By twelve thousand years ago, perhaps earlier according to recent findings, human beings may have been living in the area that would become Kershaw County. Relics, fossils, and ancient remains reveal the local presence of nomads and dwellers of prehistoric millennia. Archaeologists and anthropologists continue to identify and interpret artifacts that are the only records of people who did not leave written accounts. These findings enlarge descriptions of Native American cultures here prior to the written records of outsiders, the European explorers who encountered the early people less than five hundred years ago.

*Paleo-Indians*

The wanderers who made early incursions into the local area are called Paleo-Indians, meaning “ancient,” by anthropologists. These people were hunters and gatherers who ranged broadly for survival in a rugged world of harsh climates. By the end of the last Ice Age, some Paleo people in small groups were following southeastern river valleys and exposed upland animal trails to gather plants and hunt game. They sheltered in naturally protected areas such as riverbank overhangs and rock outcroppings. A history of the Stoneboro community describes several rocky sites along the boundary of present Kershaw and Lancaster counties that these ancient people may have used, such as Hanging Rock and Kelly Rock.

Paleo-Indian hunters are believed to have come here following trails of both small and large animals, including some that became extinct as the earth’s climate changed. Fossil remains of ancient creatures such as woolly mammoths, mastodons, giant ground sloths, saber-toothed tigers, and large bison have been uncovered in South Carolina. Extensive excavations have not been done in Kershaw County, but it is reasonably presumed that such animals also roamed here.

Cooperating in small bands, hunters are believed to have driven large prey over high ledges or surrounded prey that were feeding or drinking, especially in low bottoms. Here they attacked from higher ground by hurling large rocks, wielding clubs, and thrusting with sharpened spears, often tipped with bone or stone points. Stone tools of Paleo design, including spear points, knives, and scrapers, have been found in Kershaw County.
Archaic Indians

By ten thousand years ago the climate had warmed, and plants and animals more similar to modern ones had adapted to temperatures not much different from present conditions. Deciduous and pine forests were expanding. People of this period, which lasted until about three thousand years ago, are called Archaic Indians (“survivors of an earlier time”) for their traditions, which developed out of the Paleo way of life. Not constantly wandering, they alternately settled and moved in families or small bands, likely according to season, in order to gather plants, to fish, and to hunt at advantageous times. Deer and small wood bison fed here on plains and grassland floors of the spreading forests. Along the shoals of the Wateree, Archaic people could club or spear large fish lazing in low rocky pools and use bone hooks and traps to catch smaller ones.

Polished stone tools, such as axes, improved old technology. Archaic hunters enhanced spear-throwing ability by use of stone weights with a device called the “atlatl,” and they shaped stems on many projectile points to attach them more easily to shafts. First attempts at making clay pottery yielded rough, undecorated containers strengthened with plant fibers. For cooking stews, women dropped heated rocks into hollowed-out stone vessels. A hole bored in such a rock allowed a cook to lift it with a stick.
Archaic people also developed use of grinding stones, or mortars, to process seeds and nuts. Both shells and kernels were ground or pounded together, perhaps mixed with water to separate some of the woody particles, and were consumed in the diet. Grinding stones and other rocks worn by fire-making processes have often been found locally. Mortars carved into fixed rock are also still in existence, such as one near the Stoneboro crossroad. Although they cannot be precisely dated, the artifacts are believed to be of Native American origin. The most widely known, Mortar Rock, is a county-owned site at Liberty Hill. The round circle precisely hollowed in the granite outcropping is artistically surrounded by an incised eyellite decoration. It has long been speculated that the site held ancient ceremonial significance.

Prearranged meetings, usually in high places visible from a distance, brought together various bands or tribes for purposes of trade, courtship, and social exchange. Thus early people who were frequently isolated from one another exchanged bloodlines, natural materials, works of their hands, and ideas of various cultures and places. Gradually over time newer traditions evolved from older ways, many of which also continued in practice.

**Woodlands Indians**

From the end of the Archaic period until about 950 C.E., the prominent culture was that of the Woodlands period, named for the forest-dominated landscapes surrounding the natives’ pole-and-bark homes. By now gradual transition had been made toward more permanent villages and a lifestyle based on the cultivation of plants in forest openings and in clearings near rivers and streams. Crops included vining squashes, pumpkins, gourds, and beans, as well as corn, edible sunflowers, and tobacco. Baskets woven with grasses, vines, or flexible wood strips provided means of collecting and storing crops, and weaving techniques also fashioned fish traps for river shoals and creeks.

