



Stereotypes, Myths, and North Dakota Prehistory

By Fred Schneider

The classic Plains Indian has dominated the imagination of the American public since the time of nineteenth-century exploration and military conquest of the Great Plains. For many people, the region's original inhabitants are invariably associated with such distinctive adaptations to the plains as tipi dwelling, buffalo hunting, and expert horsemanship. Unfortunately, such limited perceptions do little justice to the diversity of the plains tribes historically or prehistorically. Despite extensive archaeological research conducted in North Dakota and throughout the plains, misconceptions about the Plains Indians, their culture and their prehistoric past still abound. The following article addresses a common stereotype of the Plains Indian, and then examines the impact this and other perceptions have had on public understanding of North Dakota and **Great Plains prehistory**.

Figure 1. A historic view of an Equestrian Nomadic camp, based upon a painting made by Karl Bodmer of an Assiniboine camp ca. 1834. Note the use of the dog travois. A view such as this would have been possible in North Dakota from 1750 to 1880 A.D.



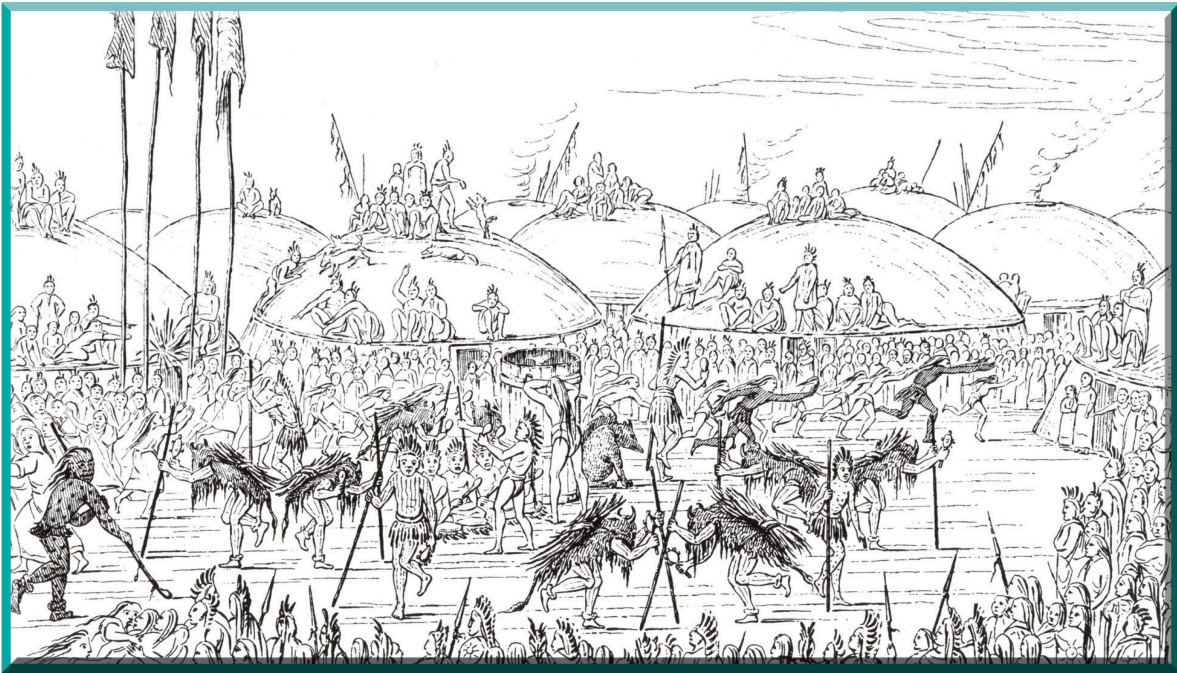


Figure 2. The historic view of a Mandan earthlodge village features homes that are circular and conical in form. This style replaced earlier long rectangular lodges at approximately 1500 A.D. (Engraving based on painting by George Catlin. SHSND 970.1-C289NL-V1-P190-plate 69)

Myths and **stereotypes** concerning the Plains Indians have competed with factual accounts since explorers and fur traders first crossed the region in the early 1800s. Certainly the travels of Lewis and Clark documented encounters and extended visits with Indians living in earthlodge villages along the Upper Missouri River. But it was later Euro-American expansion, coming into conflict with some of the nomadic tribes of the plains, that highlighted the buffalo hunting warrior complex. The eastern press—*Harper's*, *Leslie's Weekly*, and others made some of the first illustrations of these nomadic Plains Indians available to a broad audience, and imaginative writers and artists of fiction, film and television have followed.¹ Seizing upon selective images, the media over the years have emphasized this “horseriding, buffalo hunting, tipi dwelling” Indian that has come to represent all Indians in the minds of many Americans, as well as of people worldwide.

