



Comparing Apalachee, Timucua, and Calusa Settlements At the Time of European Exploration

Adapted from Florida Department of State website by Mound House education staff



16th Century Settlements

Hundreds of thousands of people were already living on the land we now know as Florida when Europeans arrived here in the 16th century. Juan Ponce de León was the first Spanish explorer to arrive in March of 1513. His ships landed on Florida's east coast near present-day St. Augustine. He claimed this beautiful land for Spain and named it La Florida or "place of flowers."

When European ships first landed on the east coast of peninsular "Florida" in the 16th century, the area was well populated. Groups including, but not limited to, the Timucua, Apalachee, Ais, Tequesta and Calusa, all had distinct cultures in Florida. Some were farming rich lands in the



north -- growing corn, beans and squash -- and others were fishing or hunting for most of their food in the south.

Locations near reliable food sources with fresh water, comfortable climate conditions, and high, dry ground made good habitat for these people. Fresh and brackish bodies of water supplied steady sources of fish and shellfish, while fertile soils allowed farming to prosper.

From the first contact between native populations and European explorers in the 1500s, it did not take long for the ensuing wars, slave trade, and diseases such as smallpox, measles and influenza to nearly wipe out the native populations in approximately 200 years. By the 1700s, wars with Spain and other European countries reduced a likely population of 300,000 people to estimates of under 10,000. Native people were taken as slaves as early as 1520 which also drastically reduced the native population. These prehistoric peoples are studied by archaeologists to learn about their distinct cultures.

The Apalachee

One of the most powerful and influential native groups was the Apalachee. At the time Europeans began arriving in America, the Apalachee controlled the fertile area near the Tallahassee hills between the Ochlockonee and Aucilla rivers. The fertile clay and loam soils of the hills supported the most concentrated native population in the region.

Some of the first Spaniards to explore Florida were drawn to this same region. Panfilo de Narvaez journeyed there from Tampa Bay in 1528. Hernando de Soto wintered there from October 1539 until early March 1540.

Searching for gold, Narvaez and his expedition moved through swampy unpopulated flatwoods until they reached the Apalachee area, near present-day Tallahassee. Navarez wrote, the Apalachee "loomed big and naked, and from a distance looked like giants. They were handsomely proportioned, lean, agile, and strong."

Eleven years later, one of de Soto's men remarked on the abundance of corn and other food in all the Apalachee villages.

When the Europeans arrived, the Apalachee lived in somewhat permanent villages, relying heavily on agriculture for their food. They were a distinct group, controlling the territory between the Aucilla River and land some distance west beyond the Ochlockonee River.

As a result of the Apalachee's fierce and determined response to the first Spanish intrusions into their territory in the 16th century, Spain made no additional attempts to contact them until early in the next century.



The Timucuan

Neighboring the Apalachee to the east were the Timucua, composed of at least 25-30 separate chiefdoms sharing a common language. More is known about the Saturiwa than any other Timucuan group. They were encountered by the French in 1562. Each Timucuan village had its own leader who was under the rule of a head chief.

The general name “Timucuan” was used by the Spaniards for all the native peoples who occupied north Florida east of the Apalachee territory. However, the Timucua were composed of a number of independent provinces that were hostile to one another at the time when the first Europeans arrived. Some of the important divisions in mission times were the Saltwater Timucua (Saturiwa and Mocamo), Fresh Water, Potano, Utina and Yustaga.

The Timucuans hunted for game and grew crops. Some of the animals they consumed for food included bears, deer, wild turkey, alligators, fish, clams, and oysters with the meat being cooked over open fires. Farming was another important means of obtaining food for the Timucua. The main crops that they harvested were maize (corn), beans, squash, pumpkins, and melons. Much of the hunting and trapping of food was accomplished by men, while the women cooked the meals and gathered roots, nuts and wild berries to eat. The women also made pottery to use for cooking.

The Calusa

The Calusa lived along the estuaries in South West Florida and were ruled by a single leader. Although lacking agriculture, the Calusa developed elaborate political, social, and trade networks. They received tribute – a payment of goods or services to show loyalty to a political leader – from as far away as Lake Okeechobee, present-day Miami, and the Florida Keys. According to Spanish records, “items of tribute to the Calusa leader included foods, mats, hides, feathers, plunder from shipwrecks, and sometimes captive people.”

The Calusa were very dependent on the natural resources to meet their needs. They were fisher-hunter-gatherers, relying heavily on the fisheries of the estuaries and waterways for their food instead of converting to an agricultural, or farming, lifestyle.

The first encounter between the Calusa and European explorers occurred in 1513 with the expedition of Juan Ponce de León, near the mouth of the Caloosahatchee River. Hostilities ensued shortly after, and the Spanish expedition fled the area. Similar encounters occurred through the early 1500s, with multiple Spanish expeditions driven away from the borders of the Calusa territory.



Florida State Standards

4th Grade

Social Studies

- SS.4.A.1.1
- SS.4.A.2.1
- SS.4.A.3.1
- SS.4.A.3.2
- SS.4.G.1.1

5th Grade

Social Studies

- SS.5.A.1.1
- SS.5.A.2.1
- SS.5.G.1.1