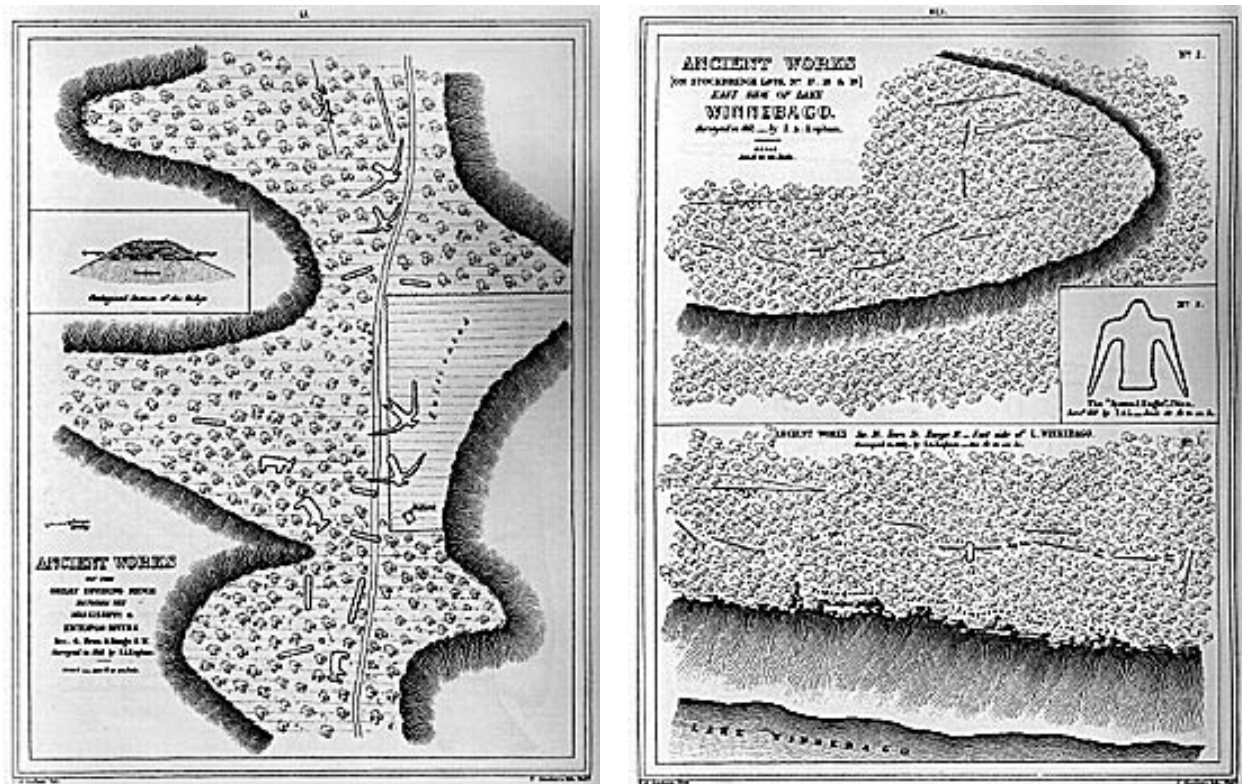
Most of the images have been found in the “Driftless Area” of southwestern Wisconsin. This area provides exposed rock and rockshelters that are ideal for carving or painting images.

Mounds

As with past traditions, archaeologists know little about the religion or political systems of the Woodland people. Archaeologists have found man-made mounds around the state that have been dated to this time. Exactly why they were made is unknown. They may have been made as part of a ceremony or to mark territories or trails. Often they are located on prominent ridges that would have been visible from a distance, and may have marked the margins of territories.

Some of the mounds contain burials, others do not. Some of the burials were placed in the mounds during construction and some were placed in the mounds after their completion. Groups of people may have gathered annually or every few years to build mounds and bury those members of their community who had passed away since the last gathering.

Mounds were made in a variety of shapes. Early mounds were conical (circular). Later effigy mounds were made in the shapes of animals such as bears, panthers, birds and other animals. Effigy mounds are unique to a small area of the country. They are only found in southwestern Wisconsin, southeastern Minnesota, and northeastern Iowa.



Maps of Woodland mound groups

See also [Archaeological Basics-Studying burial mounds](#)

See also [Wisconsin Sites-Mound sites](#)

Hopewell

During the middle of Woodland times, some Wisconsin residents interacted with groups in Ohio and Illinois. Most of the people in Wisconsin followed the Woodland tradition, however, some people adapted some of the ideas of the people in Ohio and Illinois. The resulting culture is called Hopewell. The Hopewell culture has its roots in the trade systems and social complexity of the Red Ocher people (see discussion under the Archaic Tradition). Hopewell was a specialized kind of Woodland lifeway, something like a “fancy” or high-status Woodland.

