



National Park Service Rock Creek Park Curriculum Based Program The Native Woodland Peoples of the Rock Creek Valley

In Depth Background Information

Native Americans in Rock Creek Valley

The area that is now Rock Creek Park has been inhabited for approximately 13,000 years. Archeological and historical evidence indicates that Native Americans have lived in the Potomac Piedmont region, the area of and surrounding Rock Creek Park, during the Paleo-Indian Period (11000-8000 BC), the Archaic Period (8000- 1200 BC), and the Woodland Period (1200 BC to AD 1600).

Until approximately 4,000 years ago, the area of Rock Creek appears to have been utilized by temporary foraging groups who left little archeological evidence. However, excavations indicate several prehistoric site types within the park: 1) quartzite cobble quarries and primary lithic reduction workshops (scattered remains of stone tool working) on hill slopes south of Military Road; 2) near-surface lithic scatters on hill and ridge summits, representing satellite camps of foraging task groups; 3) below-ground features, such as storage pits and hearths, representing seasonal microband (smaller group) base camps; and 4) possible remnants of Archaic macroband (larger group) base camps or Woodland villages, including features, and perhaps even burials, near the mouth of Rock Creek. There is a high probability that unknown Paleo-Indian, Archaic and Woodland sites remain – undisturbed and undiscovered – in Rock Creek Park. Other evidence of habitation over time includes artifacts and later written and pictorial records.

Early Americans came to this area during the glacial advances of the last ice age as semi-nomadic peoples, enjoying the abundant natural resources here while Northern areas were becoming frozen over. (Glaciers covered much of northern Pennsylvania, and the Chesapeake Bay didn't exist yet). Archeological evidence of Paleo-Indian inhabitants in Maryland is sparse but includes over 100 fluted projectile points. Paleo-Indians were hunter/gatherers and they lived in small, semi-nomadic bands which moved from place to place. The gathering of plants such as berries, nuts, and roots contributed more to the economy than did hunting. Though it is hotly contested among archeologists, several professionals believe that these peoples played a role in the extinction of several big game animals. Animals present at this time were Woodland caribou, elk, moose, black bear, peccary, wolf, lynx, beaver, mastodon, mammoth, and musk ox.

It is likely that during the Paleo-Indian period (11000-8000 BC), the Post-Ice Age landscape of the Washington DC area was a relatively open forest with some northern pines, white birch, and maple trees.

During the Archaic period (8000- 1200 BC), the climate became warmer and drier, and melting glaciers flooded rivers, resulting in the creation of the Chesapeake Bay. As the climate changed, big game animals began to die out and a thicker forest began to replace grassland mixed with groves of trees. Native peoples' populations grew, but they had to make major adjustments by hunting smaller game and foraging for nuts and berries. New and more abundant plant and animal life allowed them to settle in permanent or semi-permanent villages, migrating with the seasonal availability of plants and animals. They also began to depend on new food sources and hunting techniques, and to invent new tools - including stone axes, scrapers, pointed weapons - and stone bowls, evidence of which have been found in Rock Creek Park.

Around 2000 BC, Late Archaic people quarried huge numbers of quartzite cobbles from the hill-flanks along Rock Creek. These cobbles were chipped on-site into rough blades, which were transported to campsites elsewhere for final production into dart points (darts were thrown with an atlatl, and spearpoints were thrust, not thrown). These people also made tub-shaped cooking vessels by carving soapstone out of bedrock sources along Soapstone Valley and Rose Hill quarry in what is now Rock Creek Park (near and under Connecticut Avenue). Exchange networks linked Late Archaic societies, so that the stone bowls made here reached groups living far from the soapstone sources.

Some evidence suggests that Eastern Algonquian peoples (not to be confused with Algonquin peoples who lived north of the St. Lawrence River in what is now Canada), moved south into the Chesapeake watershed between 650 and 800 AD these Native Peoples lived in loosely clustered longhouses, had some agriculture, and created pottery, marked with exterior impressions of woven fabric.

