

American Indians of the Susquehanna River Area

By Elaine Wintjen

Researchers have found much evidence of Native Americans in the central PA area, including an exciting new discovery of a tool that might shed new light on trade and settlement in this area (see recent articles in this paper on Kim Mattern's find).

The Indian nations the Susquehannocks, Lenni Lenape and Iroquois lived in and around central Pennsylvania at the time the Europeans came to the Susquehanna River valley in the 1700s. These indigenous people had permanent settlements containing long houses and farms. The Oneida Chief Shikellamy resided in "Shikellamy's Old Town" located about 3 miles north of the present town of Lewisburg. There is a historic marker near the site. Later Shikellamy lived in the Indian town "Shamokin", now called Sunbury. There were extensive trails throughout Pennsylvania and contiguous areas used for trade and for conflict, such as the Tolpehoken Road which came up to Shamokin, the Great Warriors Path running north to New York state, the Penns Creek Path that went west and joined other trails to Ohio and Maryland, and the Tuscarora Path that went south to North Carolina. Many of today's roads are located where old "Indian trails" were, as they often provided the best route from one place to another.

HISTORY

The first people to live in the Susquehanna River area, about 15,000 years ago, are known as the nomadic hunter Paleo-Indians. The climate and land were different: colder with small stands of evergreens and open countryside, and no hardwood forests. Animals such as caribou, musk ox and woolly mammoths were hunted by the Paleo-Indians. They used stone tools and carefully crafted fluted spear-points, and probably lived in small family groups, moving with the seasons and the animal migrations.

About 9,000 years ago the glaciers in the far north receded, new kinds of trees and plants began to grow and different animals moved into the land. A new culture developed. The "Archaic People" began to live a more settled life, and built round, dome-shaped houses in which family groups lived. They made stone axes, mortars and pestles, spear-points, knives and scrapers; and ate game, fish, wild plants, nuts and berries. During a transitional period about 5,000 years ago, people began using stone cooking pots, and dugout canoes to travel on the waterways.

The Woodland Indian culture began about 3,000 years ago. Ceramic pots were made for cooking and storing food. Spear-points changed shape. Family groups were based on the mother's family.

Over the next two thousand years, these Woodland Peoples became the specific Indian nations called the **Susquehannocks**, **Lenni Lenape** (or Delaware), **Iroquois** and others. At their settled villages of long houses, they grew crops such as corn, squash, pumpkins, beans, pigeonberry, sunflowers and Jerusalem artichokes (a sunflower). The woods supplied nuts, berries, wild plants and game; creeks and the river provided fish. The Susquehannocks lived mainly in the Susquehanna River valley, the Lenni Lenape lived mostly east of the Susquehanna River near the Delaware River, and the Iroquois lived north of central Pennsylvania. These nations were in central Pennsylvania when Europeans arrived. The famous Indian Chief Shikellamy met with the leaders of the Iroquois Nations as well as the colonial European leaders and conveyed messages between the two groups. He was a friend of the explorer and Indian interpreter Conrad Weiser. Chief Shikellamy died in 1749.

TODAY

Many of the places familiar to us today have Indian names denoting their meaning to the indigenous people. Chillisquaque Creek, the site of a Shawnee village c. 1728, is the "place of the snow birds." White Deer Creek is the English translation of an Indian name. The Susquehanna was known as the "great island river" or "the winding river."

And many familiar foods are from the Native Americans: turkey, corn, squash and pumpkin, as well as the cranberries (native to New England) and potatoes (native to south/central America). Happy Thanksgiving to all.



Indian Harvest and Artifacts