

### III. REGIONAL PRECONTACT NATIVE AMERICAN HISTORY

The precontact Native American history of the Middle Atlantic region is divided into three distinct chronological time periods; the Paleo-Indian Period (ca. 10,000 B.C. - 6500 B.C.), the Archaic Period (ca. 6500 B.C. - 1000 B.C.), and the Woodland Period (ca. 1000 B.C. - A.D. 1801). Similarities and differences regarding subsistence strategies, settlement patterns, paleoenvironments, and technologies serve as criteria for defining *cultural periods within the aforementioned chronological time periods*. In consideration of these criteria, Early, Middle, and Late sub-periods have frequently been identified within the Archaic and Woodland Periods. Often these sub-periods serve as a basis for better understanding gradual transitions within and between cultural periods.

The following discussion of the precontact Native American history of Delaware represents a summary based on current precontact Native American archaeological research and statewide-established precontact Native American research context, specifically Custer (1986a, 1986b, 1989, 1994, 1996a). While it is important to note that the transition from one cultural period to another is a gradual process and often varies from one environmental setting to another, the regional precontact Native American history of Delaware is divided into four specific cultural periods:

- the Paleo-Indian Period (ca. 12,000 B.C. - 6500 B.C.). This cultural period spans the Paleo-Indian (12,000 B.C. - 8500 B.C.) through Early Archaic (8500 B.C. -6500 B.C.) chronological time periods;
- the Archaic Period (ca. 6500 B.C. - 3,000 B.C.). This cultural period coincides with the Middle Archaic (6500 - 3000 B.C.) chronological time period;
- the Woodland I Period (ca. 3000 B.C. - A.D. 1000). This cultural period spans the Late Archaic (3000 B.C. -1000 B.C.), Early Woodland (1000 B.C. - A.D. 0), and the Middle Woodland (A.D. 0 - A.D. 1000) chronological time periods; and
- the Woodland II Period (ca. A.D. 1000 - A.D. 1650). This cultural period coincides with the Late Woodland chronological time period (A.D. 1000 A.D. 1650).

A fifth cultural period, the Contact Period (A.D. 1650 - A.D. 1750), which focuses on the interaction of precontact Native American Indian populations with arriving European groups during the postcontact Exploration and Frontier Settlement Period (A.D. 1630 - A.D. 1730), will also be presented in this discussion because it marks the beginning of the decline of precontact Native American lifeways in Delaware.

#### A. Paleo-Indian Period (ca. 12,000 B.C. - 6,500 B.C.)

The Paleo-Indian Period begins at the end of the Pleistocene, and ends with the onset of the Holocene. This transition between the Pleistocene and Holocene is marked by a change from

cold glacial conditions to alternating wet and dry climates. The adaptations made by human populations to these fluctuating conditions characterize the Paleo-Indian Period. Paleo-Indian Period populations practiced hunter-gatherer subsistence with animal resources comprising much of their diet. Several cold-weather faunal species such as the now-extinct mastodon, the since-migrated moose, as well as smaller, still present species, such as white-tailed deer, were supported by the various deciduous, boreal, and grassland environments which were once found throughout the eastern United States (Custer 1989).

Overall, throughout the Paleo-Indian Period, settlement patterns remained relatively consistent. Nomadic groups comprised of multiple or single-family bands, which focused on attractive hunting locales such as watering holes, have been hypothesized (Custer 1986a, 1986b, 1989). Throughout the Mid-Atlantic region, identified Paleo-Indian Period site types have included quarry sites, hunting sites, base camps, as well as the various types of associated support sites (Custer 1996a, 1996b, 1989).

Paleo-Indian Period tool kits reflect an emphasis on the procurement and processing of animal resources. Preferences for high quality lithic materials, such as chert and jasper, are apparent in lithic artifact assemblages recovered from Paleo-Indian Period sites. In addition, stone tools in these artifact assemblages show evidence of great care in stone tool maintenance and resharpening. One of the most distinctive artifacts associated with the Paleo-Indian Period is the fluted point, characterized by a channel that is removed from the center of the base to the center, or distal end, of the point. Toward the end of the Paleo-Indian Period (i.e., Early Archaic subperiod), notched point styles also began to appear in toolkits.

