

Native Americans



The first known people to live in the Champlain Valley arrived around 12,000 years ago as the glacier that had covered the area for approximately 100,000 years retreated. Archeologists have grouped these first peoples into three periods based on their lifestyles, the Paleoindian (12,000 to 9,000 years ago) the Archaic (9,000 to 3,000 years ago) and the Woodland (3,000 to 400 years ago). They survived and flourished through thousands of years and major environmental changes. These include temperature changes, mostly warming, that affected all flora and fauna, and changes to the nearby large body of water, now called Lake Champlain.

The vast tundra grasslands that covered the region after the ice retreated was the perfect environment for herds of large grazing mammals, like caribou, mammoths, mastodons, and musk oxen. The Paleoindians were hunters who followed these animals over great distances as they migrated. As the climate warmed, the tundra and grasslands gave way over thousands of years to a forested environment. As the herds of large animals disappeared, people relied more on fishing, gathering plants and hunting smaller animals, like deer and bear. Archaic hunters were still semi-nomadic but in smaller, more centralized areas with campgrounds for different times of the year. The lake served as a source of food and water and as a transportation route, allowing the exchange of ideas and goods with other native groups in a wide radius, including the Great Lakes and Maritime Provinces.

By the end of the Woodland period, native peoples had a much more sedentary life. They grew corn, beans and squash, lived in longhouses within more permanent villages and made pottery. With less time spent hunting, more time was available for music, dancing, and storytelling. Decorations appeared on clothing. Jewelry, pendants, paintings, and tattoos gained popularity. The first Europeans to arrive described them as a noble race, perfectly adapted to their environment with all the luxuries and art that go with being so. Contact with Europeans would soon end the Woodland Period as disease, war, and decimation followed.

The Little Ausable River was once a much bigger river, a very appealing place for Native Americans to live. The Native American artifacts pictured here were found within the Little Ausable and Ausable River watersheds by Thomas Pray. Photo Credit: joanneenkennedy.net.



Spear points from the Paleo period. Spears were the predominant hunting weapon for the large prey of that time. All the points in the picture were found in Peru, but some of the material comes from as far away as Ohio (pink colored points) and Pennsylvania.

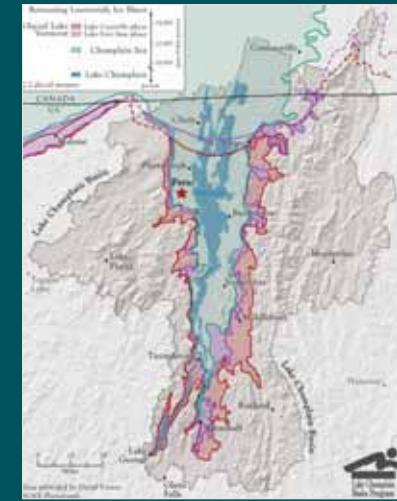


Dart points from the Archaic period. In this period, atlatls were also used for hunting. A dart fit into a notch or hook at the end of a long wooden handle, as the handle was "thrown" forward the dart flew off with extra power and speed. These points include slate from Vermont and stone from Willsboro and Beekmantown.



The arrowheads pictured here come from different time periods and/or different groups of Native Americans in the Woodland period. The bow and arrow became the hunting weapon of choice as it allowed the hunter to shoot game from further away and with less movement. Arrows flew with more force, distance and accuracy than either atlatl darts or spears, so hunting parties became much smaller.

Before Lake Champlain



The melting Laurentide Ice Sheet formed Lake Vermont. Lake Coveville and Lake Fort Ann were two distinct phases of this freshwater lake. About 12,000 years ago, the ice dam to the north broke and the lake poured out to the Atlantic Ocean. The valley, still depressed from the glacier, filled with saltwater, creating the Champlain Sea. It teemed with saltwater fish, whales and seals for more than 2,000 years, but as the ground continued to rebound, the sea was cut off from the Atlantic Ocean. Over time it shrank and desalinated to become the freshwater Lake Champlain. Both Lake Vermont and the Champlain Sea were much larger than the current Lake Champlain, the hamlet of Peru was under water during their time.