

Transcript of Indians of Eastern Long Island Lecture
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The Ancestors: An overview of Montaukett Prehistory

Archaeologists divide the evolution of Native American cultures into the following approximate time periods: the Paleo-Indian Period (12,500-8,000 years ago) the Archaic Period (8,000-3,000 years ago), the Woodland Period (3,000-1,000 years ago) the Late Woodland Period (1,000 years ago-1600AD) and the Early Contact Period (1600AD-1700AD). These periods are marked by specific changes in the material culture that has been revealed in the archaeological sites.

PALEO-INDIAN PERIOD

The earliest evidence of human activity in what is now the town of East Hampton is a fluted spear point left behind near three mile Harbor by one of the Native American hunters. The distinctive flutes were chipped from the base of the point, perhaps to accommodate the haft of the spear. This style is named Clovis for the site near Clovis, New Mexico where fluted points were found among the bones of a mammoth. Such points have become an important time marker because the mammoth were extinct about 10,000 years ago. Unfortunately, we know very little about these people, who were probably traveling through following the game animals. The archaeological data suggests that the Clovis hunters lived in small bands of 25-50 people.

With the gradual melting of the glaciers, a number of climatic changes began occurring between 10,000 and 5,000 years ago throughout the Northeast. The warming climate encouraged the northward growth of deciduous trees bearing a bountiful variety of protein rich black walnuts, butternuts, and chestnuts. A rich supply of fruits, seeds and nutritious roots expanded the food base. These changes in the environment stimulated cultural changes which mark the transition to the Archaic Period.

THE ARCHAIC PERIOD

The Archaic Period settlements were usually located near tidal bays where they could harvest shellfish. In the winter months some of the households probably moved into sheltered areas where trees or low hills protected them from the cold winter winds. Artifacts from this period have been found near Little Northwest Creek and Lake Montauk. These villagers developed a fishing technology well suited to the shallow bays, small streams, and kettle whole ponds. They harvested sea sturgeon, rock fish, bluefish, flounder, shad, and striped bass. The bays abounded with oyster, bay scallops, periwinkles, channeled whelk, and hard and soft shelled clams, which provided a year round source of protein. Water fowl migrations brought flocks of birds to the bays on a seasonal round. The forests behind the bays were full of many varieties of seeds, berries, nuts and game. Deer, of course, was a favorite source of protein, but archaeological sites indicate that the people also ate wild turkeys, raccoons, box turtles, woodchucks, and squirrels. The meager material culture of the Paleo-Indian Period was expanded to include dug-out canoes, and tools and utensils from stone, bone and fiber. The women

used wooden bowls, grinding stones, mats, bone drills, and awls in their daily domestic routine.

The social structure was essentially egalitarian. The mobile lifeways of the Paleo-Indian Period evolved into a more sedentary pattern which exploited the local ecosystem on a seasonal round. The size and number of settlements on Long Island increased as the people took advantage of the rich flora and fauna resources produced by the gradually warming climate. The village bands were probably organized into extended family groups, which had kinship connections with bands on Long Island and southern New England. Marriage rules differ, but nearly all cultures require that spouses be selected from outside their family lineage or clan and often from outside the village as well. Generally, but not always, the woman will go to live in her husband's household and become a member of that community. The villagers on the east end of Long Island's south fork, therefore, were part of a kinship network which sent marriage partners back and forth in the system, creating a complex, dynamic, and social interaction sphere. The decision making process in these small bands was democratic. Generally, a village headman was looked to for guidance, but only after he had demonstrated his capacity to lead and to have sound judgment. There were few hereditary social positions, although the son of a successful leader might have an advantage after the death of his father. Leadership was "situational" in nature. The man best able to deal effectively with a crisis or a particular challenge became the acknowledged leader for the duration of the situation: the best hunter led the hunting party; the best fisherman led the fishing expedition; the best orator represented the group in its diplomatic relations with other bands. This rather amorphous political institution was later to pose problems with the Europeans when they attempted to impose a system of treaties and contracts on the Montauketts. These European legal concepts presumed a political hierarchy which did not exist among the Long Island bands. An Individual Native American might identify more strongly with a lineage or with a clan than with the particular "tribal" names (place names) which were imposed by the Europeans in the decades after their arrival. Evidence of religious ceremonialism has been found in a fascinating site at Lake Montauk; unfortunately, it was located by state archaeologist William Ritchie in the 1950s after it had been partially destroyed by pot hunters. He discovered two human cremation burials embedded in red ocher and honored with a bird bone flute, shell beads, and eight spear points. The use of red ocher and cremation in funerary rites was well established in the Northeast during this period. Four major sites have been excavated: two at Orient Point on the eastern tip of the north fork of Long Island, one about twenty miles to the west at Jamesport, and a fourth on the south fork near the Shinnecock Reservation. It is possible that the flute was a part of a shaman's paraphernalia used in religious ceremonies. In many northern Indian communities, people who were believed to have special powers such as shamans were cremated.