During the Woodland period (1000 BC to AD 1600), it is possible that Rock Creek was used by native peoples as hunting and fishing grounds. Woodland Natives were settled near water sources, in villages, some of which were surrounded by palisades (wooden fences). They typically had farms. Among their crops were corn, beans, squash, and tobacco. Men fished and hunted deer, smaller game, and waterbirds while women and children farmed and gathered berries, nuts, and other wild plants.

Wigwams (homes) were typically one room shared by one or several families, usually related, and were built of bent saplings covered with bark, woven mats, grass, or reeds. Low benches along the walls were covered with woven mats and served as beds. During the winter, a fire would burn in the center of the dwelling for warmth. Clothing was made of deerskin, and Woodland People ornamented themselves with beads, shells, animal teeth and bones, and copper, as well as some painted designs. Tools were made of stone, bone, antlers, and teeth. Bows and arrows were developed during the Woodland period. Woven reed nets, called weirs, were used for fishing. Mats, baskets, wooden bowls, and ceramic (clay) pots were crafted, in place of the more cumbersome soapstone vessels, for daily use. Walking was the primary mode of transportation. Another mode of transportation was the bark or dugout canoe.

Around AD 600-1000, a network of long distance foot trails connected villages from the East Coast and served as trade routes reaching as far as the Ohio Valley. Wampum (which functioned like money) was made of small shells, often strung together like beads. Items

exchanged were elk or moose-antler combs, fossil shark's teeth, polished stone gorgets, and stone platform pipes with tulip-shaped bowls. A cremation burial containing such artifacts, and dated to about AD 700, was discovered in the mid 1990s beside the Whitehurst Freeway, near the mouth of Rock Creek.

The Spanish and French were aware of the Chesapeake Bay and Potomac River as early as the 1520s. In June 1608, Captain John Smith and 14 members of the Jamestown colony entered the Potomac River, aboard a two-ton barge, and native peoples of this area began to have some more direct contact with Europeans. Information about the late Woodland culture in this area comes from archeological finds as well as both written and pictorial records. Stone points, ceramic sherds, pendants, pieces of comb, plant remains, textile fragments, and evidence of several woodland hearths have been uncovered on property belonging to Rock Creek Park.

In the late 1500s and 1600s, the Nacotchtanks, a branch of the Piscataway, would have gathered and hunted on lands now administered by Rock Creek Park. The Piscataway were the largest group of Algonquian speakers in southern Maryland and they were the dominant group within the chiefdom that was called "Conoy" by their Iroquoian speaking enemies, the Five Nation Iroquois. Depending on the politics of the moment, the Nacotchtanks were on-again/off-again members of the Conoy chiefdom. (The Piscataways, Pamunkeys, Nanjemoys, and Potapacos were primarily in Southern Maryland. The Tauxenents (later known as the Doegs) and the Patawomekes were of Virginia. All of these groups spoke mutually intelligible variants of Eastern Algonquian. The Powhatans were farther south, in Tidewater Virginia).

Upon the arrival of European colonists in the mid-1600s, the Nacotchtanks/ Piscataway/Conoy were suspicious but welcoming, helping the Colonists with agriculture, hunting, fishing and other skills. The Nacotchtanks/Piscataway/Conoy were "warrior societies." After 1400 AD, warfare became endemic in the Eastern Woodlands. The Nacotchtanks/Piscataway/Conoy hoped to ally with the settlers against the more aggressive Susquehannocks, an Iroquoian-speaking group, farther north along the Susquehannock River, named after them. Like many groups, the Piscataway eventually scattered. Migrating from their Woodland home areas, they moved south to the Bull Run mountains of Virginia, then north to the Upper Potomac River on what is now Heater's Island, MD. Some also died of diseases carried by European settlers. Because of their early and extensive contact with Europeans, the native peoples of the Northeastern United States lost more of their land and more of their traditions than many groups farther west. However, recently some descendants are making efforts to revitalize aspects of their traditional cultures. Some families in the Maryland and Virginia area today claim descent from the original Piscataway/Conoy.

