

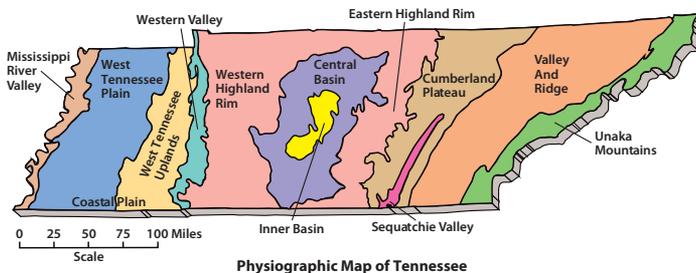
# A History of Tennessee

## The Land and Native People

Tennessee's great diversity in land, climate, rivers, and plant and animal life is mirrored by a rich and colorful past. Until the last 200 years of the approximately 12,000 years that this country has been inhabited, the story of Tennessee is the story of its native peoples. The fact that Tennessee and many of the places in it still carry Indian names serves as a lasting reminder of the significance of its native inhabitants. Since much of Tennessee's appeal for settlers lay with the richness and beauty of the land, it seems fitting to begin by considering some of the state's generous natural gifts.

Tennessee divides naturally into three "grand divisions"—upland, often mountainous, East Tennessee; Middle Tennessee, with its foothills and basin; and the low plain of West Tennessee. Travelers coming to the state from the east encounter first the lofty Unaka and Smoky Mountains, flanked on their western slope by the Great Valley of East Tennessee. Moving across the Valley floor, they next face the Cumberland Plateau, which historically attracted little settlement and presented a barrier to westward migration. West of the Plateau, one descends into the Central Basin of Middle Tennessee—a rolling, fertile countryside that drew hunters and settlers alike. The Central Basin is surrounded on all sides by the Highland Rim, the western ridge of which drops into the Tennessee River Valley. Across the river begin the low hills and alluvial plain of West Tennessee. These geographical "grand divisions" correspond to the distinctive political and economic cultures of the state's three regions.

Tennessee possesses an advantageous climate for people and agriculture, with abundant rainfall and a long, temperate growing season. The area is generally free from the long droughts and freezes of more extreme climates. The three major rivers that flow around and across Tennessee—the Mississippi, Tennessee, and Cumberland rivers—have created watersheds that cover most of the state. The Tennessee River forms near Knoxville and flows in a southwesterly direction into Alabama, then loops back north to the Kentucky border. The Cumberland River drains northern Middle Tennessee, and West Tennessee is covered by a network of sluggish streams, swamps, and lakes that flow directly into the Mississippi River. These rivers and their tributary streams have



Physiographic Map of Tennessee

played a significant role from the earliest times by yielding fish and mussels, by serving as major transportation routes, and by creating the fertile bottom soils that attracted farmers.

Fossil-laden rocks found across Tennessee attest to the fact that warm, shallow seas covered the state in the distant past. Coal-bearing strata of the Pennsylvanian period are present throughout the Cumberland Plateau. Plant and dinosaur fossils of the Cretaceous epoch occur in the sandstones of West Tennessee. Remains of extinct mammoths, mastodons, and giant sloths, driven south by the advancing glaciers of the Ice Age, can be found in the Pleistocene deposits of West and Middle Tennessee.

The story of man in Tennessee begins with the last retreat of the Ice Age glaciers, when a colder climate and forests of spruce and fir prevailed in the region. Late Ice Age hunters probably followed animal herds into this area some 12,000–15,000 years ago. These nomadic Paleo-Indians camped in caves and rock shelters and left behind their distinctive arrowheads and spear points. They may have used such Paleolithic tools to hunt the mastodon and caribou that ranged across eastern Tennessee. About 12,000 years ago, the region's climate began to warm, and the predominant vegetation changed from conifer to our modern deciduous forest. Abundant acorn, hickory, chestnut, and beech mast attracted large numbers of deer and elk. Warmer climate, the extinction of the large Ice Age mammals, and the spread of deciduous forests worked together to transform Indian society.

During what is known as the Archaic period, descendants of the Paleo-Indians began to settle on river terraces, where they gathered wild plant food and shellfish in addition to hunting game. Sometime between 3,000 and 900 B.C., natives took the crucial step of cultivating edible plants such as squash and gourds—the first glimmerings of agriculture. Archaic Indians thereby ensured a dependable food supply and freed themselves from seasonal shortages of wild plant foods and game. With a more secure food supply, populations expanded rapidly, and scattered bands combined to form larger villages.



Woodland Indians first developed farming in Tennessee.

The next major stage of Tennessee pre-history lasted almost 2,000 years and is known as the Woodland period. This era saw the introduction of pottery, the beginnings of settled farming communities, the construction of burial mounds, and the growing stratification of Indian society. Native Americans in Tennessee made the transition from societies of hunters and gatherers to well-organized tribal, agricultural societies dwelling in large, permanent towns.

The peak of prehistoric cultural development in Tennessee occurred during the Mississippian period (900–1600 A.D.). Cultivation of new and improved strains of corn and beans fueled another



Early man hunted mastodon that roamed during the last Ice Age.