THE WOODLAND PERIOD

Few sites which can clearly be identified with this period have been scientifically excavated in the Town of East Hampton, but several have been identified and partially explored by local amateurs. Local baymen have found sites when they worked on the bays harvesting shellfish. The major cultural changes which mark the transition from the

Archaic Period are the development of ceramic pottery and a more efficient exploitation of the ecosystem. These villagers began to experiment with rudimentary forms of plant husbandry. Some edible seed plants such as chenopodium (lambs quarters), polygonum (smartweed), *Phytolacca Americana* (pokeweed), *Cucurita pepo* (gourd), *Amaranthus* (pigweed), and *Helianthus annuus* (sunflower) were cultivated nearly two thousand years before the introduction of corn, beans and squash into North America.

Pottery appeared in the Northeast about 3,000 years ago. In 1927 archaeologist Foster Sayville excavated some vessels from this period in a site on Three Mile Harbor. Sayville worked with a crew of local volunteers, including Roy Latham, a young farmer from Southold, and Selah Lester, an East Hampton carpenter. These two enthusiastic amateur archaeologists made a significant contribution over the years to our understanding of prehistoric peoples on Long Island. They were avid naturalists who devoted much of their leisure time to the study of local flora and fauna.

THE LATE WOODLAND PERIOD

The transition to the Late Woodland Period is marked by the introduction of such domesticated plants as corn, (maize) beans, squash, and tobacco. These plants were first domesticated in Central America and gradually found their way into the Northeast. Plant domestication, as we have seen, had been practiced widely long before these more familiar plants arrived. In spite of their understanding of plant domestication, the people on Long Island were slow to adopt corn horticulture. They were doing fine without it. In fact, there has been no evidence of maize cultivation found in any of the sites excavated in the Town of East Hampton. We do know, however, that by 1648 when the Montauketts negotiated the first deed to land in East Hampton, the Indians were growing corn because they asked for twenty-four hoes, among the other goods, in exchange for the land.

Roy Latham and Selah Lester's nephew Thomas identified thirteen sites from this period around Three Mile Harbor. Several of these sites were located on Ashawag meadows. The Ashawag villagers were quite innovative. They protected their fresh water supply by placing hollow logs upright into the ground around the spring. Lester and Latham found two of these prehistoric wells. They also found the remains of domestic activities. There were hearths filled with ash, animal bones, a large sandstone mortar weighing about 50 pounds and a nine pound pestle.

Along with these materials, they discovered the remains of pottery vessels. The pots were decorated in a variety of ways, including scallop shell stamping, cord marking, and punctated designs made with a sharp implement. Two of the pots were large enough to hold several gallons of liquid. The rims of two of these communal pots were decorated with four human faces looking out at the four cardinal points of the compass. Each face has a shell stamped diamond design around it. The size of the pots suggests that they were used to prepare communal meals.

Near the end of the Late Woodland Period, perhaps a century or so before the arrival of the first Europeans, the Native peoples here began to build stockade forts. The earliest one mentioned in the colonial records stood on the western crest of the Nominick hills

overlooking Napeague Bay. No excavation was done there, so the exact site is not known. A second fort, which may have been in use at the time the English arrived, stood on top of Fort hill, overlooking Fort Pond near the present-day village of Montauk. This site was examined by William Wallace Tooker, who reported finding 134 graves there. Unfortunately the site has been vandalized over the years. Several graves were robbed and there were reports that one person was seen carrying a bushel basket full of human bones from Fort hill. In 1983, Edward Johannemann, an archaeologist from The State University at Stony Brook, excavated the site and confirmed Tooker's description of a stockade enclosing an area 180 feet square.

Johannemann also found evidence of tool making, several stone artifacts, and some broken pottery. Along with these materials, he found remains of clams, oysters, whelks, bluefish, and sturgeon. Johannemann noted with some surprise that there was no wampum and no evidence of wampum manufacture anywhere on the site. He was surprised because Fort Corchaug, a contemporary Late Woodland site on the North Fork, contained broken whelk and quahog shells along with drilling tools, indicating that wampum manufacturing was a major activity there. The early colonial records are full of references to the abundance of wampum on the east end of Long Island. The absence of any such evidence at Montauk is puzzling.

