

Spanning the Gap

Cultural Connections

The Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area lies within the Upper Delaware River Basin, a unique drainage containing the physical evidence, both historical and archeological, of a rich natural and cultural past.

This area, formed about 6,000,000 years ago as continental plates separated, contains the remnant of the final Pleistocene glaciation, which provided a fertile natural environment that enticed the earliest North American inhabitants to exploit its resources. Globally changing climates fostered varied niches supporting a wide diversity of plants and animals. These plants and animals supported human occupations spanning a continuous time period from approximately 8,500 B.C. to the present day. Only a handful of such areas occur on the eastern North American seaboard which have not been destroyed by more recent development.



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Native American stone tools:
(Top) Knife blades (Middle)
Spear points. (All drawings:
National Park Service)

In the late 1950s, the proposed construction of the Tocks Island Dam stimulated historical and archeological interest in this valley. Historians and archeologists were summoned to identify, record, and salvage data before the valley was inundated. Archeologists began their surveys in 1959, and by the mid 1960s, recognized that this area offered a rich and well preserved record of prehistoric occupation, beginning with the Paleo-Indian, the earliest known culture in the New World. Current theory suggests that during the Wisconsin glaciation period, 23,000 to 12,000 B.C., a land bridge existed between Asia and Alaska, vanishing around 8,000 B.C. Hunter-gatherers migrated across this land bridge following herds of caribou and other large mammals. This culture is recognized archeologically by distinctive fluted projectile points which are most commonly found in eastern North America as isolated finds. Three archeological sites within the recreation area contain evidence of this culture.

Archeological investigations during the period from 1959 through 1975 involved archeologists and historians from academic institutions from Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, and the District of Columbia. During this time, these investigators mounted the largest and most complex research programs ever directed to a specific location in the Mid-Atlantic seaboard. The results of their efforts have yielded information concerning the evolution of human settlement and environmental adaptation within the valley over 10,000 years. The investigations document the record of the changing environment through the Archaic Period (6,000 B.C. to 1,000 B.C.) and how the Archaic populations adapted to those pressures. This data is being used to reconstruct, in more detail than any other location within the Mid-Atlantic area, the Archaic settlement distributions of this region which may be helpful in explaining the phenomena in surrounding river valleys.

Of extreme interest to scholars of the northeastern United States is determining the immediate ancestors of the Algonkian Indians who occupied



(Above) Native American women at work: (Top) scraping an animal hide

the Atlantic seaboard before European contact in the 17th century. In the Upper Delaware River Valley, archeological evidence indicates that the initial Late Woodland occupations represent the ancestral tradition of the Minisink Indians, an Algonkian group of the terminal Late Woodland (Late Woodland Period - A.D. 900 to A.D. 1550). Further research may link the Owasco culture found in this valley with the New York and New Jersey Owasco cultures.

The earliest evidence for domesticated corn is documented in this period from an archeological site in New Jersey within the Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area. At this same time, archeological evidence indicates these sites show an increase in size and number, suggesting a rise in population. Does this reflect the spread of horticulture (domesticated cultigens) in the northeastern North America? Future research in the recreation area may answer that question.

Since the Delaware River is not navigable north of Trenton, New Jersey, Euro-American settlement in the Upper Delaware Valley occurred almost a century later than the coastal areas of New York, the Hudson Valley, and the Delaware Bay. Eighteen of over 454 documented archeological sites within the park are contact period sites. These sites contain European-made objects traded inland by other Native American Indians. This evidence offers an opportunity to study how this introduction changed Native American society in this area.

outside a village dwelling
(Middle) Weaving baskets
and working grain (Bottom)
Cooking. (All drawings:
National Park Service)



(Above) Native American clay pots: (Top) In use and (Bottom) Reconstructed from archeological finds. (All drawings: National Park Service)

(Below, left) Native American men preparing stone tools.
(Below) Spear points. (All drawings: National Park Service)



The first Euro-American settlers of the valley in the early 18th century, claimed the land for agriculture. As transportation routes grew, villages appeared to support the agricultural base. After the American Revolution, this area witnessed a boom in population growth. There are several of these sites within the boundary of the park which offer an archeological record which may reconstruct the lifeways of these early frontier settlers. In the post-bellum period, agriculture declined and was supplanted by recreation affording people the opportunity to view the natural scenic splendor of the Water Gap. Continued research and preservation of archeological and historic sites within the Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area promises to clarify and aid in the development of a systematic understanding of American prehistory and history in the northeastern United States.



(Drawing: United States Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture)