The transition from the Paleo-Indian to the Archaic Period 10,000 years ago is characterized by a number of significant shifts. The first is the increase in population. Estimates of the growth of population during the Archaic Period in Coastal Virginia are from fewer than 3,000 at the beginning to as many as 8,000 by the end of the Late Archaic Period.

The southernmost edge of the last ice sheet had receded to New York and Pennsylvania. As the climate warmed, hardwood and a variety of pine forests replaced the flat, damp unfrosted grasslands. Elk, buffalo, deer, and smaller mammals replaced the mastodons and mammoths that had sustained the Paleo-Indian people.

The Phase I archaeology report from the James River Institute for Archaeology summarizes the Archaic Period in the introduction to the report, excerpted below:

As the glaciers continued to melt, the sea level in the Mid-Atlantic region rose rapidly, between about 8,000 and 3,000 B.C. Paleo-Indian occupation was replaced by Archaic cultures, whose sites are far more numerous and widespread than the former. Evidence from other areas in North America suggests that Archaic peoples intensively exploited both marine and riverine aquatic resources, and one might easily suppose that Archaic groups lived by the coast in the Mid-Atlantic.

The long period of Archaic occupation is also characterized by a more diverse subsistence strategy based on the seasonality of resources. These new adaptations were linked to a warming climate and an expansion of plant and animal communities. The Archaic economy was based on generalized hunting and gathering with the exploitation of small and large game, aquatic resources, and a variety of nuts, berries, roots, and other foodstuffs. There was also a shift toward the use of locally available quartz and quartzite for tool manufacture and a radically decreasing dependence upon chert and jasper materials found in far fewer locations.

Coastal Virginia was probably occupied continuously throughout this long period of time. Base camps, temporary hunting camps, and sites for procuring special resources (clay, shellfish, wild plants, nuts, etc.) were probably located in riverine or estuarine settings and along the margins of swamps. Early and Middle Archaic period sites (to about 3,000 B.C.) are identified by particular forms of knife blades or projectile points. The Late Archaic period (c. 3,000-1,000 B.C.) saw the use of steatite or soapstone for vessels, weights, and ornaments; the widespread use of a large knife termed the Savannah River blade; and possibly the first semi-permanent settlements in the lower Chesapeake Bay, although no direct evidence of these has yet been found.

In response to the disappearance of the wooly mammoth and the mastodon, the Archaic Period forced the hunters to adopt smaller points. The Clovis points, with flakes chipped away in the center to hold a substantial spear were no longer effective for the smaller, quicker game such as deer and elk and even smaller game such as rabbits. When hunting smaller game, smaller points attached to shorter spears were more effective. Also, the change to a warmer climate and more forested land made the gathering
part of the hunter-gatherers work more productive – there were simply many more edible fruits, nuts, berries and other edible things in the forests and grasslands to be gathered.

The smaller points placed on short spears presented a problem: they could only be thrown with substantial force over short distances and the game could easily avoid them. This led to a significant engineering development that helps to distinguish the Archaic from the earlier Paleo-Indian period – the atlatl.

Atlatls are ancient weapons that preceded the bow and arrow in most parts of the world and are one of humankind’s first mechanical inventions. The word atlatl (pronounced at-latal or atal-atal) comes from the Nahuatl language of the Aztec, who were still using them when encountered by the Spanish in the 1500s. This comes from World Atlatl Association website. (Yes, there is such an association, incorporated in 1987). [References 2 and 2a]

The atlatl utilized a ‘handle’ that fit a groove in the end of the spear and allowed the thrower to launch the spear with greater velocity and, with practice, excellent accuracy. The diagram from the National Park Service shows how it worked.

As the Archaic Period progressed, people scattered more widely across the landscape, settling in new areas as the population increased. With more food available within short traveling distances, families took fewer long journeys which led to more defined territories. These territories with good food sources, particularly seafood in Virginia rivers and in the receding ocean, were worth defending which gradually led to the development of tribes and the ‘tribal kingdoms’ observed by the English when they arrived. The more settled groups utilized a wider range of stone to make their small tools, and were no longer tethered to a few specific quarry sites that supplied the raw material for restocking their toolkits as were their Paleo-Indian ancestors.