Hunting improved with the development of the all-important bow and arrow. Hunters typically shaped points for their arrows from locally available material, such as milky quartz, white stone locally called “flint rock,” distinctive in upper parts of the county. More-skillful, decorated pottery also emerged. Clay vessels, tempered with sand and decorated before firing, were fashioned for food storage, for cooking, and for burial urns. Many stone and clay relics have been found in Kershaw County, sometimes in location patterns that suggest sites of camps and travel paths of the native peoples. Varied designs and decorations of pottery samples and sherds, or broken pieces, also reveal interactions and exchange of ideas with other locales. Relics of different periods overlap at many sites, revealing long-term use of advantageous areas.

Although initial use of the dugout canoe predates the Woodlands period, vessels continued to have important use during this time and on through the
A reconstructed piece of Native American pottery on display at the Camden Archives

historic colonial and plantation periods. Fashioned of a single trunk of a durable tree, often cypress, each canoe was carefully crafted. Slowly burning fires, fueled by strategic applications of resins, were skillfully tended to break down fibers on the inside of the trunk while wet clay protected areas not to be burned. The native builders employed stone implements as they “dug out” the shell and completed the final shaping. With the narrow, shallow-draft canoes, boatmen skillfully maneuvered uneven-bottomed, log-jammed river sections like those in the Kershaw County area.6

Fire was a tool of major importance to Woodlands people, as well as a force of power to earlier man. Fire not only warmed outdoor dwellers but also cooked food and herbal medicines, preserved animal skins for clothing and protection, tempered wood and pottery, cleared areas for settlement and agriculture, and purified remains of illness and death. Once or twice yearly hunters set forest floors afire. Observing results of natural fires begun in woodlands by lightning or combustion, native peoples used routine burnings to keep the forest floors where they hunted and lived relatively clear of underbrush. They were thus able
to observe both game and potential human enemies from some distance, as well as more easily track either of them from prints impressed in the soil.

The burning of forests and agricultural fields returned certain nutrients to the soil and promoted specialized growth. Regular, low burnings, sometimes extending for miles and lasting for days, were favorable to longleaf pines and wiregrass, both of which adapted well to sandhill soils. Thus the towering woodlands of Kershaw County that were traveled by explorers and early colonials had long been influenced by human as well as natural design.

**Mississippian Mound Builders**

According to prevailing interpretation, around 950 C.E., in the middle of the Dark Ages in Europe, a different group of people moved into the Wateree Valley. They brought to prominence a separate, complex culture that lasted here for more than six centuries, enduring through the time of early European contact. The Mississippian people, to whom the later historic Creek Indians are believed to be related, pushed aside for some time the Siouan-speaking Piedmont Woodlands people, to whom are related the later historic Catawba and Wateree Indians known to English settlers. The Mississippian had separate art forms, customs, and religion, and they possibly had a dissimilar language. Their government consisted of related chiefdoms controlled from temple mound complexes.

Although some mound burials in the Southeast have been associated with Woodlands traditions as well, the Mississippian are often referred to as “the mound builders” because of the prominence they gave in daily life and government to their ceremonial earthen works. Almost a dozen local “ancient monuments” or “mounts,” as they were also sometimes called, attracted the attention of explorers and settlers in historic times. Recent studies of the few existing Kershaw County mounds, although incompletely explored, connect them with Mississippian origin. This culture early occupied Belmont Neck, a meandering loop of the Wateree River below Camden, and over time developed a series of mound complexes and villages within the floodplains throughout the river valley. The well-preserved site called Adamson Mound, on private property at the edge of present Camden, was one such early complex.

Migrating descendants of the great culture that had waned in the middle Mississippi Valley at places such as Cahokia near modern St. Louis, Missouri, apparently found their way here through Alabama and Georgia and are more particularly identified as South Appalachian Mississippian. Similar traditions existed at Moundsville in Alabama, at Etowah and Ocmulgee National Monument in Georgia, and at Town Creek in North Carolina, among other southeastern sites. All occupied floodplains for agricultural benefits, produced intricate artwork that included elaborate pottery, and surrounded town residences and central mounds with palisade walls for protection.
Coordinated toil was required in building the mounds, which served various purposes. Dirt dug with sticks and stone implements was carried basketful by basketful to the top of the heap and trod until firm by workers’ feet. Residences of elite rulers topped some mounds, as did temples or other public structures with thatched roofs and rounded, clay-covered log walls. Most of the people lived in villages nearby, tending crops, fishing, hunting, and pursuing specialized crafts.

Present scholarship suggests that the major mounds in Kershaw County were part of the powerful chiefdom of Cofitachiqui, described by sixteenth-century Spanish explorers and associated with a way of life already endangered by the time it was first being written about. The Cofitachiqui belonged to times both prehistoric and historic, but the only contemporary written records of these people were penned by those who were a threat to them, observers sometimes ignorant of or insensitive to the meaning of what they saw.

