



The Calusa—People of the Estuary

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South Florida was once the domain of the Calusa Indians, a powerful and complex society which had as its homeland the rich estuaries of southwest Florida. Using locally available materials — wood, plant fibers, bone, shell, and sharks' teeth — they fashioned ingenious tools: a saber made by attaching shark teeth with resin to a wooden branch, an axe made by fixing a large, sharpened sea shell to a wooden handle, palm-fiber nets that could capture fish in great quantities. And they painted, carved, and engraved, producing works of art that are known the world over.

The rich ecological diversity of the area they settled is as important a part of the story as the creative skills of the people themselves. The subtropical coastal environment of southwest Florida, where fish and shellfish were found in fantastic quantities, provided a year-round abundance of food. Game was plentiful. Deer, turtles, and raccoons were among the animals eaten by the Calusa. A dazzling profusion of plants provided foods, medicines, and materials for making canoe paddles and fishing equipment. Over time, the Calusa became a powerful and complex society while continuing to practice a fishing, hunting, and gathering economy. The Calusa were divided into nobles and commoners, supported an elite military force, and received gifts of tribute from towns and villages many miles away. They believed in an afterlife, and made daily offerings to their ancestors. Elaborate rituals included processions of masked priests and synchronized singing by hundreds of young women. The Calusa were among the last native Florida Indian societies to succumb to the consequences of the European invasion. Victims of warfare, disease, and slavery, they ceased to exist as a distinctive culture in the 1700s.

Vocabulary

- Ecological diversity – how many different kinds of living things are in an ecosystem
- Estuary – a body of water where the fresh water from rivers and streams meets and mixes with the salt water of the ocean
- Ingenious – clever, original, and inventive
- Procession – a group of people moving along in an orderly often ceremonial way
- Profusion – a plentiful supply; plenty
- Quantity – how much there is of something
- Resin – a sticky substance obtained from the gum or sap of some trees (like pine)
- Succumb – to give in to someone or something or to die
- Synchronize – to happen at the same time and speed
- Tribute – a payment of goods or services to show loyalty to a leader or ruler