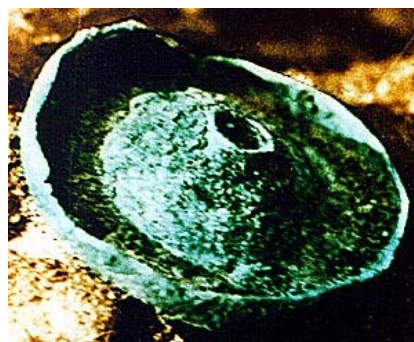
There are only a few sites in Wisconsin where people followed this unique lifeway. These sites are mainly in the southwestern part of the state along the Mississippi River. The Hopewell culture was more evident in Illinois and southern Ohio. Rivers provide an avenue for travel, trade and communication, a perfect means to bring Hopewell culture to Wisconsin. The people in Wisconsin who were involved in Hopewell culture only adopted a limited number of the Hopewell traits from all those used by the people in Illinois and Ohio. A characteristic of the Hopewell cultures is their large conical mounds. Some contained burial tombs.

Hopewell people were also involved in elaborate trade networks. Some objects placed with the burials were made from materials found outside Wisconsin. Some of these items were traded from great distances. A black shiny glass-like stone called obsidian, used to make projectile points, was traded from Wyoming. Marine shells, used for decorations, came from the Gulf Coast. Some of the items made from exotic materials that were used for rituals or placed in burials included large knives, pipes and copper axes, beads and **earspools**.

See also [Wisconsin Sites-Nicholls Mound](#)



A variety of stone and bone tools are found with Hopewell sites. On the left are drilled bear canines; in the center are projectile points of exotic stones; on the upper right are copper beads, and in the lower right are a limestone pipe and below is the base of a clay figurine.



Earspool

Lifestyle Changes

The climatic and environmental differences between northern (pine forest) and southern (deciduous forest) Wisconsin are responsible for people developing different lifeways in northern and southern Wisconsin. People in the northern part of the state continued to follow the Woodland hunting, gathering and gardening traditions until the arrival of Europeans. Cool temperatures and a shorter growing season prevented the adaptation of full scale farming in the northern part of the state. Northern people, however, began to harvest wild rice and it became one of the most important foods, even today.

Woodland people in the southern part of Wisconsin adapted their Woodland lifeways to two new lifeways called Mississippian and Oneota. Both of these traditions were still involved in hunting and gathering but both became full scale farming cultures. These traditions continued in the southern part of Wisconsin until the arrival of Europeans. Some Mississippian and Oneota artifacts have been found in the northern part of Wisconsin but not in quantities that would indicate that these cultures had a major impact on the northern Wisconsin Woodland lifeways.

See also [Archaeological Basics-Dating the traditions](#)





Early Cultures: Pre-European Peoples of Wisconsin

OVERVIEW OF THE WOODLAND TRADITION

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Name: _____

Tradition Name	
Lifeways	
Time	
Climate	
Environment	
Settlement	
Food	
Tools	
Toolkit	
Household	
Religion/Rituals	
Social/Political	
How Different From Previous Group	
Major World Events	



Early Cultures: Pre-European Peoples of Wisconsin

OVERVIEW OF THE WOODLAND TRADITION

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Tradition Name	Woodland
Lifeways	Hungers, gatherers, fishers and gardeners
Time	Southern Wisconsin 500 B.C. to 1200 A.D. Northern Wisconsin 500 B.C. to 1700 A.D.
Climate	It was very much like it is today.
Environment	It was very similar to today.
Settlement	Larger groups of 50 to 100 people, or more, would gather for short times during the summer. They separated into smaller groups of 25 to 50 during the winter when food was scarce. Camps developed along rivers and lakes in the summer and in more protected places during the winter.
Food	Squash and sunflower seeds, which were grown in small gardens, were added to the previously used wild food items. Towards the end, people started growing corn. Rivers and lakes provided fish, clams and turtles. Deer, small mammals and birds continued to be used.
Tools	The smaller and more efficient bow and arrow began to be used by the individual hunter. Spears and nets were now used for fishing.
Toolkit	Spear points, arrowheads, bow and arrow, knives, modified flakes, hammerstones, manos and metates, abraders and pottery
Household	Seasonal, housing structures began to be used during this period. Pottery was first introduced during this time. Gourds and squashes were used for vessels and food. Textiles and fabrics were decorated with shell beads and dyed with natural dyes. Tobacco and pipes began to be used.
Religion/Rituals	During this period large scale and elaborate burial rituals took place, particularly the Hopewell culture. Conical, linear, and animal shaped mounds began to be employed. Rock art also appeared during this time.
Social/Political	A large scale network of trade developed at this time, extending from the Gulf Coast to Canada, Wyoming to West Virginia and Ohio. Ritual goods and raw materials were exchanged. People were organized in large groups for social and ritual gatherings.
How Different From Previous Group	Burials of the dead were more elaborate. People were more politically structured and became more localized and territorial. Pottery and gardening had their beginnings at this time.
Major World Events	100 B.C. - Great Wall of China 0 - Birth of Christ 400 A.D. - Fall of Rome 1,000 A.D. - City of Timbuktu built in West Africa