The **Plains Indian stereotype** suggests that a single form of cultural adaptation to the plains existed

during the historic period. In fact, the region was home to many tribal groups, each with unique cultural traits. **Archaeologists** have defined for the historic period two major Native American cultural adaptations—the Plains Village Tradition and the Plains Equestrian Nomadic Tradition.² These traditions allow archaeologists to catalog tribes by general similarities associated with specific time periods.

Peoples of the **Plains Village Tradition** were horticultural gardeners who occupied earthlodge villages located primarily in the Missouri River Valley in the Dakotas. In North Dakota, these cultures are historically identified as the Mandans, Hidatsas, and Arikaras.³ For a short time the Cheyennes and Yankton-Yanktonai Sioux participated in a similar lifestyle. Regardless of tribal variations, cultures of the Plains Village Tradition established characteristic housing, foods, and livelihoods that can be identified in prehistoric as well as historic sites. The following descriptions of the Plains Village Tradition are based on historical as well as archaeological research.

The Plains Village sites contained a few to dozens of earthlodge dwellings constructed of logs, willow branches and sod. Surrounding them were fortifications consisting of ditches and log palisades, sometimes utilizing adjacent steep hillsides for additional protection. The villages were situated along terraces overlooking major rivers, giving access to permanent water sources as well as bottomland forests that provided construction materials and fuel. Villagers raised gardens with many varieties of corn, beans, squash, sunflowers, melons, and tobacco in the fertile floodplains nearby.⁴ In North Dakota, the first documented evidence

of horticultural gardening is associated with this cultural type.⁵ Hunting was also important, illustrated by the quantity of butchered bison bone and the diversity of tools and artifacts made of bison bone.⁶ The distinctive garden hoe made from the shoulder blade or scapula of the buffalo is an artifact common to these villages. The numerous pieces of pottery encountered in excavations of these village sites attest to the importance of this technology.

This cultural adaptation (farming) first occurs in the archaeological record at about 1000 A.D.,

