4,000 B.C., Saunders said. “You just find points in riverbeds and near the Gym-Armory where we've used for the last 20 years,” Saunders said. “It's pretty amazing. We'll be getting a handle on this for a while.”

The first tribe, about 12,000 years ago, were wanderers, following the coastline. They didn't want to deal with and what they wanted to do it,” Saunders said.

Another question is how the mounds were built. Saunders said it seems unlikely the mounds were a cooperative effort, not a coerced one. “They picked and chose what they wanted to deal with and what they didn't,” Saunders said. “These are coastal folks. They didn’t watch over agriculture.”

But, even that picture may change in the coming years with new discoveries and new methods of dating artifacts, Saunders said. “There’s a lot going on right now,” Saunders said. “It’s pretty amazing. We’re getting a handle on this for a while.”

Indian mounds leading archaeologists to change view of past

By BRETT BAAROUQUERE

For Rebecca Saunders, history is more than just a bunch of names and dates on a page. Saunders sees it as an ever-changing look at how people got to Louisiana and the Gulf Coast. Saunders, an archaeology professor at LSU, studies the prehistory of Louisiana, trying to figure out who and what lived along the Gulf Coast thousands of years ago.

“Lots of things have changed in the past decade,” Saunders said. “Ten years from now, people will be looking at what we’re saying now and giving a completely different picture of the area.”

In the last 10 years—a drop in the bucket in archaeological terms—scientists have realized that populations were in Louisiana about 5,000 years earlier than originally thought. Those discoveries have forced Saunders and others to rethink historical models that have been used about what Louisiana and the Gulf Coast looked like in the year 12,000 B.C.

“We are reanalyzing every model that we’ve used for the last 20 years,” Saunders said.

The timeline models once used by archaeologists were based on pieces of information gathered in mounds, like the ones on the LSU campus near the Gym-Armory where Saunders works.

The timelines went something like this:

The first tribes, about 12,000 years ago, were wanderers, following around herds of animals as the seasons changed. “We don’t know much about them,” Saunders said. “You just find points (from spears) in riverbeds and things.”

Then, the tribes became more organized and began using agriculture to create food and settled in specific areas between 6,000 and 4,000 B.C. Saunders said. An organized society would form, then came the mounds, sometime around the year zero or 1 A.D., Saunders said.

But, new, better methods of dating the artifacts found in the mounds throws that model off by about 5,000 years, Saunders said.

Some of the artifacts found in the mounds around south Louisiana once believed to be about 2,000 years old are actually 7,000 years old or older, Saunders said.

“These guys are supposed to be wandering around,” Saunders said. “They’re not supposed to be building mounds.”

But what those early mounds were for remains a mystery, Saunders said.

“They don’t consistently have anything in them,” Saunders said. “We don’t know what they were for.”

There are some clues as to what went on in Louisiana’s pre-historical days.

The large mound at Poverty Point has been an archaeological gold mine for researchers, as one of the preeminent sites in North America.

That mound was built at the end of an era, around 3,300 B.C., not the beginning of an era, Saunders said. Around 800 B.C., the first pottery is found in Louisiana, which is something of a mystery because other evidence shows that the people here knew about pottery before then, Saunders said.

“We knew they were talking about this point and began building burial mounds, Saunders said. But, for some reason, in Louisiana, the mounds were handled differently than in Ohio, she said.

In Ohio, one person or family was placed in a mound. In Louisiana, entire villages were buried together, Saunders said.

“It’s much more egalitarian,” Saunders said. “We have no idea how these ideas got here.”

A homegrown Louisiana culture, known as the Plaquemine culture, grew in the ensuing 1,200 years, Saunders said. “They picked and chose what they wanted to deal with and what they didn’t,” Saunders said. “These are coastal folks. They didn’t watch over agriculture.”

But, even that picture may change in the coming years with new discoveries and new methods of dating artifacts, Saunders said. “There’s a lot going on right now,” Saunders said. “It’s pretty amazing. We’re getting a handle on this for a while.”