Over fifty fluted points, as well as other lithic artifacts attributed to the Paleo-Indian Period, have been recovered in Delaware (Griffith 1982; Custer 1989). Given the presence of various lithic outcrops in the Piedmont Uplands/Fall Line of northern Delaware, the recovery of fluted points in the state is not unusual. The abundant cobble beds scattered throughout southern portions of the Delaware, specifically within the Coastal Plain, have also been suggested as having been utilized by Paleo-Indian Period groups as sources for raw lithic materials (Custer 1989; Marshall 1982). The availability of raw lithic resources would have attracted Paleo-Indian Period groups to the general area. Unfortunately, many of the fluted points from Delaware tend to represent isolated surface finds; however, the distribution of these finds, provide some insight on the Paleo-Indian Period of Delaware.

Regional models of archaeological research have shown that small interior wetland settings played an integral role in Paleo-Indian Period subsistence strategies and settlement patterns. In addition to providing readily available water in interior areas away from drainages, these environmental settings would have supported a wide variety of floral and faunal species, and as such, would have been considered attractive occupation locales by past precontact Native American groups (Custer 1996a, 1996b). Fluted points have been recovered from these small interior wetland settings in both Delaware's Piedmont and Coastal Plain physiographic zones.

Throughout the Atlantic Coastal Plain, bogs and swamps formed from the remains of relict thermokarst basins have been subjected to considerable archaeological examination (Custer 1986a, 1986b, 1989; Kraft and Mounier 1982; Marshall 1982; Bonfiglio and Cresson 1982). While the actual geological origin of these unique wetland settings has been a topic of much discussion, it has been discovered that these settings were relatively stable environments by the end of the Pleistocene (Bonfiglio and Cresson 1982; Cavallo and Mounier 1980; Cavallo and Mounier 1982; Custer 1986a, 1986b). Throughout the Middle Atlantic region, these features have commonly been called “bay/basin”, “whale wallow”, “pingo”, or “palsa” features. More significantly, such features are known to have been favored environmental locales that were subjected to recurrent use well into at least the end of the Late Archaic subperiod (Custer 1989; Bonfiglio and Cresson 1982; Cavallo and Mounier 1980; Kraft and Mounier 1982). While bay/basin features are especially abundant in the state’s Mid-Peninsular Drainage Divide physiographic zone, archaeological evidence for Paleo-Indian Period use of bay/basins has not been found in Delaware (Custer 1989). Nonetheless, considering the discovery of Paleo-Indian Period occupations associated with similar features in New Jersey (Bonfiglio and Cresson 1978, 1982), it is likely that bay/basin features were also utilized by Paleo-Indian Period groups in Delaware (Custer 1989).

On a related note, similar archaeological models and findings have also been documented for wetland settings such as bogs, swamps, seeps, springs, and sinkholes in karst areas of the Piedmont (Custer 1986a, 1986b, 1989, 1994). One example of Paleo-Indian Period habitation in Delaware’s Piedmont is the Mitchell Site (7NC-A-2), which is located just north of Hockessin. The Mitchell Site consists of the archaeological remains of a small hunting site located at the edge of relict sinkhole. In addition to three fluted points as well as various cutting and scraping tools from the plow zone soils surrounding the sinkhole, test excavations at the Mitchell Site also recovered several flakes from a buried intact soil horizon within the sinkhole itself.

Much of Delaware’s Paleo-Indian Period archaeological data was recovered from the state’s Mid-Peninsular Drainage Divide physiographic zone. In addition to various isolated fluted point locales, this physiographic zone also contains one of the Delaware’s best-known concentrations of Paleo-Indian Period sites. Specifically, these sites are those associated with the Hughes Paleo-Indian Site complex (7K-E-10, 7K-E-24, and 7K-E-33), which is located in central Kent County. The complex includes six distinct artifact concentrations situated on a series of low, well-drained knolls that rise above various wetland settings that include a large freshwater swamp and several poorly drained areas. Surface collection efforts at the Hughes Paleo-Indian Complex have yielded a wide variety of lithic artifacts from these sites. In addition to debitage, the recovered artifact assemblages also contain several fluted and notched points, late stage bifaces, as well as various flake tools. All of the tools exhibit evidence heavy resharpening and reworking consistent with Paleo-Indian Period lithic curation practices. The majority of the recovered fluted points are Clovis and Middle Paleo-Indian subperiod variants. The notched point assemblage consists primarily of Kirk and Palmer points. The recovery of both fluted and notched point types implies recurrent use of the environs of the Hughes Paleo-Indian Site complex during the Paleo-Indian Period.