For centuries and on separate continents both Native American tribes and European countries had warred among themselves for survival and ascendancy. Therefore, when factions of both continents met at the same place, conflicts and struggle were inevitable. As deadly as warfare was, the effects of European diseases proved even deadlier to Native Americans. Diseases never encountered before
decimated large numbers of natives, even whole tribes, because of lack of immunity and inexperience with treatment. Some of the earliest records describing native people in the Kershaw County area reflect their decreasing population—the beginning of their end.

**European Contacts**

In the centuries following the early contacts with Europeans, diverse theories about Spanish explorers’ first routes through the uncharted wilderness emerged as attempts were made to trace their ancient travels onto modern maps. Gradually clearer pictures have emerged regarding an extensive chiefdom in which the present area of Kershaw County once lay. Most interpretations since the 1980s locate the central power of Cofitachiqui in the Wateree River Valley, and some suggest that the mound complex on historic Mulberry Plantation, a short distance south of Camden, was its main city at the time of the first documented European visitation in the area.

**Hernando de Soto**

By the first of May 1540, less than half a century after Columbus’s arrival in the New World, the Spanish conquistador Hernando de Soto and his men reached the west bank of the river opposite the main town of the chiefdom they had been seeking. In Florida captive Indians had described a vast region in the northeast where Cofitachiqui, a large area of considerable wealth, was ruled by a female chief. Expecting to find gold there, De Soto had traveled northward, foraging supplies as he led his army of six hundred hungry men, three hundred horses, black slaves, and Indian captives along native paths and inland rivers. If interpretations are correct, the river he reached was the Wateree River, and the people he was looking for were living near present Camden.

De Soto’s scribes give details of his encounter with the ruler, or the ruler’s female relative as emissary—“La Cacica,” the “Lady” or “Queen” of Cofitachiqui. Carried to the shore on a decorated litter, the young, attractive leader, dressed in delicate white, was paddled in a canopied canoe to welcome De Soto. Speaking to him with poise and regal bearing, she presented him in good will with a string of river pearls she had removed from around her neck.

The Indians then provided transportation across the river and gave the guests gifts, food, and lodging. Half of the dwellings in the village were given over to house them, indicating a town of extensive size. After first accepting hospitality, the Spaniards then began their intended search for precious metals among tribal holdings. They explored nearby public and private areas and rummaged through Cofitachiqui’s mound-top platform temples. Some reports describe finding sacred burial structures where larger-than-life-sized wooden statues guarded bones of ancestors.
When the invaders also came upon articles of European manufacture, including beads and rosaries, they concluded that the people had made previous contact with the Spaniard Vásquez de Ayllón, who had led an expedition to South Carolina a dozen years earlier. Some of De Soto’s men apparently examined other local mound areas they found vacated, possibly including Belmont Neck and the Adamson Mound. Reportedly, the young leader told De Soto that her people had been visited for several years by a mysterious epidemic, and many had died. Some scientists believe that effects of European diseases had already been spread to the Cofitachiqui.

Throughout their searches the Spaniards reported finding decorations of shells and freshwater pearls, sheets of mica, and hammered copper, but not the gold or silver they had expected. When food supplies were exhausted, the hosts told De Soto about a province further inland beyond the mountains. There, they said, was much food as well as gold and silver to be found. Almost two weeks after their arrival, the Spanish gathered for themselves the portable treasures of Cofitachiqui and went in search of alleged riches further away. As protection, De Soto forced the lady-queen to accompany them as guide and interpreter. However, after some days or weeks the young captive escaped, reportedly taking with her the most valuable box of pearls the Spaniards had ransacked from her people.12

Juan Pardo

Other European countries were also seeking to establish hold in the New World, just as they rivaled Spain in the Old World. In 1562 France established the first European colony in what became South Carolina, a part of the vast territory Spain claimed as “La Florida.” Charlesport, the fledgling French settlement on Port Royal Sound, lasted only one year, but Spain reacted quickly to protect its interests. In 1566, on the same location at present-day Parris Island, South Carolina, Spaniards built a fort and town they named Santa Elena, capital of La Florida. Juan Pardo that year led an exploration of 125 men inland from the new settlement to seek an overland route to Mexico. Then, and again two years later in 1568, his mission took him on various visits among the Cofitachiqui and thus, according to interpretations, into present Kershaw County.

In addition Pardo in various places further inland visited groups of indigenous people who would in later generations rise to prominence in the Kershaw County area—the Guatari (Wateree), then ruled by a female chief, and the Ysa, Issa or Iswa (Catawba). He found both these tribes in present-day western North Carolina. Although Pardo never penetrated beyond the Appalachians, along the way he set up forts and attempted to spread Christianity to the Indians, efforts which endured only briefly. The Wateree, for example, soon killed the party of seventeen soldiers and a corporal Pardo had left behind with them. Eventually
in 1587 Santa Elena, like Charlesport, was abandoned. In recent years scholars have found help in pinpointing the route of De Soto’s expedition by tracing the more specifically described route of Pardo, who visited several of the same Indian towns in the same order that De Soto traveled.

