

Lesson 7: The Search for Lenape Campsites

Background for Educators

[Description taken from Eric Sanderson's *Mannahatta: A Natural History of New York City*.]

The first New Yorkers (to label them with a term they would not recognize) were the Lenape,¹ also known as the Lenni Lenape² or Munsee, and later as the Delaware. They were called by their peers in the region the "Ancient Ones," respected as the oldest of the northeastern Algonquin cultures.

We know that when Hudson arrived they lived in a traditional homeland which stretched from the edge of our Connecticut to Delaware in eastern North America, including nearly all of New Jersey and most of southeastern New York; an area that has since been called "Lenapehoking."³ Across this area, the people lived in small bands, moving from place to place with the seasons, following the available food supply. They were hunters and gatherers, hunting with bows and arrow and spear, and undoubtedly intimately familiar with the fruits, berries, leaves and nuts of the region. They were also great fisherfolk, especially during the spring runs of anadromous fish, and relied heavily on the abundant shellfish resources (especially oysters, clams) of the region with the result that shell middens, large piles of discarded shells, are found wherever the Lenape were once found. However the Lenape of New York also knew horticulture based on Meso-American crops: corn, beans and squash, traded up from Mexico, though how much they depended on these crops is a matter of debate.

We don't know for certain how many people lived in the communities on Mannahatta; estimates vary from 300 – 1200 individuals, about the sidewalk population of one block on a busy afternoon in midtown. Part of what complicates the estimation is that Mannahatta was probably not a year-round residence for most Lenape, rather it was more of a three-season resort. The Lenape moved to Manhattan for the fishing in spring, staying over to plant some crops, hunt, gather and fish over the summer, then gather their things in a furious fit of activity in fall, to bring in the crops, smoke and dry the meat, and pack up before the retreat to winter quarters. With the cold climate of New York, winters were best spent with friends and family, in large long-houses, telling stories, threading wampum, making goods and staying out of the weather. A long exposed island in the midst of the estuary was probably less desirable than protected sites inland in the Bronx or Queens.

One consequence of this mobile lifestyle is that the Lenape owned only as much as they could carry. Although exact observers of individual property, there was no purpose owning more than one needed; why bother have 20 deer skin cloaks when you could only use one at a time and would have to abandon the rest at the end of the season?⁴ The idea that one could collect wealth and store it, in an instrument like money, was foreign to them. Rather what one could accumulate and carry was reputation and respect. Did a person share his meat with the community? Did a person listen to her neighbor and offer wise advice? Did a person remember the old ways and respect the elders? Even wampum, shell beads laboriously bored from clam shells collected on the shore, was a gift to mark respect on important occasions, not a currency of exchange as it would be adopted by the Dutch. Such a social system worked well for a people with an abundant, but limited scope for resources, and who lived in small communities where everyone knew the other.

They lived mostly out of doors, but for inclement weather and nighttime, they built wigwam and longhouse shelters. Wigwams were small conical buildings about 15 feet in diameter, meant for a single family. Longhouses were larger structures, 15-20 feet wide and 60 feet long; they might house seven or eight families. Both were built by burying upright tree saplings along the perimeter, then bending the saplings over to create an arched roof. Sapling cross-beams were lashed onto the structure horizontally to the ground, and then the whole structure would be covered with overlapping sheets of tree bark, stripped from large, old-growth trees.⁵ In some cases

these bark sheets might be six-feet long and four-feet tall, peeled carefully from trees in June, when the sap had begun to run. An outer frame of saplings might be built, especially for the larger structures, to hold the bark on tight during the wind. Although sturdy, these structures were not meant to last forever; a well-maintained wigwam probably would last at most ten years before termites and wood-boring beetles (check???) would have their way.

Inside, the wigwams and longhouses were dark and smoky; sunlight entered through the doors and through the smoke-holes in the top that could be closed off with reed mats. Low fires, one for each family, were built in stone rings and were maintained continuously, usually with a pot of porridge or stew cooking, to be sampled throughout the day. Longhouses were partitioned into sections, so each family had its own space, with a center corridor connecting all. Small platforms, sometimes several levels high, were built into the side for sleeping and storage. Food would be stored in pits dug into the ground, lined with grasses, and covered with stones, or hung from the sapling rafters.⁶ A family of four might have an inside area that was 50 square feet, and with the neighboring family so close, privacy as modern people enjoy it was probably unknown, providing yet another reason to spend time outside.

Outside, there would be another fire burning and pot stewing, large log mortars hollowed out for pounding corn or nuts with wooden pestles, huge piles of shells and other refuse, sweatlodges near the water,⁷ kids and dogs running all about, a few men lounging, and knots of very busy women. Women labored near constantly, for they prepared the food, tanned the hides, cleaned fish, sewed clothes, made pottery, maintained the fields, and gathered the water, firewood, plant foods and medicines. Men were responsible for hunting and largely for fishing (though women also helped), and for building houses, making dugout canoes, crafting tools, growing tobacco and felling trees. Both men and women worked together, both for company and efficiency, often with the children. Children stayed close to their mothers when small, but as they grew older, would begin imitating their parents at work. In the meantime, kids had lots of time for play. The Lenape, like people all over the world and since the beginning of time, kept dogs, which provided constant companions, spirit guardians, and, when the occasion required, food.

¹ Roughly translated as "the real people."

² Roughly translated as the "Real real people," probably the term "Lenni Lenape" is a historical artifact.

³ Lenapehoking was coined by the late Nora Dean Thompson, a Lenape woman raised on the Delaware Nation in Oklahoma and source of much 20th century scholarship about Lenape language, culture and beliefs.

⁴ Let alone the effort of creating the cloaks: hunting the deer, dressing the hide, tanning it with an emulsion made from brains, sewing it with bone needles, and decorating it with shells.

⁵ Particularly American chestnut, but also oak, linden and elm.

⁶ Jasper Dankers and Peter Sluyter, two ministers, visited a Nyack longhouse in Brooklyn in 1679 and wrote this engagingly detailed description: "We went thence to her habitation, where we found the whole troop together, consisting of seven or eight families, and twenty or twenty-two persons, I should think. Their house was low and long, about sixty feet long and fourteen or fifteen feet wide. The bottom was earth, the sides and roof were made of reed and bark of chestnut trees; the posts, or columns, where limbs of trees stuck in the ground, and all fastened together. The top, or ridge of the roof was open about half a foot wide, from one end to the other, in order to let smoke escape, in place of a chimney. On the sides, or walls, of the house, the roof was so low that you could hardly stand under it. The entrances, or doors, which were at both ends, were so small and low that they had to stoop down and squeeze themselves to get through them. The doors were made of reed or flat bark. In the whole building there was no lime, stone, iron or lead. They build their fire in the middle of the floor, according to the number of families which live in it, so that from one end to the other each of them boils its own pot, and eats when it likes, not only the families by themselves, but each Indian alone, according as he is hungry, at all hours, morning, noon and night.... All who live in one house are generally of one stock or descent, as father and mother with their offspring."

⁷ Both men and women took advantage of sweat lodges, one for each gender, which looked like mini-wigwams. One had to crawl on hands and knees to get inside, where hot stones which had been baked on a fire outside were dropped into baskets of water, creating steam. When the heat and the sweat became too much, the Lenape man or woman would run from the lodge and jump into a nearby stream or pond. Important for their spiritual lives, sweat lodges also kept the Lenape much cleaner than their European counterparts.