Another distinct concentration of fluted point locales has also been noted in the Delaware-Pennsylvania-Maryland border region. This concentration is of interest because coincides closely with the Delaware Chalcedony Complex (DCC) (Custer 1989). Several fluted points and Paleo-Indian Period notched points made of DCC materials have been recovered from various surface contexts throughout the DCC catchment area, including around Iron and Chestnut Hills.

Like other parts of the state, most of the evidence for Paleo-Indian period habitation in New Castle County is based on isolated fluted point finds. However, a few sites with Paleo-Indian Period occupations have been identified and examined beyond the surface collection level. One such example is the Everett site (7NC-D-21), which was discovered on a terrace overlooking a poorly-drained area near Grey's Hill. Although all of the fluted points from the site were recovered on the surface, controlled subsurface excavations did yield several scraping and cutting tools. Based on site sites, the Everett Site has been concluded to be the remains of a small hunting site or base camp maintenance station (Custer 1989).

Aside from some modifications in response to the emergence of the Holocene toward the end of the Paleo-Indian Period, overall, settlement patterns and the basic adaptive lifestyle remained relatively consistent throughout most of this cultural period.

## **B. Archaic Period (6500 B.C. - 3000 B.C.)**

Several adaptive strategies of precontact Native American human populations to the emergence of stable Holocene environments define the Archaic Period. By 6500 B.C., mesic forests of hemlock and oak flourished in several sections of the Middle Atlantic region, including Delaware (Custer 1989). Reduction of open grasslands forced the extinction or migration of many of the cold weather-browsing megafauna that were critical to the subsistence of Paleo-Indian Period groups. In addition, rises in sea level created interior swamp, marsh, and estuarine environments. These new environments supported a wide variety of floral and faunal species such as deer, migratory waterfowl, anadromous fish, and both fresh- and salt-water shellfish (Custer 1986a, 1986b, 1989). Consequently, Archaic Period populations began to take advantage of the availability of these various new resources. Overall, the Archaic Period is characterized by a noticeable shift from a hunter-gather strategy to a foraging lifestyle.

Archaic Period tool kits in the region also reflect a more generalized foraging subsistence. Unlike the specialized hunting Paleo-Indian Period tool kits, Archaic Period tool kits often include plant processing tools, such as mortars and pestles, as well as ground stone tools, including adzes, axes, and spearthrower weights. The appearances of these types of tools are indicative of a greater dependence on plant resources (Custer 1989).

Like their predecessors, Archaic Period groups were also nomadic; however, these groups migrated throughout the area to take advantage of the broad range of environmental settings and resources on a seasonal basis. Growth and reduction of group size also occurred seasonally.

Interestingly, many of the environmental settings that have yielded Archaic Period procurement/processing sites are similar to those with Paleo-Indian Period sites; however, there are notable differences in the distribution of Archaic Period and Paleo-Indian Period sites across the state. Studies have also shown that the coincidence of Paleo-Indian Period and Middle Archaic subperiod procurement sites at a single location tends to be rare in Delaware (Custer 1986a, 1986b). No doubt, the differences between Paleo-Indian Period and Archaic Period site distributions are a reflection of human adaptations to shifts in ecological factors.

As suggested earlier, in the eastern United States, Archaic Period sites tend to be located in riverine, lacustrine, and coastal settings. These environments often contain a diversity of Middle Archaic subperiod site types that range from small procurement or processing sites to base camps of various sizes (Custer 1989, 1996a, 1996b). Many of the larger multi-component sites found in the Middle Atlantic region, such as those found within the Abbott Farm National Landmark near Trenton (New Jersey), often contain Middle Archaic subperiod occupations (Pagoulatos 1992). Middle Archaic subperiod components have also been identified at the Harry's Farm Site (Kraft 1975) and at the Indian Head Site (Mounier 1975, 1982), both of which are also located in New Jersey.

Various Archaic Period sites have been recorded throughout Delaware. These sites have ranged from small temporary procurement/processing stations (e.g., 7NC-D-70, 7NC-J-3, and 7K-C-25; Custer 1986a, 1986b) to base camp-type sites (e.g., 7NC-A-2, 7NC-E-42, and 7S-E-21; Custer 1986a, 1986b). In addition to well-drained areas surrounding large swamps and major drainages, archaeological remains of Archaic Period occupations have been discovered on upland slopes near ephemeral streams, low knolls adjacent to swampy floodplains, near sinkholes, around bay/basins, and other bog/swamp-type environments. As would be expected, Archaic Period base camp sites tend to be found near wetland settings with larger carrying capacities than those associated with more temporary procurement/processing sites. Archaic Period base camps have been found along the state's major drainages such as the Delaware River (e.g., Crane Hook) and the St. Jones River (e.g., 7K-C-194A), and also on well-drained lands surrounding large swamps, such around Churchman's Marsh in northern Delaware (e.g., 7NC-E-6 and 7NC-E-42; Custer 1989, 1986a, 1986b). While many of Delaware's larger multi-component base camp sites date predominately to later time periods, these sites also often contain Archaic Period occupations (e.g., 7K-C-194A, and 7NC-G-101) (Custer 1989; Custer, Riley and Mellin 1996; Custer and Silber 1994).

