

Archaeology of Birmingham Area's Indigenous People

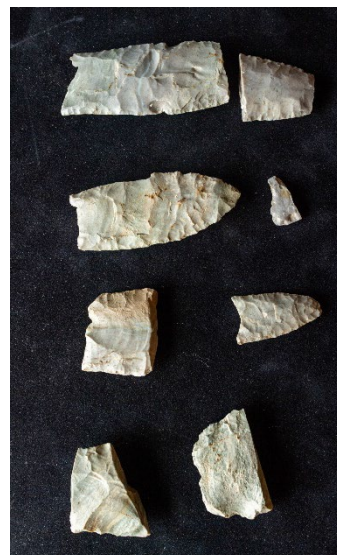
Caitlin Donnelly, Birmingham Museum

Indigenous presence in Birmingham spans the Ice Age (approximately 10,000 years ago) to the time of the first white settlement of Birmingham in 1818. Caitlin Donnelly discusses what we know about the Indigenous people who occupied the Birmingham area, and how the Saginaw Trail connects their past occupancy with the present.

Current research at sites like White Sands, New Mexico, is pushing back the date that humans arrived in the Americas from Asia. Previous models held that humans crossed the "Bering Land Bridge" (between what is today Siberia and Alaska) between 13,000 and 10,000 years ago, when the ice sheets that covered North America began to recede after the last Ice Age. But new research suggests that humans were in the Americas at least a few thousand years before that. Seeds found imbedded in human footprints at the White Sands site have been dated to 23,000 years ago. This has suggested new theories, including one called the "Kelp Highway" that posits that humans may have reached the Americas by skimming the coastline in small boats, seeking food like fish and marine mammals.

While ice may not have played the big role that we once thought when it came to the peopling of the Americas, it did play a big role in when those peoples could reach the Great Lakes area. The ice sheet that covered Michigan was about one mile thick, and when it receded about 14,000 years ago, it carved out the lakes that our state is known for. It also left rivers, hills and other geographic features.

At present, the oldest known site of human occupation or activity is in St. Joseph County in western Michigan, and is 13,000 years old. What do we find in sites that old? Stone is one of the most durable items in the archaeological record and archaeologists working on the history of Indigenous peoples in the Americas use the size and shape of stone tools to date sites and to mark different periods and delineate between different cultures in the past. Sometimes, items like bone, leather or basketwork also survives but stone tools are the most numerous. The St. Joseph site seems to have been used by a group of five or six individuals for several weeks while they were manufacturing spear points. The points were made of a fine-grained stone (chert) that originated in west-central Indiana about 150 miles south. This indicates that this group was either highly mobile and transported the chert to Michigan; or that they were connected to a large trade network that transported the stone to them.



A selection of projectile points found at a manufacturing site in St. Joseph County in 2021, the oldest known Michigan site, dating to about 13,000 years ago. (Photo, courtesy University of Michigan, <https://news.umich.edu/farm-field-find-rewrites-archaeological-history-in-michigan/> Accessed 11/1/2023.

The shape of these projectile points can tell us a lot about their age and who made them. The points at the St Joseph County site are known as "Clovis points" (named after Clovis, New Mexico, where stone tools created in this style were first discovered). These points are large, fluted, bi-faced spear points used all over what is now the United States from 13,400 to

12,700 years ago. They were designed to hunt large prey, and are unique to North America.

Those large prey animals are responsible for a transportation route that many folks in Oakland County use every day—Woodward Avenue. As the glaciers receded, the land left behind was quite swampy. Animals moving into the region looking for food kept to the highest ground and began creating trails. The people following these animals in turn followed these trails, and over the succeeding generations continued to use them, creating major foot trails. (One of these trails was an important transportation route for the first white settlers coming to Oakland County in the years after the War of 1812. Known as the “Saginaw Trail,” it stretched from the river in Detroit all the way to the Saginaw Bay area, eventually became today’s Woodward Avenue, and is the subject of [a book](#) by that name available at the Birmingham Museum.)

And, what were those large prey animals? One of the biggest and most common animals in the area of Oakland County was the mastodon, a cousin of the modern day elephant that ranged between 7 and 10 feet tall and weighed as much as 6 tons. Mastodon remains have been found all over Oakland county and particularly along the Saginaw Trail/Woodward Avenue. Other large animals that lived in this area at this time were elk, caribou, giant beavers, muskoxen and mammoths. But as the Ice Age ended, many of those large animals either died out or moved further north, leaving behind smaller animals like deer. For the Indigenous people in Oakland County, hunting technology had to change along with the climate and changing wildlife.

A set of stone projectile points collected at the Chatfield Farm site, just outside of Birmingham, gives us a good look at how the technology changed. Over a period of 9,000

years, from the earliest Ice Age occupation to contact with Europeans, the variety of points give a glimpse of how the trail system continued to be used by succeeding Indigenous cultures in the area. The Chatfield farm was located on a side trail that branched off from the main Saginaw Trail along a branch of the Rouge River. Projectile points collected at that location in the late 1920s date from 10,000 to 1,000 years ago.



The projectile points in this case, currently on display in the lobby of the Birmingham Museum, represent 9,000 years of Indigenous Peoples using a trail that was an off-shoot of the Saginaw Trail (modern day Woodward Avenue).

Why were these points found there? They may have been manufactured nearby, used in trade, lost, buried for later use, or discarded. Observe the different sizes and shapes of these tools, possibly used for hunting, cutting, hammering, etc.

These points represent what archaeologists call the “Archaic Period” throughout what is now the U.S., at a time when the climate was warming up and Indigenous people relied on a more diverse diet of food, including smaller game, seafood, and nuts and seeds. People living in different areas created specialized tools meant for their region’s unique food sources, while still incorporating materials traded from other areas. (For example, copper mined from Michigan’s Upper Peninsula was traded all the way to the Gulf Coast and obsidian points from volcanoes on the West Coast have been found on the East Coast.)

In the upper Midwest, the period starting about 1,000 years ago marks the transition point between Indigenous groups hunting and gathering only, to implementing more sophisticated seasonal harvesting and agricultural practices. In Oakland County, this took the form of a mix of hunting, gathering vegetables, fruits and seeds, fishing, and planting companion crops like squash, beans, and corn. The people migrated within their territory following established footpaths to seasonal camps, where they harvested naturally occurring foods, and annually maintained agricultural plots.



The artifacts in this case were collected by Fenton Watkins of Birmingham. They were found, acquired, and traded by amateur collectors from sources all over the United States, and date from several hundred years ago to modern reproductions. Watkins arranged them in pleasing patterns popular in the mid-20th century, but they have lost all cultural and physical context and unfortunately, cannot be effectively interpreted. (Birmingham Museum)

The archaeological record of Oakland County as well as nationally attests to the genius and adaptability of the Indigenous Peoples of this land, from the first “All-American” technology of the Clovis point to the resourceful and environmentally sustainable heritage of the Great Lakes tribes at the time of European contact. The Anishnaabeg, or three Great Lakes tribal groups that were actively present in Oakland County when Birmingham was settled now reside in western and northern Michigan, leaving little material culture behind. However, their cultural traditions have been preserved by

the Odawa, Ojibwe, and Potawatomi peoples who now reside largely in Western and Northern Michigan. [Read more](#) about the Indigenous people who once lived in Oakland County, and about their basket-making traditions here.

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