



## Eastern Woodland Indian Life

When European explorers first arrived on the east coast of North America, vast forests covered the entire region. The Native peoples who lived here at the time had oriented their lifestyle to these forests, and so they are collectively referred to as the Eastern Woodland Indians.

Most of what we know about the Late Woodland groups in Maryland comes from early colonial accounts and archaeological investigations. Both indicate that the typical settlements built between 400 – 600 years ago included small round houses, called wigwams, or oval and rectangular longhouses. These structures were often located in palisaded villages or in dispersed hamlets among agricultural fields.

### What They Ate

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They harvested their food from the forest, and from freshwater or tidal streams and marshes. Locations of Late Woodland archaeological sites document their preference for settling along these rich ecological “edges.” By about 900 A.D., they were supplementing their diets by growing corn, beans, squash, sunflowers and pumpkins. They weeded their gardens with hoes made from oyster shells or deer scapula (shoulder bones).

Corn was a favorite food, and it was prepared in many different ways. Fresh corn was scraped into pots to cook with other foods, and ears of green corn were roasted in hearth ashes. Green corn was also dried on the cob to preserve it for winter eating. Dried corn was ground into cornmeal, which was mixed with water and either boiled or cooked on hot rocks by the fire. Dried corn could also be boiled with lye (ash from hearths) to make hominy.

They usually ate squash fresh from the fields, but they often roasted ripe pumpkins whole on the hearth. Slices of both were also dried and then hung in the ceilings of the houses, where the smoke from the fires kept it from spoiling. They stored baskets or pottery vessels of extra food in pits lined with bark, grasses, or corn husks

Even though the Woodland Indians successfully practiced farming, they continued to take advantage of their environment as hunter-gatherers. Women gathered berries, nuts, roots and other plant material. Men hunted rabbit, raccoon, deer, and turkey, and caught fish and shellfish from the local waterways. Meat not immediately eaten was cut into strips, smoked, and dried. This “jerky” could be added to stews in the winter or mixed with dried berries and animal fat to make pemmican.

### Things They Made

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Women made ceramic pots in which to cook and store food, and decorated these pots by pressing sharp sticks, hollow reeds or stems, their finger nails, or even fossilized shark’s teeth, into the wet clay. Baskets were made from tree bark, and the stems and leaves of various plants.

Woodland Indians crafted arrowheads, spear points, drills, knives, and scrapers, from stone, and they carved fleshers, needles, and hooks from bone. Tools were attached to wood or bone handles with glue

made from deer hide and hooves, or the pitch from trees; then the joints were wrapped tight with sinew or rawhide.

### **More about Their Lifeways**

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Woodland Indians didn't track time as closely as we do, but they did note the dawn, the movement of the sun, and the cycles of the moon. Seasons were oriented to changes in the weather and when different foods were available. A fifth season was connected to the first harvest of green corn. Passing years were counted by the number of winters, or *cohonks* – the sound of migrating geese flying overhead.

Both men and women wore short aprons made of deerskin tied around their waists. In cold weather they may have worn leggings, moccasins, and fur capes or mantles. In the warmer months, some natives, especially young children, might not wear anything at all. Plants, such as cattails, were woven into capes or mats. These mats and animal furs were used for bedding on benches built into the sides of their houses.

Most of the Northeast Algonquian groups were organized as tribes. In the Chesapeake Bay region, some of these tribes were developing into chiefdoms at the time Europeans began arriving. For the Woodland Indians family was the core of social life, and extended family members lived together in one house or hamlet. Social ties and clan identification were traced through the mother's family in a matrilineal system. A Woodland Indian child belonged to his or her mother's clan, and her brothers were the main authority figures in his or her life.