

Native Americans in the Middle Delaware Valley

Delaware Water Gap
National Recreation Area

National Park Service
Pennsylvania/New Jersey



Paleo-Indian 10,000 to 8,000 B.P. (Before the Present)

The first people in North America arrived about 12,000 years ago. Archeologists call these people the Paleo-Indians, and believe that they crossed into America from Asia on a narrow strip of land – the Bering Land Bridge – that once connected present-day Alaska and the Asian continent.

The climate was very different than it is today. Winters were much colder and longer, and instead of hardwood forests, the land was

covered with tundra grasses, marshlands, and scattered spruce and fir stands. Small family bands moved across this landscape, hunting game, fishing in rivers and lakes, and gathering foods from nature.

Artifacts from this period are rare, but the best known is a type of fluted spear point, the *Clovis point*, which has been found in the Upper Delaware Valley.

Archaic Period 8,000 to 2,000 B.P.

The climate warmed, and Indian bands traveled less. Some stayed largely in one place using a greater variety of products from nature, such as acorns and nuts, to nourish themselves. Indians lived in caves, rock shelters, or wooden longhouses. There is no evidence of agriculture.

Fish, shellfish, deer and elk, raccoon and wild turkey were abundant. The spear remained the chief hunting weapon, thrown by hand or with an *atlatl*, which added speed and force to the spear. Artifacts include grooved axe-heads, sinkers for fishing with nets, and several types of projectile points.

Woodland Period 2,000 B.P. to 1550 A.D.

In the Woodland Period, garden farming led to a more settled life style. Families stayed close to their lands, sturdier homes were built, families increased in size, and people lived longer. Gardens produced corn, bean, and squash, which were eaten fresh, dried for storage or cooked and stored in pottery vessels made from riverbank clay.

The native relied on fish for much of their diet. They caught shad and other fish in fishnets 300 or 400 feet long. Artifacts from this period include large numbers of sinkers. Dugout canoes were used to travel on the river, and some fish were caught with fishhooks of bone or bird claw, or speared or harpooned.



(Above) Recreation of life along the Middle Delaware in the Woodland Period. Evidence of

settlement has been excavated in the park on the New Jersey bank of the river (Above, left)

Historic Period 1550 A.D. to Present

The arrival of European colonists meant drastic changes for the natives. Colonists traded items such as brass kettles, iron axe-heads, and cloth for animal pelts from the natives. Contact with Europeans, however, infected natives with smallpox, measles and other diseases for which the natives no longer had inherited immunity.

Conflicts arose between colonists and natives over the ownerships and use of land, and between rival European empires over their colonial claims. In time the Lenape came into conflict with the neighboring Iroquois natives as well. By the mid 1700s, the Lenape had moved or been forced inland away from the Delaware Valley.

Today, Lenape descendants are scattered throughout North America. The last full-blooded Lenape, Nora Thompson Dean or “Touching Leaves” died in Oklahoma in 1984.