

Woodland Period in Pennsylvania

I. Introduction

The period of time that archaeologists call the Woodland started at about 3,000 years ago and lasted until shortly after the first Europeans entered Pennsylvania about 450 years ago. During these years, the way of life of the Native Americans living in Pennsylvania gradually changed as populations grew and new technologies were invented or adopted. One of the first changes that occurred was the use of pottery containers, called ceramics. This began at the very beginning of the Woodland Period. Other important changes occurred later, including the cultivation of crops, the use of the bow and arrow for hunting and life in settled village communities. Archaeologists have divided the Woodland Period into three parts, called Early Woodland (3,000 to 2,500 years ago), Middle Woodland (2,500 to 1,200 years ago) and late Woodland (1,200-450 years ago.)

II. The Early Woodland (3,000 to 2,500 years ago)

At the beginning of the Early Woodland, about 3,000 years ago, Native Americans living in Pennsylvania had a way of life based primarily on hunting wild animals and collecting wild plant foods. In this respect, they were similar to their Archaic Period forbearers. Animals they hunted included those we are familiar with today, such as deer, bear, wild turkey and many small mammals such as squirrels, raccoons and groundhogs. They boiled or roasted the meat. They also dried meat to preserve it so they would have food during lean times. Wild plants they collected included edible roots, berries and many kinds of nuts, including acorns, hickory nuts, walnuts and chestnuts. They also gathered seeds of wild plants that we consider to be weeds. The names of these weeds are Chenopodium (Lambs Quarter), Amaranth (Pig Weed) and Polygonum (Knot Weed). Seeds and nuts were roasted and then ground to make flour, which could be used to make gruel or bread. Because wild food resources were found in different areas during different times of the year, the people moved frequently, setting up temporary camps where they lived for several weeks to months while they hunted and gathered in the surrounding land.

This hunting and gathering way of life continued largely unchanged during the Early Woodland. However, several small but important changes had begun. To

produce a larger crop, the Native Americans began to plant, as well as to gather, the seeds of the wild weeds mentioned above. This was the start of crop cultivation and a farming way of life. During the Early Woodland, however, crops were only a minor part of the people's food, most of which still came from wild animals, nuts and berries. Another change was the use of ceramic vessels for storing and cooking food. Early Woodland ceramics were crudely made with thick walls. Since ceramic vessels are heavy and easily broken, their use suggests that Early Woodland people were moving around less than their Archaic forbearers. This would have helped with the growing of crops, since people could stay near their gardens and protect the crops from animals, weeds and the weather.

Along the Ohio and Monongahela Rivers in Western Pennsylvania, the Early Woodland way of life led to the development of many small villages, with several families living in each village. These people developed a culture that archaeologists have named Adena. Among their interesting customs was the practice of burying their dead in large mounds of earth built specifically for that purpose. Each mound was used to bury many people, and as more and more people were buried there, the mound got larger and larger. Several different methods were used to prepare the dead for burial. Some people were cremated, while others were left exposed to the weather so that their bodies would decompose naturally. Others were buried in stone or log tombs at the centers of the mounds. Less important people were buried as bundles of bones in graves scattered throughout the mound. People from several small Adena villages buried their dead in the same mound, which suggests that these villages belonged to the same society. Several Adena burial mounds in Pennsylvania have been excavated by archaeologists. In addition to burials, they found grave goods, which were buried with the dead to prepare them for life after death. Adena grave goods included especially well-made stone tools, carved stone smoking pipes in the form of animals and people, and carved stone jewelry. Archaeologists believe that the complex burial ceremonies of the Adena people reflect a religion based on ancestor worship.