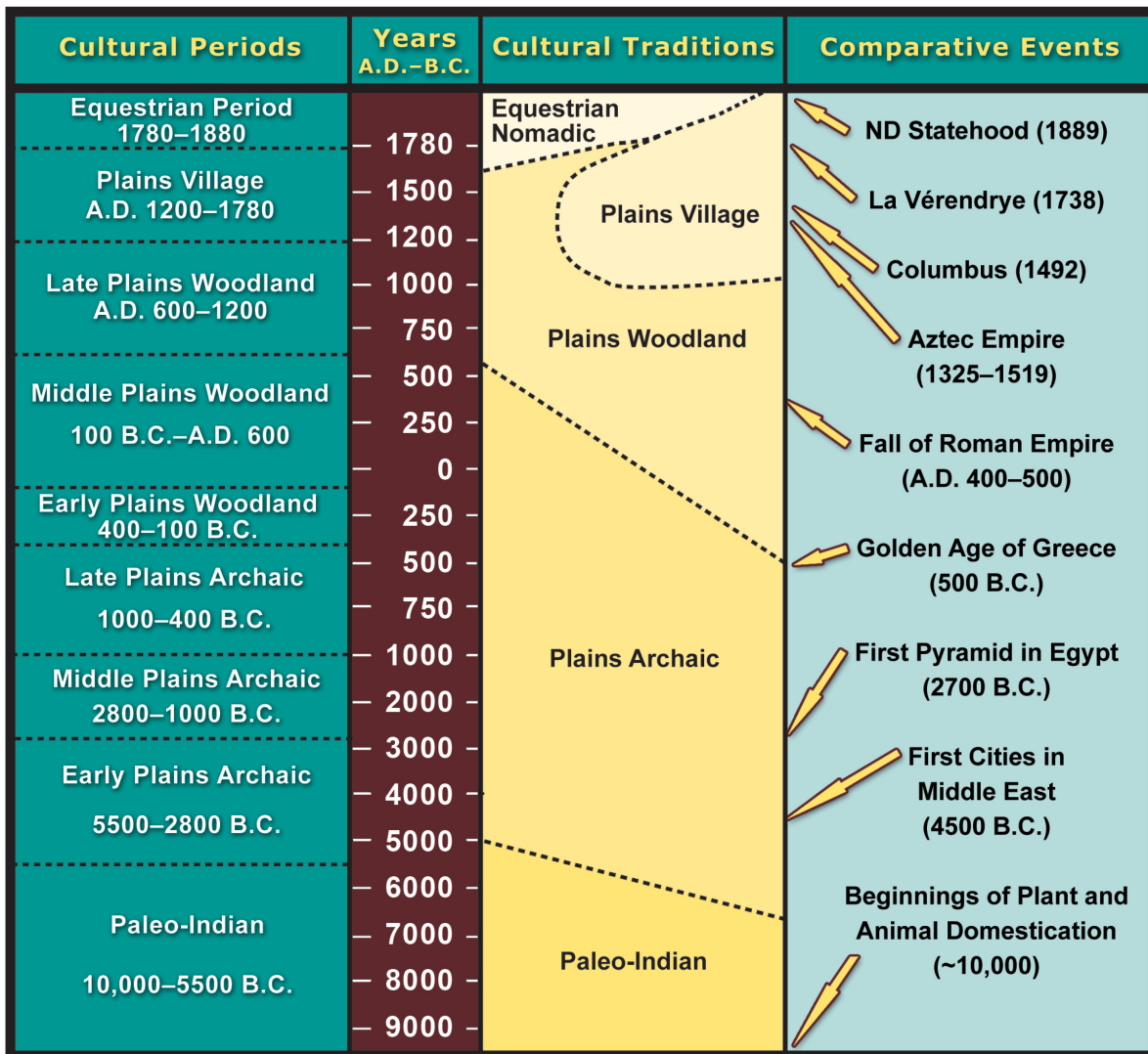


Figure 3. North Dakota Archaeological Periods and Traditions. Adapted from Michael Gregg, 1987. (Graphic by Cassie Theurer)

and is well documented at several earthlodge village sites preserved in North Dakota.⁷ Archaeological remains of earthlodge villages at Double Ditch, Menoken and Huff, state historic sites near Bismarck, North Dakota, provide information about these people and their culture spanning the prehistoric and early Euro-American influences (ca. 1400–1700 A.D.), while the Knife River Indian Villages National Historic Site near Stanton, North Dakota, allows investigation of these people during the early historic period (ca. 1700–1861 A.D.).

The second historic adaptation, the **Equestrian Nomadic Tradition**, is associated with people who made year-round use of the tipi, occupied semi-permanent tipi camps, were noted as expert horsemen and warriors, and focused their food quest on the migratory buffalo. In North Dakota, native peoples primarily occupying the prairie-plains are historically identified as the Sioux, Cheyennes, Crows, Plains Chippewas and Assiniboines. Since their nomadic lifestyle dictated the use of mobile dwellings and short-term occupation of their camps, there is little cultural refuse found at most of these sites. Their presence in the region is marked by the numerous rock circles or tipi rings that still exist throughout uncultivated areas of the state.⁸

Archaeologists are challenged by their study of this cultural adaptation, due to the limited artifacts recovered from most of these sites. A date usually given for the beginning of this tradition in North Dakota is 1750 A.D. In North Dakota, only one site, at present, can be associated with a tribally identified historic group of Equestrian Nomadic bison hunters. The **Ice Glider site**, situated on the west side of the Missouri River Valley opposite the town of Washburn, has been proposed as a winter camp of Yanktonai Dakotas, dating from ca. 1830–1860 A.D.⁹

Archaeologists face several major problems in relating particular tipi-ring sites to a specific tribe. The first concerns the lack of historic documentation. While historic records mention these tipi rings as well as the camps of historic tribes, the

information is not sufficiently explicit—to identify the exact location of a particular site. The second problem stems from the lack of cultural material recovered archaeologically from most of these sites. Without suitable archaeological materials, it is extremely difficult to determine the cultural or archaeological identity of the people who used these sites. **Tipi ring sites** associated with people of the Plains Village Tradition, who used tipis when they were hunting, generally cannot be distinguished from those of nomadic bison hunters.¹⁰ Obviously there is a danger in assuming that all tipis and tipi ring sites were used solely by Plains Equestrian Nomads. Finally, many of these fragile areas have been destroyed by agricultural activities. Many rocks that once formed tipi rings have been removed and placed in field rock piles.

It is clear from the archaeological record, therefore, that the early historic period was witness to two significant cultural adaptations. The Equestrian Nomadic lifestyle, which provided a basis for popular images of the Plains Indians, is but one of these adaptations, and one that is least documented by archaeological investigations and interpretations.

Recent Record of Human Occupation

Another common myth about Plains Indians is the idea that human occupation of the plains region was a relatively recent event.¹¹ Particularly pervasive is the belief that native peoples inhabited the plains only after the introduction of the horse and the gun.¹² Because early Euro-Americans struggled to survive on the plains, they questioned how anyone else could have managed with technologies less complex than theirs. They concluded that Native Americans were recent arrivals to the region. The paucity (scarcity) of archaeological investigations in the plains prior to the twentieth century substantiated this myth.

The more recent archaeological record, however, has documented the presence of human occupation of the plains dating from 12,000 years ago, based on

Clovis culture artifacts excavated and dated from elsewhere in the region.¹³ In North Dakota, excavations in the **Knife River Flint Quarries** of west central North Dakota provide evidence of early peoples, based on Folsom-age materials dating from 10,000 years ago.¹⁴ Thus there is evidence for an extensive period of human occupation in the region and in North Dakota long before the appearance of the horse and the gun. On the other hand, the Equestrian Nomadic Tradition, based on use of the horse, tipi, bow and arrow, and the gun, is a relatively recent cultural adaptation of short duration. Archaeologists can presently document tipi rings in North Dakota for the past two to three thousand years; the bow and arrow for the past two thousand years; and the horse and gun for only the past 240 years.¹⁵ Clearly, the most common image of the Plains Indian existed for only a brief moment in the total span of Native American occupation of the plains.