### **C. Woodland I Period (3000 B.C. - A.D. 1000)**

The Woodland I Period is defined by pronounced environmental alterations occurring throughout the Middle Atlantic region (Custer 1986a, 1986b, 1989, 1994, 1996a, 1996b). Locally, this time is associated with severe climatic shifts that resulted in warm and dry conditions (Custer 1989). These changes enabled xeric and deciduous forests of oak and hickory to replace mesic forests, as well as the return of grassland areas. Although many of

the existing interior wetland settings of Delaware disappeared, the slow but continued rise in sea level resulted in the emergence of new large brackish marshes, especially near the Delaware River and Bay. Stabilization of the climate, environment, and sea level were established by ca. 1500 B.C. and these conditions were probably relatively similar to present ones (Custer 1989).

This alteration of the environment also caused notable changes in the adaptive strategies of precontact Native American populations. Floodplains of major rivers and estuarine swamp/marsh settings supported a broad range of floral and faunal resources. In Delaware, large archaeological sites that often contain several different occupations have been documented in such environmental settings. Similar sites with base camps, barring regional variations, have also been identified in these resource-rich environments throughout the Middle Atlantic region.

Smaller base camps are often located along lesser tributaries, near cobble beds, or in coastal areas. Such sites are often associated with shell middens in coastal settings. Small procurement and processing sites are also scattered throughout these environments, as well as along intermittent streams and in interior areas (Custer 1994). Along the southern coastline of the state, marine resources were integral in the subsistence of Woodland I Period populations. Sites dating to this period are often found near tidal marshes, in sheltered coves, or in estuarine settings. Especially favored locations would be these types of settings that would have supported a diversity of resources such as ocean fish, crabs, and shellfish.

Although small short-term forays, for purposes such as hunting or obtaining raw lithic materials were made, in general, Woodland I Period groups seemed to have practiced a relatively sedentary settlement pattern. Group sizes seem to have ranged anywhere from small individual family units to conglomerations of several of these units dependent on seasonality or environmental setting (Custer 1989, 1994; Custer and Silber 1994).

Significant additions to precontact Native American tool kits also appear during the Woodland I Period. Increased use of plant processing tools, such as grinding stones, mortars, and pestles, suggest a trend in efficient and intensive procurement of floral resources. Tools associated with woodworking, such as adzes and celts, become prevalent. More broad-bladed, knife-like processing implements also appear in chipped stone tool assemblages. Overall, procurement of raw lithic material was based on primary and secondary sources; however, often non-local lithic materials are found within Woodland I Period assemblages. The presence of these imported materials suggests emergence of trade and exchange networks among these groups (Custer 1989, 1994).

The addition of stone, followed by ceramic, vessels also reflect a growing efficiency in the use of certain food types. These vessels served as cooking implements. Some of the larger ceramic vessels may have possibly served as storage vessels for surpluses. Storage pits and house features have been identified at numerous sites dating to this time throughout the Middle Atlantic region (Custer 1989, 1994, 1996a, 1996b; Custer and Silber 1994).

This new, relatively sedentary, settlement pattern also caused considerable changes in social organization of populations living in the Middle Atlantic region. A more sedentary lifestyle combined with horticultural plant harvesting would have often yielded occasional surpluses. For example, toward the end of this period, procurement of fish resources is thought to have played a significant role in subsistence strategies within the Abbott Farm National Landmark, which is located near Trenton, New Jersey (Stewart 1994). Across the Middle Atlantic region, objects such as polished celts, gorgets, pipes, and tools of non-local materials appear to be manifestations of developing social organization. Consequently, these factors often allowed incipient ranked societies to form. Across the Middle Atlantic region, objects such as polished celts, gorgets, pipes, and tools of non-local materials appear to be manifestations of developing social organization.