III. The Middle Woodland (2,500 to 1,200 years ago)

Throughout most of Pennsylvania, the Early Woodland way of life seems to have continued with little change during the Middle Woodland. People continued to live in small villages and to live primarily by hunting and gathering, although farming provided some of their food. Ceramic vessels became better

made, with harder, thinner walls. The vessels were often decorated by striking the outside surface with a paddle wrapped with cord. In Western Pennsylvania, the way of life of the Adena people also continued with little change. Burial mounds continued to be built, and were even larger than during earlier times. The Middle Woodland successors of the Adena are called Hopewell by archaeologists. Like the Adena, the Hopewell placed elaborate and valuable grave goods with their dead. Beautifully carved figurines made of mica and copper, stone tools made of obsidian and jewelry of pearls, precious stones and even silver and gold have been found in Hopewell graves. The materials these valuable objects were made from could have only come from areas far from western Pennsylvania. This indicates that the Hopewell traded and traveled over very long distances to acquire the materials they needed to manufacture their elaborate grave goods. At the end of the Middle Woodland, the Hopewell culture declined and the people returned to a simpler way of life, without the large burial mounds and complex burial ceremonies. Archaeologists are not sure why this happened, but they theorize that changes in the climate may have made the combined hunting, gathering and farming way of life of the Hopewell less productive. Many people may have died, and those that did not may have had to move into new areas to start a new way of life.

IV. The Late Woodland (1,200-450 years ago)

At the beginning of the Late Woodland, several very important changes in Native American lifeways occurred. At this time, Native Americans in Pennsylvania began to grow crops of corn, beans and squash. The new crops originally came from the region of Mexico and South America and had spread gradually throughout North America through contacts between neighboring groups. With the new crops, people were able to grow more food. Their populations began to grow and they began to live in one place for longer periods of time. Larger and larger villages developed, located along rivers where the soils were favorable for farming. Another change that occurred was the introduction of the bow and arrow for hunting. Before the Late Woodland, people hunted with spears that they threw with a short throwing stick, called an atlatl. The bow and arrow was better for hunting, since an arrow could be shot from a bow much farther than a spear could be thrown. The bow and arrow probably came originally from the arctic regions of Canada and Alaska, and like the new crops spread to Pennsylvania through contacts between neighboring groups. With the bow and arrow the Late Woodland people of Pennsylvania became more efficient hunters, and this also helped them get more food. The animals they hunted the

most were white-tailed deer, but also took bear, wild turkey and many small mammals.

In combination, growing the new crops and hunting with the bow and arrow was a successful way of life for the Native Americans of Pennsylvania. The villages continued to grow larger, and as they did so, they became more organized. Oval houses made of bent saplings covered by hides or bark were clustered near the center of the village. These were ringed by buildings of another type which archaeologists call keyhole structures. The keyhole structures were also made of bent saplings covered by hides or bark, but were smaller than the houses and had a tunnel-like extension on one side. They looked somewhat like an igloo made of bark or hide. Keyhole structures may have been used for smoking food to preserve it, or as sweathouses, which were like saunas. Ritual sweating was important in Native American religions, to cleanse a person before important events, such as marriage or coming of age. Surrounding both the houses and the keyhole structures was a circular wall of large posts, called a stockade. The stockades around Late Woodland settlements suggest that groups were at war with one another at various times.

Along the Susquehanna River in central Pennsylvania, Late Woodland groups have been named Clemson Island, Shanks Ferry and Susquehannocks by archaeologists. The Clemson Island people were the first Late Woodland people to occupy this region. Their small villages were not organized and did not have stockades. The next group, the Shanks Ferry, did have larger organized villages that did have stockades. The Susquehannocks lived in the area after the Shanks Ferry. They had larger houses, called long houses, where several closely related families lived at the same time. The Susquehannocks were still living along the Susquehanna River when the first Europeans came to the area.

In western Pennsylvania along the Monongahela and Ohio Rivers, a different group, known as the Monongahela culture, existed during the Late Woodland Period. Like the groups along the Susquehanna, the Monongahela lived in stockaded villages and grew corn, beans and squash as their primary foods. They also hunted white-tailed deer and their houses were oval and built of bent saplings with a hide or bark covering. They attached small tunnel-like structures to their houses, called appendages. These were probably used to store food. The Monongahela had disappeared from western Pennsylvania by the time the first Europeans settled here. What happened to them remains a mystery which archaeologists have not been able to solve.

Soon after the arrival of the first Europeans, the Native American cultures of Pennsylvania began to decline. As European settlement proceeded, they lost their lands through treaties and illegal occupation. In addition, a great many died from European diseases to which they had no resistance. They also continued to make war among themselves, as well as with the Europeans who occupied their lands. Soon, all the Native American groups that had once lived in Pennsylvania had moved West or had disappeared entirely.