The Mound Builders or Pre-Indians

From the mid-1800s, travelers and settlers in North Dakota noted the presence of numerous conical earthen mounds. These mounds were similar to those described and investigated throughout much

of the eastern United States, leading to expectations that there was a connection between the peoples who built mounds in North Dakota and those who had done so throughout the east. Because mounds were seldom observed in use by historic tribes, and frequently contained elaborate artifacts of materials and designs not associated with historic tribes, the idea arose that mounds were the work of an earlier non-Indian people.

Thomas Jefferson is frequently cited as one of the first investigators of earthen burial mounds, which he explored near his home in Virginia.¹⁶ Many of the eastern mounds were noted for their size and complex construction, their burial chambers and graves, and their elaborate grave contents. As early as 1796, Frances Bailey, an English astronomer who examined earthen burial mounds along the Ohio River, speculated that the mounds were “built by a race of people more enlightened than the present Indians, and at some period of time very far distant; for the present Indians know nothing about their use, nor have they any tradition concerning them.”¹⁷

During the nineteenth century the idea of the prior existence of a race termed “pre-Indians” grew in

Figure 4. An excavated tipi ring or rock circle at the Sprenger site, 32SH205, in Sheridan County, North Dakota. The rocks are interpreted as weights to anchor the hide cover of the tipi. Artifacts were found within as well as outside the circle of rocks. The site is interpreted as a Plains Woodland period site. (Courtesy of Fred Schneider)





Figure 5. Profile view of a conical earthen burial mound. Mounds of this type were constructed primarily during the Plains Woodland period and served as places of interment and as memorials to the dead. These mounds were constructed from approximately the time of Christ to perhaps as late as 1100 to 1300 A.D. (Courtesy Fred Schneider)

popularity. These people—the **Mound Builders** as they were generally called—were particularly noted for the manufacture of elaborate artifacts placed with their dead. According to the myth, they had disappeared by moving to new lands or by being destroyed by the “barbarous savage Indians.”

North Dakota also was the scene of early exploration and speculation concerning its earthen burial mounds and their builders. In what is perhaps the earliest account of mound exploration in the state, Colonel William B. Marshall, an officer on the Henry H. Sibley expedition of 1863, described the exploration of a mound along the Sheyenne River east of Lisbon, North Dakota. He speculated that the “sepu[l]cher must date anterior to the present Indian races.”¹⁸ Marshall obviously was aware of the **Mound Builder myth**. The first published account of mound exploration in the state is that of General H.G. Thomas who, in 1872, while stationed at Fort Seward, excavated earthen mounds in the Jamestown area. By this time, mounds had been the focus of investigation throughout much of the eastern United States. General Thomas was disappointed in his findings and suggested on the basis of his excavation of one mound:

I cannot refrain hazarding the opinion, however, that they were the offshoot of the mound-builders whose larger works are seen as far north as Northern Ohio at least; that they deteriorated century after century in this barren northern section, until they became the people their skulls show them to have finally been; and so poor that a flint-headed weapon, a shell necklace, a stone for grinding their food; were all their starving, surviving relatives could afford them on their sorrowful journey to the spirit land.¹⁹

How else could General Thomas explain the simplicity of this mound and its modest artifacts in comparison to the more complex mounds and contents in the eastern United States?

The year 1883 marked the beginning of two major investigations of North Dakota mounds. Henry Montgomery, though not an archaeologist, was the first scientifically trained individual to conduct excavations in the state. He was hired by the newly established University of North Dakota to serve as Curator of the Museum and Professor of Natural

Science, in addition to his position as Vice-President.²⁰ His academic work, however, did not prevent him from devoting considerable time and energy to the discovery and excavation of mounds in eastern North Dakota. After five years he had reportedly opened and investigated some forty mounds; subsequently, an 1888 newspaper story quoted him as believing that the mounds were the work of a “race wholly extinct and in many respects quite different from the Indians of present time.”²¹ Unfortunately, Montgomery left scant information about his “explorations” and today we know little about the locations of the mounds he explored, their construction or their contents.²²

Another mound investigator in 1883 was Theodore Lewis, a land surveyor by training, who spent portions of 1883, 1886, and 1890 recording 212 mounds in North Dakota.²³ While not involved in mound excavation, Lewis, unlike Montgomery, kept voluminous notes and records of his observations. Since he meticulously documented and

mapped mound locations, the Lewis survey records are still of great value to archaeologists.

George Bryce, was yet another early investigator of mounds in this region. He speculated that the mounds were built, not by Indians, but perhaps by seafaring peoples from northern Europe (due to the presence of marine shells in the mounds) or by the Toltecs from Mexico (suggested by the similarity of the mound construction).²⁴ His writings and many of those of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century echo the idea of an earlier “pre-Indian” or Mound Builder “race.”

From a historical perspective, the persistence of the Mound Builder idea is fascinating, because Cyrus Thomas, one of the leading national investigators of mounds and the Mound Builder story, had published a lengthy, definitive study of this issue in 1894.²⁵ In what is still a classic example of scientific reasoning and analysis, Thomas demonstrated that the mounds were the work of

Figure 6. Example of conical and linear mounds that are joined, located near Jamestown, North Dakota.
(Courtesy Michael Gregg)



people ancestral to historic Indian tribes, and not of some earlier non-Indian race. But the myth proved more powerful than facts, and the pre-Indian Mound Builders continued to be credited in a variety of professional and popular publications.

In North Dakota, little scientific excavation and investigation of earthen mounds occurred for many years. Consequently, much of our knowledge of mounds—their construction, age, purpose, and contents—came from other regions. Prior to World War II, most mound excavations in the state were the focus of individuals in search of antiquities or exotic items, rather than trained observers gathering cultural, historic or scientific information. The first mound excavation in North Dakota by someone trained in modern archaeological methods was conducted by Gordon Hewes in 1949.²⁶ His work, and that of later archaeologists, demonstrated that the mounds contain quite sophisticated burials and artifacts. Further, the evidence proved that they were constructed and used by peoples who were culturally and biologically American Indians, although it is impossible to identify particular mounds or human skeletons within mounds as being ancestral to a specific tribe.

Even today, relatively few records and even fewer published analyses of North Dakota mound excavations exist. Thus, there is really very little known about the mounds, despite the forty-plus mounds explored by Montgomery, the dozens and perhaps hundreds looted by pothunters, and the several scientifically excavated but as yet unreported mounds. Substantive knowledge of the mounds, their structure, and contents is associated with the published accounts of only a dozen excavated mounds in the state. From these accounts, a number of facts have been established. Mound construction in North Dakota began about the time of Christ, not four thousand to five thousand years ago as some authors state, and continued as late as 1100 to 1300 A.D.²⁷ The majority of the state's mounds are located in the Missouri River Valley and in major river valleys of eastern North

Dakota. They occur as conical or linear mounds, and can be found singly or in groups.²⁸ Sometimes these two mound types are joined, and there exist situations where several conical mounds are joined by linear mounds, and/or linear mounds extend from the sides of conical mounds.

Whatever the shape, earthen mounds generally include the remains of more than one individual. Commonly, several individuals were placed in a central sub-mound burial pit, and later internments were made into the mound itself. Many of the earliest mounds also contained the skulls or skeletons of bison, suggesting that the ritual respect for bison is an ancient plains tradition. Burial artifacts often provide evidence of long-distance trade and contacts with people of other regions of the country. Forensic analyses of human skeletons in the mounds document people who were physically similar to historic Native Americans. Additional information has been gathered concerning their ancient diet and nutrition, skeletal pathologies and infectious diseases, mortality, and mortuary practices.²⁹ Today, mounds are recognized as markers of human graves and as cemeteries. Due to increased concerns about possible destruction or looting of earth mounds, the federal government and various state governing bodies have enacted policies as well as laws for their protection.

The Bow and Arrow and Related Matters

The **bow and arrow** has been integral to the image of the Plains Indian, and indeed was a weapon common to Plains Indian tribes during the early historic period. Because of misunderstandings about the bow and arrow prehistorically, people have made erroneous assumptions about projectile points. For most of human history, in North America and throughout the world, the bow and arrow was not present. The archaeological record gives evidence that the bow and arrow was a relatively late innovation, perhaps introduced in North Dakota about the time of Christ. Even then, it does not appear to have replaced the earlier spear or dart until perhaps as late as 600 to 700 A.D.³⁰

One of the most enduring and widespread myths concerns the function of **small arrowheads**. Artifact collectors often believe they were used to hunt small game, particularly birds, hence the common reference to them as “**bird points**.” However, historical, archaeological, and experimental findings clearly demonstrate that small, sharp-edged projectiles cast by a powerful bow can easily penetrate the hides of large game animals such as bison and deer and are proven killing implements. This is not to say that these same projectiles might not have been also used for hunting small game including birds. However, if all such projectiles functioned as “bird points,” then prehistoric and historic people must have had a passion for roast bird, and the archaeological and historical records provide no such evidence. Some historic accounts, in fact, document the manufacture of unique arrows without stone or bone projectile tips for the hunting of birds and small game.

Another issue concerns large projectile points, which are typical of most of the prehistoric record.

