

Who Were the Red Paint People?

Rebecca Cole-Will, Abbe Museum, 2002

The lost Red Paint people of Maine are a myth that began at a time when archaeology was in its speculative infancy and there was no way to accurately date the age of sites.

The Early History

In 1892, Charles C. Willoughby became the first archaeologist to excavate and describe sites attributed to the Red Paint People. Using meticulous excavation techniques and carefully documenting his work, Willoughby was the first researcher to note the uniqueness of artifacts from Red Paint cemeteries. He called these pre-Algonquian to distinguish them from the presumably more recent Algonquian artifacts, which he assumed were ancestral to contemporary Maine Native Americans. This dichotomy set up the idea that the Red Paint sites were very ancient and totally unrelated to later archaeological time periods.

Archaeologist Warren King Moorehead popularized the name “Red Paint People” in his 1922 book, *A Report on the Archaeology of Maine*. He had excavated many sites in Maine that contained powdered red ochre and artifacts in clusters interpreted as graves. But the sites rarely if ever contained remains and even some of the stone artifacts appeared badly decayed. This observation led Moorehead to state, “*It is our conviction that the graves represent an ancient and exceedingly primitive culture, totally different from that of the later Algonquin tribes.*” (Moorehead, 1913).

To compound the mystery, Moorehead did not find any sites that he believed were the habitation sites of the Red Paint People.

Walter B. Smith weighed in on the subject in his monograph, *The Lost Red Paint People of Maine; A few things we think we know about them and more that we know we don't*.

Smith, too, was perplexed by the apparent absence of any village sites that could be attributed to the Red Paint People. He reasoned that the cemeteries were very old and, because of the quantities of both sites and artifacts, they represented a large population. He therefore suggested that the village sites must have disappeared over time, drowned by coastal submergence.

People were living along the lower reaches of the Maine rivers at the time of their last subsidence of its coast, perhaps two thousand—perhaps four thousand, or more, years ago, and at centers now covered by the ocean, even at a distance of many miles out from the present coast line.

He went on to suggest that a great tidal wave may have swept away the last of the people, leaving their cemeteries on higher ground and a mystery for the ages.

What We Have Learned

Today, archaeologists know a great deal more about the time period represented by the so-called Red Paint People.

First, we have discovered that there never was a lost tribe of Red Paint People. Archaeologists use the term Moorehead Burial Tradition to refer to the burial complex — only one aspect of the culture. Just as we cannot know about daily life in Egypt based only on what is found in the pyramids, so too we need to look at all aspects of Archaic Period culture to understand the special nature of the cemetery sites.

Second, we know that these sites are indeed old—they date to between about 4,500 and 3,800 years ago and are one time period of a long tradition of burial ceremonialism in North America. Throughout North America during the Archaic Period many cultures buried their dead with elaborate ceremony. Red ochre—the red paint—was used in burials in many areas and the tradition has even been discovered in Paleolithic sites in Europe 25,000 years old and Australia over 40,000 years ago.

Third, several Archaic Period habitation sites have now been excavated in Maine and we know much more about how people lived. Sites along the coast, including the Taft Point shell midden excavated by the Abbe Museum, document the subsistence and settlement patterns of the Late Archaic. During those times, indigenous people along the coast were concentrating on fishing for marine resources such as swordfish and cod, and hunting deer. Along the rivers, sites at waterfalls and stream confluences represent fishing stations.

The mystery of the Red Paint People speaks more about interpretation of the archaeological record than anything else. Translating archeological cultures, as defined by the types of tools discovered in excavations, in order to understand the lives of an ancient people, is not a simple task. Then, too, archaeological “cultures” may span thousands of years. A change in tool forms that appears sudden may really be evidence of many human generations of adaptation and change.

Finally, today archaeologists have learned much from Native people about the sensitivities of disturbing grave sites. Whenever possible, sacred sites are left undisturbed and there is a protocol in place to notify the appropriate Native representatives should such a site be discovered or if there is potential for an inadvertent discovery.