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 Missouria, 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 Dhegia Siouan language (as do the Kansa from whom Kansas gets its name). It is unknown when they first arrived in Missouri, but, like the Missouria, 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 Missouria. 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.