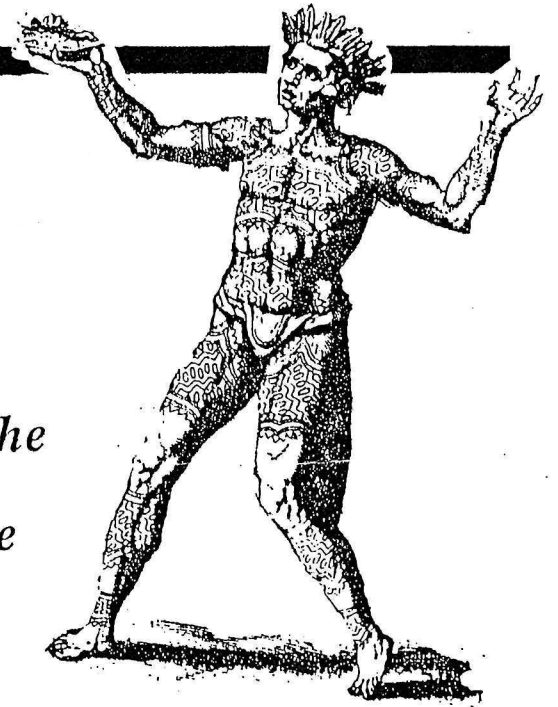


Timucuan

Ecological & Historic Preserve
National Park Service
U.S. Department of Interior

"People of the Shell Mounds"

"They be all naked and of a goodly stature, mighty, faire and as well shapen and proportioned of bodye as any people in all the worlde, very gentill, curtious and of a good nature...the men be of tawny collour, hawke nosed and of a pleasant countenance...the women be well favored and modest..."



With these words, French explorer Jean Ribault described the native population he first encountered in Florida. The Timucuan tribe of chief Sauriwa, encountered by the French at the mouth of the St. Johns River in 1562, was a culture whose basic ways of life had not changed for more than 1000 years. These people, the Timucuans, inhabited central and north Florida and southeastern Georgia. "Timucua" was the common language spoken.

Today's knowledge of Timucuan culture is derived only from historical and archaeological research.

Anthropologists refer to the prehistoric inhabitants of northeast Florida as the St. Johns People: "People of the Shell Mounds."

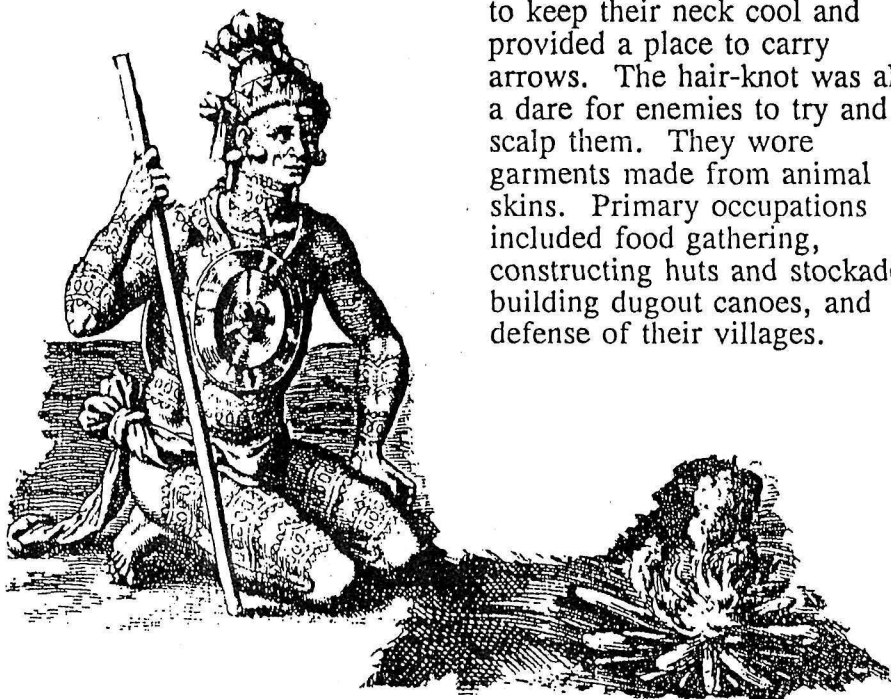
Related villages were under the political control of a tribal head-chief. Tribes were organized socially and politically through a system of ranked clans. Wealth and title were inherited through the mother's brother. At no point in time were all Timucuans united into one ethnic or political unit.

