

Missouri's Native Peoples

Missourians are very interested in their own history, and in the history and *prehistory* of other cultures. Native American presence in North America goes back at least 13,000 years, and many researchers believe it dates back 20,000 or more years ago. Europeans did not start making written observations of Missouri native peoples until roughly the mid-1600s. Thus, 98% of American Indian presence in Missouri and the entire region lies in the prehistoric (or pre-European contact) era, where people are known by *oral traditions* and the *artifacts* and remnants of settlements left on the landscape.

The earliest people in Missouri are believed to have been big game hunters. Called *Paleoindians*, they lived at sites like the *Kimmswick Bone Bed* in Mastodon State Historic Site near St. Louis, Missouri (<https://mostateparks.com/park/mastodon-state-historic-site>). The earliest occupation at the Kimmswick site dates at least 11,500 years ago. Over time, Native American settlements in Missouri became larger. People began farming in Missouri as early as 3,000 years ago. The spear and *atlatl* (spear thrower) of the earliest Missourians gave way to the *bow-and-arrow* about 2,100 years ago.

Let's briefly look at two groups of Native Americans that have the longest history in Missouri and figured prominently in Missouri history in the *17th* and *18th centuries*.

Missouria

The *Missouria* tribe speak a dialect of the *Chiwere Siouan* language. It is unknown when they first arrived in Missouri, but it was likely centuries before any Europeans set foot in the area. The Missouria are first seen in historic records starting in 1673. Louis Jolliet and *Father Jacques Marquette* saw the mouth of the Missouri River at what is now St. Louis. They asked about the river and were told it was the "*Oumessourit*," referring to the first people one would encounter going up the river. This is the Illinois tribe's name for Missouria (translated as "people of the dugout canoes"). Thus, giving name to the Missouri River and the state of Missouri.

We have a good idea about how and where the Missouria lived based on oral traditions, *history* and *archaeology*. The principal *villages* of the Missouria are in and near what is now *Van Meter State Park* near Marshall, Missouri. Visit the park to learn more (<https://mostateparks.com/park/annie-and-abel-van-meter-state-park>)!

They lived in houses made from branches, and woven cattail mats. Perhaps, 15-25 people lived in each house. Their villages were large, and contained at least a few thousand people. The Missouria were farmers growing corn, beans, and squash. They also spent much of the year hunting *white-tailed deer* over a large hunting range in central Missouri. They would plant their crops in the spring, hunt in the summer, return for the fall harvest, and hunt in the winter.

By the 1790s, **smallpox** (a European-introduced disease) had devastated the Missouri, wiping out more than 90% of their population. They left Missouri in the 1790s and relocated to live near the **Otoe** tribe in what is now Nebraska. Today, the Otoe-Missouria tribal headquarters is in **Red Rock, Oklahoma**.

Osage

The **Osage** tribe speak a dialect of the **Dhegic Siouan** language (as do the **Kansa** from whom Kansas gets its name). It is unknown when they first arrived in Missouri, but, like the Missouri, it was centuries before any Europeans set foot in the area. The Osage, historically, were composed of three bands (groups of clans or villages): the Great Osage, the Little Osage, and the Arkansas Osage. Traditionally, the Great Osage lived in southern Missouri, the Little Osage in central Missouri, and the Arkansas Osage in what is now northeastern Oklahoma and northern Arkansas. All of the Osage hunted widely in southern Missouri and surrounding areas. You can visit a historic Great Osage village at the **Osage Village State Historic Site** (<https://mostateparks.com/park/osage-village-state-historic-site>) in southwestern Missouri near El Dorado Springs.

Their way of life is similar to the Missouri. They lived in large branch and woven cattail mat houses. Perhaps, 15-25 people lived in each house. Their villages were large, and contained from hundreds to a few thousand people. Combined, the Osage had several thousand people in several villages. They were farmers growing **corn, beans, and squash**. They also spent much of the year hunting white-tailed deer over a large hunting range in the Ozark Highland. By 1800, the Osage were also hunting **bison** in the central plains in Kansas and Oklahoma. The Osage would plant their crops in the spring, hunt in the summer, return for the fall harvest, and hunt in the winter.

Most of the land that was to become the state of Missouri was taken from the Osage in treaties in 1808 and 1825. The Osage are still numerous, and their tribal headquarters today are in **Pawhuska, Oklahoma**.