The last Spanish explorer known to have documented a visit to Cofitachiqui was Pedro de Torres in 1627–28. He reported that the chief, who entertained him well, commanded the respect and obedience of all his vassal chiefs. Yet the presence of Spain by now was beginning to fade in this area of the continent, and the Spanish withdrew from outlying areas to concentrate on the stronghold at St. Augustine, Florida, from which they remained a formidable though more distant threat.

*Henry Woodward*

If the native people felt themselves more securely in control again after the withdrawal of the first French and Spanish settlers from the coast, these feelings did not long endure. Soon English ships appeared, looking for a site to establish a colony. In 1666 one of the Englishmen, a young surgeon named Henry Woodward, remained behind to minister to Indians at Port Royal Sound and to learn their language. He was so successful in beginning trade with them and with interior tribes that twice the Spaniards at Fort Augustine sent out expeditions to capture him to protect territory they claimed as their own. When the English returned to begin a colony at Port Royal, Woodward cited Spanish threats to encourage his countrymen to settle instead sixty miles up the coast. Thus was Carolina’s first permanent settlement, Charles Town (the genesis of later Charleston), begun in 1670.

Woodward, known as South Carolina’s first settler, remained important in lowcountry history, only one example being as an instigator of rice planting, the crop which brought the new colony’s first agricultural wealth. He also made visits inland to the area of present Kershaw County. From just-established Charles Town, in the summer of 1670 Woodward trekked northwestern for fourteen days, visiting a number of smaller chiefs along the way, to meet with the Cofitachiqui chief whom he called the “Emperor” at his town of a thousand “bowmen.” At Woodward’s invitation, the emperor visited Charles Town a few months later, in mid-September. The chief visited again on an unknown mission in spring 1672.

Shortly after this time, for reasons and destinations still unclear, the people of Cofitachiqui apparently permanently vacated their territory, a mysterious “disappearance” that anthropologists continue to investigate. Theories being studied include voluntary migration away from European encroachment, involuntary rapid depopulation by disease from European contact, warfare with outlying tribes coming into the vicinity, and absorption into other tribal groups.
Whatever the cause of their absence from their former homeland, no outside visitor to the area from this time forward reported finding lifestyles or cultures as complex as the former ones.

John Lawson

In 1700 the Lords Proprietors, in whom the king of England had vested title to the royal lands of Carolina, commissioned a surveyor to visit their holdings and describe them with an eye toward economic development. Thus on December 28, 1700, a young Englishman named John Lawson left Charles Town with a party of five other Englishmen and five Indians. Traveling through central and upper Carolina, Lawson kept a detailed journal to describe the inhabitants and natural resources he encountered.¹³

Modern examinations identify some of Lawson’s route and descriptions with locations in the present Kershaw County area.¹⁴ Much of the way his party traveled along an ancient native trading path known in local record and elsewhere as the Catawba Path, which linked the coast to the deep interior and roughly
traced a major route still followed. For example, today’s Broad Street in Camden, the center of its main business district, overlies part of the old Catawba Path.

When Lawson arrived, the Cofitachiqui were apparently no longer in the area, for his journal makes no mention of them or their culture in the places where they formerly lived. Along both sides of the Wateree River he found scattered native “plantations,” including old fields and villages. He described a Siouan group, Congaree Indians, in an area below present Camden living in oval wattle-and-daub houses built of mud, sticks, and woven mats and topped with bark roofs. He was told that smallpox had taken the lives of many of the local people. The chief’s wife, the “Queen,” fed Lawson’s party while the chief and his men were off hunting. The journal describes tame fowl six feet tall, perhaps sandhill cranes or whooping cranes. Above the area of Camden, Lawson’s group consumed lunch on a quarter-acre-sized rock outcropping, possibly the Flat Rock area, and commented on the abundance of “marble” (granite).

In further travels Lawson encountered the Wateree ("Wateree-Chicaknee") Indians in present Lancaster County and the Catawba ("Esaw") Indians in the North Carolina area. At a later time the different names given the same continuously flowing body of water—the Wateree River in Kershaw County and the Catawba River in Lancaster County—show that the tribes found living along those respective bodies had moved further south than where Lawson encountered them. Both groups would later also be found living within the Kershaw County area. The native name of the Lynches River is said to have been Kadapaw, and the Indians along that body are sometimes called the Kadapaw Indians. Although they at times have been reported as a separate tribal group, the name “Kadapaw” is often considered a pronunciation variation of “Catawba.”

In 1709 Lawson’s journal was published in England and became a popular travel book that encouraged interest in migration to Carolina and investment in its development. Within only a few decades the area of present Kershaw County would become part of an English plan to develop the backcountry and to attract European settlers to make their homes there.