



# THE EARLY ARCHAIC

DEEPLY ROOTED IN | NATIVE GROUND

KENTUCKY ARCHAEOLOGY MONTH  
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## Early Archaic: 8000-6000 BC

The Early Archaic period in Kentucky was a time of change, environmentally and culturally. The glaciers retreated and the climate warmed. Semi-glacial evergreen forests became the mixed deciduous forests we recognize today. Large megafauna, such as the mammoth and mastodon of the preceding Paleoindian period, were going extinct. Familiar animals, such as deer, elk, and bear took their place, as did smaller mammals like raccoon, opossum, fox, and squirrel. New bird, fish, amphibian and reptile species appeared, too.

Native peoples living in Kentucky adapted to these changing conditions: socially (how they related to each other), economically (how they obtained food and goods), and technologically (how they made their tools). Archaeologists think it likely that Kentucky's Early Archaic groups were the descendants of hunter-gatherers from the Southeastern U.S.- places like Alabama, Georgia, and the Carolinas. Once they arrived in Kentucky, though, they stayed for a long, long, time.

Early Archaic peoples were mobile hunter-gatherers. They traveled across large territories in small groups – bands of family members – and they did not stay long in one place. Archaeologists know this because Early Archaic peoples obtained much of the chert (or flint) for their spearpoints, scrapers, and drills during their travels across the land. They carried these tools wherever they went. And when the tools were no longer useful, the people threw the tools away as trash, in places far from where they had acquired the raw material.

These people moved in search of game, particularly deer and small mammals. Unlike their ancestors, Early Archaic hunters used the atlatl (spear thrower) to bring down game. They gathered plants whenever they were available, and nuts were a particularly important food source, especially black walnuts. But plants in general likely played only a minor role in their diet. Archaeologists have recovered many stone adzes- a woodworking tool- at Early Archaic campsites. This shows that Early Archaic peoples used plant resources, such as wood, for purposes other than nutrition.

Floodplains and rockshelters were their favored campsite locations. Today, the remains of these campsites are often deeply buried under

silt dropped by floodwaters or under the accumulated trash left from repeated stays in caves and rock overhangs.

Groups were attracted to spots for a host of different reasons. Some places were situated near sources of high-quality chert. People might come back repeatedly to these places over a period of years. They might camp at other spots along their routes only once or a few times. In these cases, archaeologists have found evidence of fireplaces, or hearths. Yet other localities might be where groups of people came together to socialize for short periods of time throughout the year.

Early Archaic toolmakers were master craftspeople- expert at making finely chipped stone tools that were beautiful as well as practical. By routinely resharpening a tool's edges, they could extend its use life, or transform it into a different kind of tool altogether. They disposed of the waste from making stone tools on the ground or along a riverbank. These concentrations of chipped stone, called debitage, tell archaeologists how Early Archaic flintknappers made their tools.

Spearpoints early in the period were large and had notches on the sides of their bases. These notches helped hunters attach a stone spearpoint to a wooden spear. Spearpoints with side-notches are called Big Sandy, St. Charles, Thebes, and Kessell. Over time, spearpoint styles changed. Corner-notched examples became common. Archaeologists call these spearpoints Kirk Corner Notched, Kirk Serrated, Pinetree, and Stillwell. Other spearpoint forms had bifurcated (split) bases, or ones with two notches in the base.

### **Read More:**

Archaic Period by Richard W. Jefferies in *The Archaeology of Kentucky: Past Accomplishments, Future Directions* Volume One State Historic Preservation Comprehensive Plan Report No. 1, D. Pollack, ed. pp. 143-246. Kentucky Heritage Council, Lexington, Kentucky.



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