Timucuan men were muscular, agile, and tall, averaging slightly over six feet in height. Previous mythology placing the height of Timucuan men at seven feet has been rebuked by archaeological research. Their hair was worn tied on top of the head in a knot to keep their neck cool and provided a place to carry arrows. The hair-knot was also a dare for enemies to try and scalp them. They wore garments made from animal skins. Primary occupations included food gathering, constructing huts and stockades, building dugout canoes, and defense of their villages.

Timucuan women were reserved, maternal, and strong. Their raven-black hair was worn long down their backs. If their husband died they cut their hair short as a sign of mourning and were only allowed to remarry once the hair had grown back to its original length. Women wore garments made of Spanish Moss. Their ornaments included necklaces of shell beads, bracelets of fish teeth, and bone hair pins. Primary occupations for women were raising children, gathering/preparing food, weaving, and pottery making.

Elite members of Timucuan society were tattooed. Dye was rubbed into intricate geometric designs carved in the skin with sharp tools. When the wound healed the tattoo was permanent. Colors used were red, black, yellow, and blue. Chiefs had the skin around their lips tattooed blue as a symbol of their authority.

Pre-contact Timucuan subsistence was centered on fishing, hunting and gathering in the forests and swamps, and planting maize, beans, and squash. Weapons included spears, clubs, stone axes, knives, and slings. The main weapon was a bow and arrow with projectile points made from chert (flint), bone, shell and shark teeth.





Tragically, the imposition in later years by the Spanish of both the mission and forced tribute systems, coupled with disease and attacks by other Indian groups devastated Timucuan numbers. Social, political, and religious systems were forever changed. It's estimated that from a population numbering possibly in the tens of thousands at first contact, only 550 Timucuan were still alive in 1698.

Shellfish were collected from both fresh and salt water and formed a major portion of the Timucuan diet. Disposal of the empty shells resulted in the extensive shell mounds that exist along the banks of the St. Johns River today.

Villages were built near or along bodies of water. Houses were circular with conical-shaped, palm-thatched roofs and walls of woven vines caulked with clay (daub). Public granaries and large oval council houses were common. Large villages had open ceremonial squares where festivals, dances, and religious ceremonies were held.

Travel across northeast Florida's shallow waterways was made via a unique type of craft; the dugout canoe. Hewn from either tall pine or cypress trees, dugout canoes were built by placing burning coals along the tree trunk. The coal-charred wood was then scraped away with sharp shell or stone tools. This process was continued until the walls were an inch or two thick. The bottom of the dugout was flat; the stern was rounded; and the bow was usually higher than the rest of the canoe.

The Timucuan helped their new French neighbors adapt to the New World environment by assisting them in building a village and fort. The French, painfully aware of their minority status, initially made every effort to avoid alienating local tribes. Only when the threat of starvation appeared after ten months in Florida did this policy begin to unravel.

Although the Timucuan apparently remained neutral during the attack by the Spanish against the French fort in September, 1565, they actively assisted de Gourges' forces in the successful French recapture effort in April, 1568.

French colonist Jacques le Moyne's sketches of Timucuan ceremonies and customs provided Europeans with some of their first views of Native Americans. Franciscan priest Francisco Pareja's translation of a set of catechisms and confessionals from Spanish into Timucuan in 1612 marked the first translation involving a New World language.



There are no known Timucuan descendants alive today even though the Timucuan people dominated northeast Florida for more than 1000 years with little cultural change.

The lesson to be learned from the existence and disappearance of the Timucuan people is that in a clash of cultures ultimately one group, no matter how advanced or well established, may vanish.