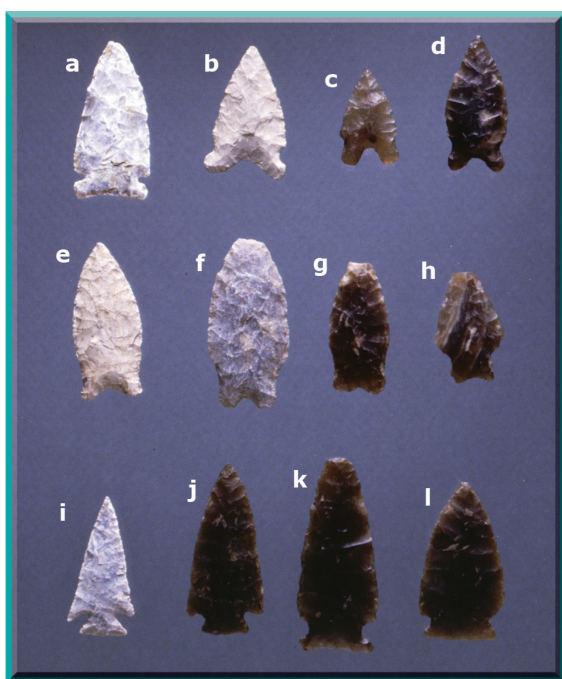


Figure 7. Plains Archaic projectile points. Specimens a (Logan Creek) and b (Oxbow) are Early Archaic; Specimens c through h are Middle Archaic (c–d, f–g, Duncan; e, McKean; h, Hanna); Specimens i through l are late Archaic (i–j, Pelican Lake, k–l, Besant). (SHSND AHP)

They are frequently referred to as spear or dart points, and many were probably intended and used for that function. There is ample proof that prehistoric hunters used large points, mounted on spears or darts, to successfully kill bison and other large game for thousands of years prior to the use of the bow and arrow.³¹ However, detailed microscopic examination and comparison of these specimens with ones used in experimental studies reveal that many archaeological specimens, including so-called **spear points**, functioned primarily as cutting or scraping tools.³² Some specimens may have served both functions, that is, first being used as a projectile to kill an animal, then used as a butchering tool to process a kill.

Yet another issue subject to speculation by the public is the large number of artifacts sometimes found at one location. It is not unusual to hear people suggest that such a discovery indicates the location of a battleground.³³ While there is both historic and archaeological evidence in this region of aggression and warfare, and battles most definitely took place, most discoveries of large numbers of projectile points at a single locality have a more mundane explanation.³⁴ Prehistoric peoples relied upon stone or flint, a relatively brittle substance, for the manufacture of many of their weapons and tools. Toolmakers created large numbers of objects in anticipation of their short-term use as well as their frequent breakage, loss, and discard. As people used and reused the same locality over years and generations, they made, used, discarded, or lost countless projectile points, resulting in the accumulation of considerable amounts of cultural debris.

What so many people fail to understand is that it is the **context** of prehistoric objects that allows them to be used to interpret the activities of early peoples. While projectile points are attractive to collectors and the public, it is only with scientific consideration of associated evidence that they can attain significance for understanding prehistory. If much of the evidence of the prehistoric record is ignored, discarded or forgotten in the search for arrowheads, the result is the perpetuation of false ideas about bird points, battlegrounds, or other