THE EARLY CONTACT PERIOD (1600 AD- 1700 AD)

The early stages of interaction between the Native Americans and the English settlers on Long Island were distinguished by a pattern of equal status trade and voluntary adaptation. This pattern gradually shifted to one of directed acculturation wherein the English imposed their values and customs on the Indians. The archaeological reports from several contact sites provides some insights into these patterns. In 1914 a large cemetery was found on the top of Pantigo Hill in Amagansett. Frank Nelson, an Amagansett farmer, was digging a foundation for his chicken coop when he discovered three human burials. Several projectile points and some shell beads accompanied the burials. The discovery did not deter Nelson from continuing his work on the coop. Nelson expanded his chicken house to a length of 130 feet, cutting a path 16 feet wide through the center of a cemetery. By the winter of 1916, he had uncovered 17 more burials. Harry O'Brien, a Brooklyn doctor, learned of Nelson's discoveries and came out to investigate. O'Brien, an avid amateur archaeologist, excavated two more burials before he reported the news to Foster Saville, a professional archaeologist at the Museum of the American Indian in New York. Saville worked on the site until November 1917, excavating a total of 58 burials.

The burials here appear to represent a transitional period when the Montaukett were becoming increasingly dependent on European goods while still practicing ancient mortuary customs. Twenty-one of the burials were wrapped in blankets, skins, woven mats, or bark. The blankets were European, but the other materials were similar to those used before the Europeans arrived. One burial contained the remains of an adult and a child covered by a blanket and accompanied by several European trade goods. The adult had a necklace of large blue glass beads and the child wore a string of amber glass beads.

Near the skeletons were a pewter dish, pottery, and a piece of textile. Under the two skeletons were several white, black, blue, green, and red beads.

Studies of seventeenth century contact burial sites in Rhode Island and Massachusetts have revealed a number of significant patterns and insights into this important transitional period. The Native American communities were under considerable stress as their primary economic, political, and social institutions were being challenged and altered by their English neighbors. Their hunting grounds were gradually shrinking as the English settlements expanded. Native economies were becoming increasingly dependent on the English market system. More and more Montauketts sought employment for themselves and their children in English households.

The desire for manufactured goods gradually drew more Montauketts into the English economy. Some were recruited as whalers, provided with boats and iron harpoons, and sent out to kill the whales that migrated each year along the south shore of Long Island. Others engaged in less skilled work as indentured servants, slaves and free laborers. They were viewed by the English as a part of a permanent underclass. Although the Indians became dependent on the outside economy and were given little chance to advance in status, they did maintain a separate culture that continues to distinguish them from other ethnic groups.

THE MONTAUKETTS TODAY

Soon after the American Revolution, several Montaukett families followed Samson Occom, the Mohegan missionary, to join his Christian Indian community at Brothertown in central New York State. The rest remained at Montauk until Arthur Benson, a wealthy developer from Brooklyn, conspired to evict them from their homeland. He negotiated individual sales of tribal residence rights from the few families who were still living on Montauk. Most Montauketts had moved to places on Long Island and southern New England where they could find work. When news reached the Montaukett diaspora, many were outraged that there had been no negotiations with the tribe as an entity, so they organized their resources to initiate a lawsuit. They sued Arthur Benson and the Long Island Railroad in a series of court battles from 1896 to 1918. Judge Abel Blackmar dismissed the case, ruling that the tribe, as an organization, had ceased to exist. The decision was heavily influenced by racial and cultural prejudices of the times. The official government policy at the turn of the century was based on the premise that the Native Americans would be better off if they abandoned their traditional Indian identity and assimilated into the mainstream population. Indians were pressured to divide up their reservations into individual homesteads and live like their white neighbors. The mood of the times was clearly against any move to regain a tribal homeland. Whites expected that the Indians would gradually vanish into the cultural mainstream. The Montauketts, however, never lost their sense of an Indian identity. They continued to meet in small family gatherings and kept in touch through a kinship network.

In the 1990s the Montaukett tribe went through a revitalization process. Members from East Hampton, Sag Harbor, Amityville and other communities came together to hold meetings and ceremonies. Robert Pharaoh and Robert Cooper lead two factions of

Montauketts who are working to obtain state and federal recognition. They organized Powwows at Montauk and on the Stony Brook campus to celebrate the revival of the tribe. As we move into the new century, however, the tribe has withdrawn from the public eye to focus on strategies designed to strengthen their tribal structure.