Cooking habits also began to differ in the Archaic Period from the previous nomadic peoples. Baskets were woven from plant fibers which were also used for clothing and to cover shelters. Stone vessels for food storage and cooking began to appear. Some groups also quarried steatite, a soft type of soapstone, to make stone bowls. [Reference 3]

Previously, food had been eaten raw or cooked in containers manufactured from animal skins, bark, and plant fibers. Chunks of meat could be speared on a stick and roasted directly over a fire, but that was not feasible for many of the edible items gathered from the Archaic forests. The soapstone bowls could be placed directly in the fire. Seeds, roots, and meat could be converted into stews and soups. Bowls were also used for cooking outside the fire when small stones were heated, then transferred from the fire and dropped into the pot for indirect heating of the meal. The downside was that the stone bowls were heavy which made the groups less mobile.

Less mobile, more stable groups did not construct houses like those found on the 18th fairway from the next period, the Woodland period. Archaic shelters did not leave post mold stains in the soil. More temporary structures were no doubt used for shelter. The lack of archaeological evidence of dwellings causes more reliance on stone pottery and the variety of smaller points used with spears and with the atlatl to identify sites from the Archaic Period. One clear Archaic indicator is the presence of large piles
of discarded clam or oyster shells which, thousands of years later, were of great value to the English settlers to ‘pave’ the roads and streets in Jamestown and Williamsburg.

Archaic Virginians knew their territory, where to hunt and fish, which plants were edible and which were not, when to harvest food from the forest plants and how to store food. Near brackish and saltwater areas, people would have relied heavily upon oysters, turtles, and crabs - and feasted on the occasional beached whale as well, on beaches now under the waves of the Atlantic Ocean since the sea level has risen significantly since the time of Archaic settlement.

Not surprisingly, it appears that these more-settled groups no doubt defended their territory which began to lead to the social isolation and the tribal structure observed in later periods. Contrary to isolation is evidence that late in the period, long-distance trade with far-away tribes was established, suggesting that they had fashioned canoes or rafts that allowed them to cover long distances by water.

Our next article moves to the Woodland Period, at the end of which the English arrived at Roanoke Island in North Caroline and failed to establish a settlement, and later established the first permanent English settlement in Jamestown. The Indians who met the English on both occasions were dramatically different than their Paleo-Indian and Archaic ancestors. In the more than 2,600 years since the end of the Archaic Period, they had made tremendous progress.

**References for this Article**

Much of the information in this article was excerpted from the website [VirginiaPlaces.org](http://www.virginiaplaces.org/nativeamerican/archaicindians.html).

1) *Archaic Indians in Virginia*
   [http://www.virginiaplaces.org/nativeamerican/archaicindians.html](http://www.virginiaplaces.org/nativeamerican/archaicindians.html)

2) *The Development of the atlatl*
   [http://waa.basketmakeratlatl.com/?page_id=177](http://waa.basketmakeratlatl.com/?page_id=177)

2a) A link to an article titled *Australian Spearthrowers* on the previous website compares Australian and American atlatls or spearthrowers as follows:

   Historic Australia illustrates how a simple technology, the atlatl or spearthrower and its accompanying projectiles, can develop enormous variability during millenia of use across a large area. What we know about atlatls in the Americas suggests that there too they were infinitely varied and elaborated.


**Additional References**

*The Archaic Peoples of Prince William Forest Park*

*Archaic Technology—Weapon, Weights for atlatls and points for Archaic spears*
[http://www.museum.state.il.us/muslink/nat_amer/pre/htmls/a_weapons.html](http://www.museum.state.il.us/muslink/nat_amer/pre/htmls/a_weapons.html)

There is an interesting YouTube video that describes the atlatl and polished stone weights that were added to the handles of the atlatl, and examples of Archaic Period stone jewelry worn by tribal leaders.
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WKWcV6V7y68&index=10&list=PLYk-Bp5rgqhQxS1rQtsOEmerzl7bHgOOr](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WKWcV6V7y68&index=10&list=PLYk-Bp5rgqhQxS1rQtsOEmerzl7bHgOOr)