Archaeological Site Locations

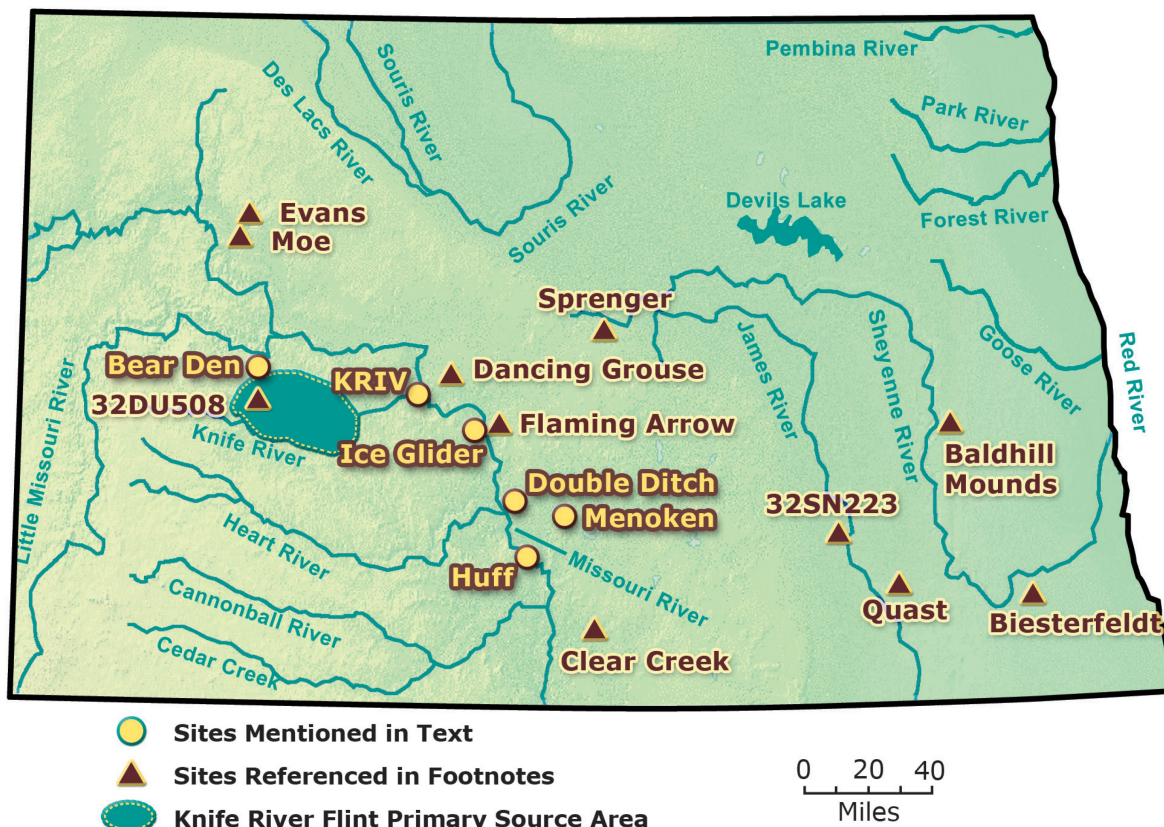


Figure 8. Archaeological Site Locations. (Graphic by Cassie Theurer)

myths. The archaeologist, when confronted with a site littered with stone points, asks: “What are all the pieces of evidence to be found?” If at the same site one also finds hide scrapers, butchering tools, debris from manufacture and use of stone tools, butchered animal bone, pieces of pottery, fire pits or storage pits, there are clear indications that the locality was used for more activities than a battle.

Archaeologists are interested in projectile points for the information such objects can provide about past peoples and cultures, information that comes from knowing the exact location of artifacts and the nature of their association with other artifacts and natural environmental features. Arrowheads by themselves are relatively meaningless. Rather, it is the information that they can provide about past behaviors and activities that make them interesting and of scientific, historic, and cultural value.

Artifacts and Tribal Identification

Archaeologists are frequently asked such questions as “Who made this arrowhead?” or “What tribe made this pottery?” These are difficult questions to answer, for even if an archaeological site can be identified as one occupied by a particular historic tribe, it is misleading to assume that all **artifacts** from that site were made by the site occupants, or to assume that all occupants of the site were members of the same tribe. Early historic and prehistoric people were extremely mobile. Individuals and entire social or political units frequently moved in seasonal patterns and were in contact with peoples of diverse cultural traditions. For instance, it is historically documented that the Mandan-Hidatsa villages at the mouth of the Knife River in central North Dakota were regu-

larly visited by Assiniboines, Cheyennes, Crows, Dakotas, Yanktonais, and Plains Chippewas. One must be careful not to attribute all artifacts found at these sites, whether they be arrowheads, scrapers, knives, beads or pottery, to the Mandans and Hidatsas. Most likely the majority of the objects at these village sites were made and used by the Mandans and Hidatsas, but many could have been the property of people from other tribes. People of diverse cultural backgrounds married into other groups, resided with or became captives of other groups, traded with other groups, and reused their abandoned settlements.

The various trade networks allowed widespread sharing of cultural styles as well as material and natural resources.³⁵ Knife River Flint has been found in prehistoric contexts as far east as Ohio, as far south as Kansas City, west into eastern Colorado and northwest almost to Calgary, Alberta.³⁶ In return, prehistoric North Dakotans received marine conch shell ornaments and beads from the Gulf Coast region; freshwater snail beads from the Ohio River drainage; native copper artifacts from the Upper Peninsula region of Michigan; red pipestone from southwestern Minnesota; steatite or soapstone from Wyoming or Montana; obsidian