Relations with displaced Indian groups became particularly hostile in the last years of the 17th century, when frontier residents were shocked by brutal raids. To guard against Indian raiding parties, the Maryland Rangers patrolled the area between the Potomac and the Patuxent Rivers. A fort for the rangers was built in 1692 or 1693, supposedly somewhere west of Rock Creek. Sources differ on the precise location of the garrison. It may have been situated just below the Little Falls of the Potomac, on the 759 acre White Haven patent in the hills northwest of present-day Georgetown, possibly on the west side of Rock Creek, near P Street.

There was no trading post in the Rock Creek area. Reports of a trading post are incorrect. The myth of Saw Pit Landing at the mouth of Rock Creek has been disproved by research conducted in Rock Creek Park in 2004.

William Henry Holmes, Archeologist

William Henry Holmes (with the Bureau of American Ethnology of the Smithsonian Institution) studied the quartzite and steatite quarries within the Rock Creek Valley between 1889 and 1894. His excavations represented “state of the art” archeology of the time, and he was a leader in the field. Holmes was able to prove that the debris in the quarries included a series of reject blade forms and he disproved that the tools indicated an earlier, mid-Pleistocene, presence of Native Peoples in North America. (Many of these rejects superficially resembled the Acheulean handaxes of Europe, which are now known to date from about 500,000 to 100,000 years ago). Holmes’ findings in Piney Branch quarry did “more to clear up the story of man in America than any single piece of research in the United States.” (Holmes, personal correspondence 1925 and 1932, as quoted by Meltzer and Dunnell 1992:xvii)

Besides the Piney Branch and Dumbarton Heights quarries, Holmes identified several other quarry areas of quartzite cobble reduction: with much shop refuse noted on high points near present day Connecticut Ave and Tilden Rd. and numerous spots on the slopes of the Mount Pleasant bluffs, along Rock Creek between the National Zoo and the Piney Branch quarry. He noted the presence of evidence of primitive dwelling on the terrace overlooking Rock Creek west of Mount Pleasant and reported finished implements found in this area. Holmes conducted an investigation of the Rose Hill steatite quarry, which at that time was in the process of being obliterated by construction of Connecticut Avenue. The now vanished site was located at the western end of the present Soapstone Valley Park.

Barbara Munford (The George Washington University) conducted another excavation in the Piney Branch quarry in the early 1980’s, and suggested that the angles of some flakes and bifaces might indicate their use in processing of hide, flesh, wood, and bone. Without data concerning the relative stratigraphic positions of artifacts, the chronology of the Piney Branch artifacts cannot be clarified. Therefore, the Rock Creek quarries may have been used in the Late Archaic through the Late Woodland Periods.

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Information on the John White watercolors – Historical Period
(Source: <http://www.nps.gov/fora/teacher.htm>)

“White's manner of drawing the native people was as spontaneous as their actions — applying his colors directly to the paper without any surface preparation after outlining the subject in black lead. He probably sat off to the side quietly observing the American Indians with his sensitive and understanding eye, then swiftly conveying his impressions to paper. Most 16th century artists tended to Europeanize their subjects and pose them in unnatural situations. One of John White's greatest contributions to our knowledge of the American Indians was his delicate naturalism in portraying his subjects. The bulk of White's drawings — plants, animals, and people — were made during the 1585-86 voyages. These were an eloquent record of America, painted with imaginative insight and freshness.

The John White watercolors, engraved by Theodore de Bry, first appeared in 1590 as part of a volume entitled America. (However, de Bry's watercolors do not accurately portray the Indians as White's original watercolors did). The publication went through 17 printings and was translated into four languages between 1590 and 1630. For three centuries it stood as the main source of pictorial presentation of the American Indian and life in the New World. The

drawings were then lost until 1866 when the British Museum secured at least a partial collection of the originals from the Earl of Charlemont. It was almost another century before the paintings were reproduced again. The publication of the John White Prints in the volume *America 1585* offers modern eyes what De Bry's engravings presented to the Tudor world.”

* Background information and curriculum guide developed by Elizabeth Ahmann, Park Volunteer, as well as Anne O’Neill, Park Ranger. Thanks also to Regional Archeologist, Dr. Stephen Potter for his invaluable assistance.
