

Archaeological Time Periods and Terminology

Archaeologists use time periods to help organize and discuss the deep human past. These periods are **analytical tools**, rather than cultural or ancestral labels, and their names and date ranges can vary by region and scholarly tradition.

On this website, we **foreground approximate date ranges**. This approach follows current professional guidance, including the [NYSAA Indigenous Style Guide \(Guide for Referencing Indigenous Communities\)](#), and reflects an effort to be clear, and precise when discussing the archaeological record.

Commonly Used Time Periods in Pennsylvania Archaeology

- **ca. 16,000–10,000 BP**
(ca. 14,000–8,000 BCE; often referred to as the “Paleoindian” period)
Represents the earliest documented human presence in the region, associated with highly mobile lifeways and distinctive stone tool technologies.
- **ca. 10,000–3,000 BP**
(ca. 8,000–1,000 BCE; often referred to as the “Archaic” period)
Encompasses long-term adaptations to changing environments, with diverse subsistence strategies and regional variation.
- **ca. 3,000–2,700 BP**
(ca. 1,000–700 BCE; sometimes referred to as a “Transitional” period between the Archaic and Early Woodland)
Represents a period of gradual change, with early ceramic technologies appearing alongside continuing Archaic lifeways and increasing regional variation.
- **ca. 2,700–2,100 BP**
(ca. 1,000–100 BCE; often referred to as the “Early Woodland” period)
Associated with early ceramic technologies, expanded exchange networks, and changes in social practices.
- **ca. 2,100–1,600 BP**
(ca. 100 BCE–400 CE; often referred to as the “Middle Woodland” period)
Marked by extensive interaction networks, ceremonial landscapes, and shared symbolic practices across eastern North America.
- **ca. 1,600–500 BP**
(ca. 400–1450 CE; often referred to as the “Late Woodland” period)
Characterized by increased reliance on agriculture, village life, and regionally distinct material traditions.

- **ca. 500–350 BP**

(ca. 1450–1700 CE; often referred to as the “Late Precontact to Early Contact” period)

Represents the time immediately before and after sustained European presence, reflecting both continuity and change in Indigenous communities.

A Note on Terminology

Period names are used here as **descriptive archaeological conventions**, rather than definitions of cultural identity, ancestry, or community affiliation. Archaeological evidence alone cannot fully resolve questions of identity or continuity, and these terms should be understood as part of an evolving scholarly framework.

Sources

Date ranges and period frameworks presented here draw on commonly used regional syntheses for Pennsylvania and the broader Mid-Atlantic, including:

- Carr, Kurt W., and Roger W. Moeller. *First Pennsylvanians: The Archaeology of Native Americans in Pennsylvania*. Penn State University Press, 2015.

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