Early drawings and reports by European explorers show that coastal American Indians were people who knew how to survive in harmony with the land. There were many tribes on the Coastal Plain, but one thing they all had in common was their way of life.

Early American Indians in North Carolina can be divided into three groups - Siouan (Soo-uhn), Iroquoian (ir-uh-KWOY-uhn) and Algonquian (al-GAHN-kwee-uhn). These groups of people spoke different languages and lived in different parts of the Coastal Plain, but shared similar resources. In most coastal tribes people lived in villages near water. They built intricate fishing traps that could catch enough fish to feed an entire village. They lived in longhouses made out of poles from young trees which were bent and covered with bark, animal skins, reeds or grasses. Families participated in games, songs, stories, and dances. They ate the same foods, lived in the same kinds and sizes of villages, and used the same kinds of everyday tools and jewelry. These native Coastal Plain people knew how to survive. Adventure was always around the corner as new people from European countries visited in their large boats.

The people of the Algonquian groups lived in the northern Tidewater. Iroquoian groups lived in the central Coastal Plain, and Siouan tribes settled along the southern Coastal Plain. Many Coastal Plain villages were built along the banks of rivers or streams and were often built on high ground to keep them safe from floods. Palisades, walls made from tall wooden poles, protected villages from enemy attacks.

The Coastal Plain region of today is much different than it was thousands of years ago. When you think of the coast, you might think about playing on the beach, riding on sailboats, eating at seaside restaurants, or just relaxing in the sun. If you take away all of these wonderful things, what do you have left? The early tribes of the Coastal Plain region never experienced the fun and exciting things we do today when we visit the coast, but don’t think for a minute that they were miserable. They loved this life!
Everyone helped in the way of life. “Women’s work” and “men’s work” were clearly defined. Women prepared food and made clothing. Men hunted deer and other animals with bows and arrows. By this time, canoes had been developed, and they used spears and nets to catch fish. Both men and women helped plant and harvest crops. There were times of play, but survival was the most important thing in the minds of all tribe members.

Trading had become very popular. These coastal natives made pottery from powdered clay mixed with shells, gravel, or sand. Baskets were constructed from reeds found near streams and were often very beautiful and purposeful. Wampum, shell beads, were strung together to make attractive jewelry, and sap from maple trees was collected to make fine maple syrups and candies. All of these were used as trade items with other tribes and villages.

Corn was the most popular food of the time. All tribes planted and harvested corn. When it was ground, women would use it to make bread, soup, and cakes. A favorite way to eat corn was right off the cob or as popcorn, as we do today!

A little later, wigwams became popular. Men constructed the wigwams out of thin young trees by bending them into a semi-circle on the ground. Women covered the wigwams with woven mats made of birch bark, animal skins, corncobs or reeds. Wigwams were not only living quarters but also where all the cooking took place during the winter months. A small hole was left in the roof to allow the smoke from cooking to escape.

Hunting was still considered a means of survival, and Native Americans of this time believed the Great Spirits had blessed them with the creatures of the land. They never killed more than they could eat. The spirit of each animal had special meaning for them. Just like the Paleo Indians, no part of the animal went to waste. The animals were used for food, shelter, clothing, tools, toys and decorations. Moccasins, made from deer skin, became a trademark for footwear. Styles varied with the tribes, but all were soft-soled and came up to the ankles.

You may not realize this, but at this time, North Carolina was not considered a state. These native people lived here, but they didn’t call it North Carolina. However, they did name many places in North Carolina that we are familiar with today: Roanoke, Hatteras Island, Pamlico Sound, Neuse River, and Pee Dee River, just to name a few.

Native Americans tribes of this time had flourished into sustainable, working communities. They had come a long way from when their Paleo Indian ancestors inhabited these lands. North Carolina natives slowly evolved with permanent villages, agriculture, and a more civilized way of living.