Results of large-scale surveys, such as those associated with the Delaware Department of Transportation construction of S.R. 1 during the late twentieth century (e.g., Bachman, Grettler, and Custer 1988; Riley, Bachman, et al. 1994) and development of Delaware Park (Thomas 1981), indicate that much of Delaware was inhabited during the Woodland I Period. Since these studies, several concentrations of individual Woodland I Period sites have been identified around most of the state's drainages. Many noted Woodland I Period sites have been subjected to extensive research in both New Castle and Kent Counties.

#### **D. Woodland II Period (A.D. 1000- A.D. 1650)**

Overall, the Woodland II Period is characterized by an emergence of pronounced agricultural food production systems (Custer 1984, 1989). The growth of efficient plant food harvesting is a reflection of a continued pattern of sedentism of precontact Native American populations.

In the Middle Atlantic region, significant variability in the subsistence systems, social organization, and community patterns existed among Woodland II Period populations. These differences ranged from societies who lived in large villages organized by kinship group to populations whose lifeways closely resembled those of their late Woodland I Period (i.e., Middle Woodland subperiod) predecessors (Custer 1989, 1996a, 1996b).

In northern Delaware (as well as the Piedmont Uplands of the Delaware-Maryland-Pennsylvania border region), one of the most prevailing cultures of the Woodland II Period is the Minguannan Complex. Unlike some of the region's more complex societies, such as the Shenks Ferry groups of the Susequehanna Valley or the Minisink populations of the Upper Delaware Valley, the lifeways of Minguannan cultures seems to have been less sedentary (Custer 1996a, 1996b). In some states of the Middle Atlantic region, agricultural food production systems were already in operation by the end of the Woodland II Period within several cultures<sup>2</sup>; however, there has been little evidence in the archaeological record to suggest that Minguannan cultures conducted such activities (Custer 1996a, 1996b).

---

<sup>2</sup> For example, components dating to the Woodland II Period at the Harry's Farm and Miller Field Sites, both located in northern New Jersey, have yielded several remains of corncobs, cornhusks, corn kernels, pumpkin seeds, and squash seeds (Watson and Custer 1990).

Overall, Minguannan settlement patterns appear to have deviated little from their Woodland I Period predecessors, and Minguannan sites often coincide with sites that were previously used by Woodland I Period groups (Custer 1996a, 1996b). In fact, these sites often contain several occupations from both cultural periods and these occurrences further illustrate a more sedentary lifestyle. Aside from some modifications in projectile point and ceramic styles, deviations of Woodland II Period artifact assemblages from Woodland I Period assemblages are minimal.

#### **E. Contact Period (A.D. 1650 - A.D. 1750)**

The Contact Period marks the initial arrival of European groups; predominately Dutch, Swedish, and English, to the Middle Atlantic region. Overall, data from the archaeological record of this period is limited, and often, ethnographic accounts by these first European explorers and settlers have been considered important supplementary sources of information.

In Delaware, few sites with clear Contact Period components have been identified. Two of Delaware's more studied Contact Period sites, 7NC-E-42 (Custer and Watson 1986; Custer 1989) and the Dragon Run Site (7NC-G-104; Kellogg et. al 1994), are located in New Castle County. By comparison, the European-manufactured artifact assemblages from both sites are considerably more meager than those recovered from contemporaneous Contact Period sites in neighboring Pennsylvania, Maryland, and New Jersey (Custer 1989; Custer and Watson 1986; Kellogg et. al 1994). Additionally, the Native American assemblages strongly indicate a relatively undisturbed continuation of Woodland II Period lifestyles at 7NC-E-42 and the Dragon Run Site (7NC-G-104). The lack of participation between these Native American groups and Europeans has been attributed to a stronghold of southern Pennsylvania Susquehannock groups on Delaware (Custer 1989; Custer and Silber 1994; Custer 1994).

Although several Contact Period-era European-made pipes and Native American artifacts recovered at the Townsend Site (7S-G-2) in southern Delaware have been attributed to a Contact Period occupation (Omwake and Stewart 1963), the association of the Native American and European artifact assemblages continues to be somewhat unclear (Custer 1984). Similar discoveries of European and Native American artifacts have also been noted at several Woodland II Period Slaughter Creek Complex sites; however, like the artifacts from the Townsend Site (7S-G-2), the exact contextual relationship between these artifacts also remains uncertain (Custer 1984).

Although Native American groups continued to live in northern Delaware, aside from some occasional exceptions, Woodland II Period Native American lifeways had been dramatically altered by the middle part of the eighteenth century.