

## The Calusa: “The Shell Indians”

The Calusa (kah LOOS ah) lived on the sandy shores of the southwest coast of Florida. These Indians controlled most of south Florida. The population of this tribe may have reached as many as 50,000 people. The Calusa men were tall and well built with long hair. Calusa means “fierce people,” and they were described as a fierce, war-like people. Many smaller tribes were constantly watching for these marauding warriors. The first Spanish explorers found that these Indians were not very friendly. The explorers soon became the targets of the Calusa attacks. This tribe was the first one that the Spanish explorers wrote home about in 1513.

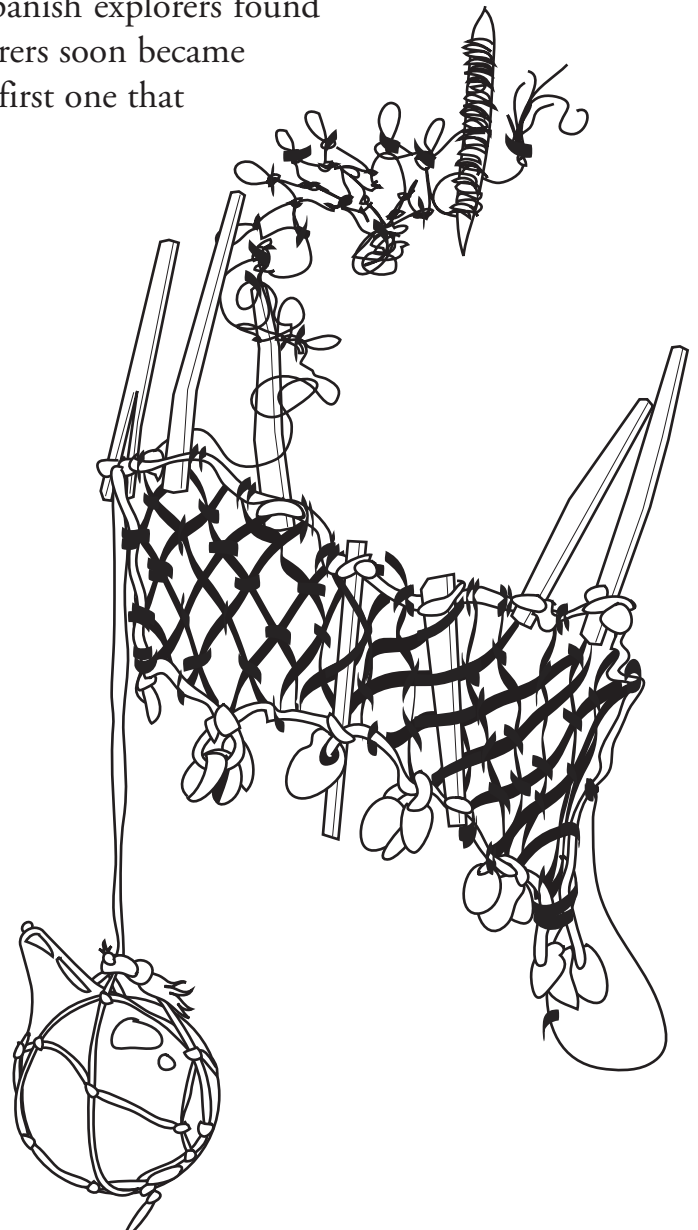
### How the Calusa Lived

The Calusa lived on the coast and along the inner waterways. They built their homes on stilts and wove Palmetto leaves to fashion roofs, but they didn’t construct any walls.

The Calusa Indians did not farm like the other Indian tribes in Florida. Instead, they fished for food on the coast, bays, rivers, and waterways. The men and boys of the tribe made nets from palm tree webbing to catch mullet, pinfish, pigfish, and catfish. They used spears to catch eels and turtles. They made fish bone arrowheads to hunt for animals such as deer. The women and children learned to catch shellfish like conchs, crabs, clams, lobsters, and oysters.

### The Calusa as Shell Indians

The Calusa are considered to be the first “shell collectors.” Shells were discarded into huge heaps. Unlike other Indian tribes, the Calusa did not make many pottery items. They used the shells for tools, utensils, jewelry, and ornaments for their shrines. Shell spears were made for fishing and hunting.



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Shell mounds can still be found today in many parts of southern Florida. Environmentalists and conservation groups protect many of these remaining shell mounds. One shell mound site is Mound Key at Estero Bay in Lee County. Its construction is made entirely of shells and clay. This site is believed to be the chief town of the Calusa, where the leader of the tribe, Chief Carlos lived.

Archaeologists have excavated many of these mounds to learn more about these extinct people. Artifacts such as shell tools, weapons, and ornaments are on display in many Florida history museums.

### **The Calusa as Sailors**

Living and surviving on the coast caused the tribesmen to become great sailors. They defended their land against other smaller tribes and European explorers that were traveling by water. The Caloosahatchee River, which means “River of the Calusa,” was their main waterway.

They traveled by dugout canoes, which were made from hollowed-out cypress logs approximately 15 feet long. They used these canoes to travel as far as Cuba. Explorers reported that the Calusa attacked their ships that were anchored close to shore. The Calusa were also known to sail up and down the west coast salvaging the wealth from shipwrecks.

### **What Happened to the Calusa?**

What happened to these fierce sailing Indians? The Calusa tribe died out in the late 1700s. Enemy Indian tribes from Georgia and South Carolina began raiding the Calusa territory. Many Calusa were captured and sold as slaves.

In addition, diseases such as smallpox and measles were brought into the area from the Spanish and French explorers and these diseases wiped out entire villages. It is believed that the few remaining Calusa Indians left for Cuba when the Spanish turned Florida over to the British in 1763.

