

FLORIDA ANCESTORS



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Photo: An engraving of a mammoth found near Vero Beach, Florida. Forensice tests have shown the bone and engraving to be over 12,000 years old.
Courtesy of Chip Clark, Smithsonian

Since time immemorial the peninsula that would become Florida was home to many ancestral communities. Some communities thrived along the coasts, others along inland rivers, and all of them held special knowledge of their homelands that was passed down through generations. Traditional knowledge of environments and resources laid the foundations of societies that flourished across the peninsula for thousands of years.

The first Seminole ancestors arrived to Florida over 14,000 years ago, and probably much closer to 15,000 years ago. Archaeological finds show that the ancestors migrated across the continent as they hunted large animals, like now-extinct mammoths, along with deer, rabbits, and other mammals. They fished, collected plants for food and medicine, and built temporary homes from resources available in their local environments. The knowledge they acquired from these activities became the basis for their own scientific understanding of the world around them.

When the first ancestors arrived to Florida, they already had sophisticated ideas about how to flourish in different landscapes. They remained mostly nomadic for a period because the environment at the time - a drier landscape with water-filled sinkholes scattered around the peninsula - favored that method of hunting. They chose to live in smaller groups that made moving from place to place easier. Eventually, smaller groups came together to form larger ones and, over time, as the environment warmed, rainfall increased, and sea levels rose, they began to settle into specific areas of the peninsula. These settled groups would come to form the large, advanced societies encountered by Europeans around A.D. 1500

When European colonizers arrived, they did not just steal resources from Indigenous people of Florida; they stole practical wisdom and science developed over thousands of years. At the same time colonizers suppressed Indigenous traditions and culture, they robbed Indigenous communities of their knowledge for their own survival. As one Indigenous scholar notes, "it wasn't Western science first; it was Indigenous science first".

