

Searching for Indian History

Excavations along Penns Creek have revealed cooking and flint-napping sites, as well as flints, pottery, triangle points and paleo-scrapers, indicating the area was inhabited at least 13,000 years ago and into the colonial period.

Indian villages, farms, and burial grounds are mentioned in the historic record. Some sites have been investigated; others have been damaged by plowing and development.

The Indians that inhabited Union County and surrounding areas for thousands of years prior to European settlement are, however, present in many place-names of Indian origin.

Susquehanna is a variation of the name of the Susquehannocks, also called the Conestogas and Andastes, who lived in the river valley until the early 1700's. The Susquehanna River was known as "Great Island River," by the Onondaga, and "Long Winding River" by the Lenne Lanapi. Otzinachson, "the Demon's Den," is the Iroquois name for the lower part of the West Branch Susquehanna River.

The Iroquois nations lived in New York State and traveled and hunted in PA. The Shawnee lived in many areas of the east coast before moving west to Oklahoma. The Lenne Lanapi ("Original People") populated eastern Pennsylvania in the Delaware Valley. The group now known as the Western Delaware moved after conflicts with the Iroquois through Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Kansas finally settling in Oklahoma in the 1800's.

The former Indian town Shamokin, "The Place of Chiefs or Rulers," is now Sunbury. Lenne Lanapi chief Sassanooon lived there in the early 1700's, and Oneida Chief Shikellamy in the later 1700's.

Shamokin was on many Indian paths, including the Tulpehoken Path (from the Lenne Lanapi word Tulpewi-hacki meaning "turtle-land") to Womelsdorf, the Great Shamokin Path to Kittaning, the Tuscarora Path to North Carolina, and the Great Warriors Path to Athens and Iroquois settlements in New York.

The Penns Creek Path, from Blue Hill, opposite Shamokin, crosses Union County along Penns Creek (called Kayarondinagh by the Iroquois) then goes to Frankstown, where it joins paths to Ohio and Maryland.

The Great Island Path left Shamokin, crossed the Susquehanna, climbed a ridge then followed the river through present-day Winfield, Lewisburg and White Deer. The path went west near White Deer Hole Creek towards Elimsport, over the ridge to Nippenose Valley (Lenne Lanapi for "like summer," pleasant), through a gap in Bald Eagle Mountain to the Great Island, present-day Lock Haven. Great Island was a former Susquehannock village and a gathering place and shad fishery for the Lenne Lanapi, Shawnee and Iroquois.

White Deer Creek is a translation from the Lenne Lanapi Woap-achtu-huanne meaning "white-deer stream." White Deer Hole Creek is from Woap-achtu-woalhen meaning "white-deer digs a hole."

Muncy creek and town were named for the Munsee (Wolf) Clan of the Lenne Lanapi. Where Muncy now stands, was the Shawnee village of Canaserage, meaning "among the milkweeds" or "at the place of the mandrakes." Both plants were used as medicines by native peoples. It was a common practice to name sites for important physical features or events.

Chillisquaque Creek is the "place of the snow birds." A Shawnee village, c. 1728, was at the mouth of the creek. Large flocks of snow geese, Canadian geese and swans can still be seen in the fields and on the river near this creek as they migrate along the eastern flyway.

To learn more about central Pennsylvania Indian history, visit the Union County Historical Society, and your local historical society and library.