



NATIVE AMERICAN HERITAGE PROGRAMS

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WHO ARE THE LENAPE?



To most people today, they are the Delaware Indian, thought to have disappeared from the East Coast several centuries ago. *That is not correct.* They are the original people of the Eastern Pennsylvania region and the name they call themselves is Lenni Lenape, “the real people.” Though most were driven farther and farther westward during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, many remained in their homeland of Lenapehocking*. Their descendants are still there today!

Before the “Shouwunnok” (people from over the Great Salt Water) came, the Lenape lived in peace along their two sacred rivers, now called the Delaware and the Hudson, for untold thousands of years. Their record keepers told that they came from the North West over thousands of miles. The journey took many generations and many years, but they finally came to the land where the sun rose, and they knew it was their home. Many branches spread out from the original people, and they became the nations known collectively as the Algonquin speaking peoples who formed part of the “Eastern Woodland Culture”.

The Lenape were at first hunters and gatherers, but they became agricultural experts and were farming for thousands of years before the European arrived. They lived in small family groups or clans, mainly along waterways where the farming was good. They had no central government or “kings,” as the British insisted, but met as equals in council when there were problems to solve.

There were basically three geographical divisions of the people: the Munsee of the Pennsylvania highlands and New York (whose symbol is the wolf); the Unami or river people of the Lehigh Valley and Pennsylvania in general (whose symbol is the turtle); and the Unalachigo or the southern person of what is now New Jersey (whose symbol is the wild turkey). Each of these divisions consisted of many clans, but the names have become obscure. The Lenape of today usually associate themselves with one of the major divisions.

There was a matrilineal society where the women had a prominent place in council. Marriages were inter-clan and a bridegroom would move into his wife’s house. Everyone worked hard and had many different roles in their families and clans. Women worked as hard as the men but were accorded great respect. Both were responsible for raising the children who were exceedingly dear to them and were usually disciplined with only words and example.

Property was “common” as was wealth. William Penn wrote about them “in liberality they excel, there is nothing too good for a friend they never want much or have much they are light of heart” They were pacifists and their right to be so was generally honored by other native nations. They were called “grandfathers,” or wise ones.

They spoke a melodious language that we still hear today in our place names. They kept records in pictographic form on wooden sticks. They had a numbering system into the thousands. They had a great reverence for the earth and all it contained, believing that they were responsible for the care and nurture of all The Creator provided.

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Because of their concern, they left little impression upon the land, their presence “resting as light as a bird’s wing over dense forests and sparking rivers.” When the major numbers were gone, “the people” seemed to have vanished leaving no trace.

The lack of governmental organization and their intense love of individual freedom made it difficult to resist the aggression of the Europeans. Many began to move west early in the colonial period so they could find a free land once more. They assumed the name “Delaware,” the English name for their sacred river (Lenapehanna) of their homeland. Most of these people now live on reservations in Oklahoma, Wisconsin and Canada.

In the Valley of the Lehigh, and other parts of PA, New Jersey, Delaware, and New York there are the Homeland members, descendants of those Lenape who chose to remain behind when the others left. They believe the knowledge of the “grandfathers” way of life is worth sharing in a world beset by family problems, greed and so many other ills.



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* *Lenapehoking* is a modern day term that means “Land of the Lenape.”



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