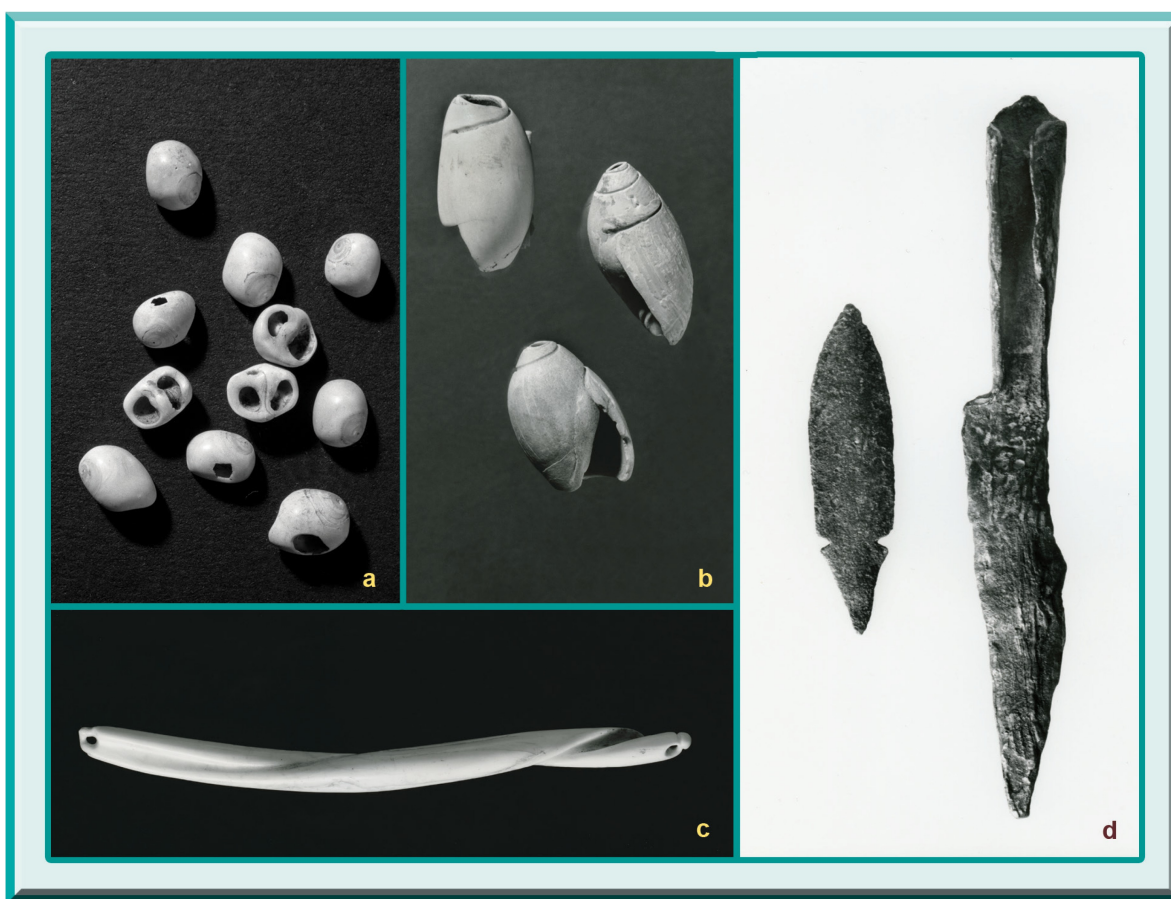


Figure 9. Objects traded into North Dakota in prehistoric times. a: beads made from *Leptoxis*, a freshwater shell from the Ohio and Cumberland drainage. b: beads made from *Olivella*, a saltwater shell found along the Pacific coast and the southeast of Atlantic coast of the United States. Most likely from the Plains Woodland or Plains Village period; c: a pendant made from the columella of a marine whelk shell, from along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts of the United States. Most likely from Plains Woodland or Plains Village period; d: two projectiles made of native copper probably obtained from sources in the Lake Superior region. Most likely from the Plains Archaic period. (SHSND AHP)

from Yellowstone Park and Idaho; and marine shell beads from the northern Pacific coastal region.³⁷ Prehistoric North Dakotans served as recipients as well as middlemen in the exchanges, and most likely introduced finished and decorated bison hides, hide shirts, perhaps bone tools and, later, garden produce and horses, in addition to the widely traded Knife River Flint.

The constant interaction of people and tribes assured the continued exchange of people, ideas, and goods and provided continual enrichment of the cultures of the Great Plains. Yet from the archaeologist's perspective, this dynamic interchange of people and objects tends to complicate efforts to define cultural and tribal boundaries during the prehistoric period, particularly when one attempts to attribute a particular artifact to a specific tribe.

Archaeological research has provided evidence of the presence and cultural diversity of people living in the Great Plains and in the region encompassed by North Dakota for the last 10,000 years. It is important to realize that just as cultural diversity existed among the plains tribes at the time of initial Euro-American contact, cultural diversity also existed over the longer period of prehistoric human occupation of the Great Plains.

Archaeology has and will continue to add to the story of North Dakota and its peoples of the recent as well as the distant past. Archaeology can substantiate and elaborate stories and records of past cultural achievements, can supplement the cultural record and can force the constant reevaluation of our knowledge and interpretations of the past. Indeed, the interpretations made by archaeologists today differ from those made in the past, and we can be assured that archaeologists in future generations will challenge our current interpretations of the past. For now, archaeological research has clearly contradicted the stereotypes and myths concerning North Dakota's prehistoric peoples. Consequently, the public must abandon these dearly held notions and give ancient Indian people the recognition they deserve.

About the Author

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