

# Traces of Lenapehoking

## Native American Sites on the Philadelphia Waterfront

Douglas Mooney



**L**enapehoking is the word that local Lenape (or Delaware) Indians gave to their ancestral homeland, a portion of which was located in the area that is today the city and county of Philadelphia.<sup>1</sup> As used in this article, the phrase “traces of Lenapehoking” refers not only to the archaeological evidence—the artifacts—the native peoples who inhabited this homeland left behind, but also to the surviving remnants of the original landscape of Philadelphia—preserved fragments of the pre-colonial ground—within which these artifacts were found.

Overview of the excavations of a Native American site found 7 feet beneath the floor of the former I. P. Morris Machine Shop #2 building (completed 1913) in Fishtown. The foundations of three earlier mid-nineteenth-century industrial buildings—two lumber mills and a glassworks—also survived the construction of this massive factory complex. *Photograph by George Cress, 2015.*

**L**ong before the founding of Philadelphia, Native American people made this area their home for many thousands of years, establishing their camps and villages along the Delaware and Schuylkill Rivers, as well as beside the many streams that crossed the interior landscape. While it is not known for certain when the first indigenous people arrived in this region, archaeological evidence from sites in neighboring parts of New Jersey and Pennsylvania suggest that the earliest occupants arrived here by at least 10,000 to 12,000 years ago—at

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or near the end of the last Ice Age.<sup>2</sup> However, discoveries from a handful of other sites, such as Meadowcroft Rockshelter near Pittsburgh and Cactus Hill in Virginia, suggest that people originally moved into this part of the country as early as 16,000 years ago.<sup>3</sup> Even more recently discovered sites on the Delmarva Peninsula have produced information hinting that the first arrival could date back to more than 20,000 years ago.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the fact that Native American peoples have lived in this region for thousands of years—and created countless numbers of sites over that period—until about 25 years ago, most archaeologists working in the Philadelphia area assumed it was very unlikely that an intact Native American archaeological site would ever be found in the most densely developed parts of the city.<sup>5</sup> Considering the more than 300 years of intensive development and physical transformation Philadelphia has experienced, the common acceptance of this expectation was perhaps understandable. Yet despite the massive disturbances brought about by expanding urbanization and industrialization, archaeological explorations conducted in the past two decades have succeeded in overturning earlier beliefs and interpretations, and have identified undisturbed fragments of the Native American landscape that existed before there was a Philadelphia, along with intact artifact deposits Lenape Indians and their ancestors left behind



in many parts of the city.<sup>6</sup> These traces of Lenapehoking have been preserved in the nooks and crannies that have escaped impacts from historical development, and today can be found in open backyards, in parks and playgrounds, the ground beneath city streets, and other similar environments. While many of these protected spaces have been relatively small and contained only parts of what were once much larger native sites, other locations have preserved intact areas several acres in size and evidence of multiple complete occupations. Regardless of size or circumstance, with each new discovery, archaeologists are learning more important information about the Native American peoples who made their home here hundreds and even thousands of years before Europeans first arrived on these shores.<sup>7</sup>

The densest concentration of Native American sites in Philadelphia has been found along the banks of the Delaware River. Since 2008, AECOM archaeologists working on PennDOT's I-95/GIR Improvement Corridor Project have discovered a total of 10 intact native sites in the present-day neighborhoods of Fishtown and Port Richmond—an area the Lenape Indians called Shackamaxon.<sup>8</sup> Amazingly, these sites have survived despite the fact that this section of the river was transformed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries into a center of industrial manufacturing that helped earn Philadelphia the nickname “Workshop of the World.” Despite the radical landscape transformation that accompanied the construction of places like the William Cramp & Sons Shipyard and the Port Richmond Coal Depot, these industrial complexes were frequently built over the original ground surface, without entirely destroying it. As a result, unexpected historical and cultural juxtapositions are often found in these locations, such as the discovery of intact native artifacts several thousand years old sitting next to the concrete foundations of factories built in the early 1900s.

These 10 sites have been found in a variety of settings, ranging from near-surface soils preserved in the open yard spaces behind nineteenth-century houses to the margins of historical stream channels sealed beneath 10 or more feet of fill. One site was discovered just 200 feet away from Penn Treaty Park—

the location where William Penn was believed to have signed a treaty of friendship with the Lenape Indians in 1682. The artifacts found near the park dated to several thousand years before the treaty, and so were not left behind by people who might have witnessed this historic event. However, they do testify to the fact that native peoples occupied this area for a much longer period of time than the City of Philadelphia has existed.

**(Right)** Excavations of the Shackamaxon #2 Site (circa 2,500 B.C.), located directly across Delaware Avenue from Penn Treaty Park and preserved in a series of former residential backyards. The park is just visible in the upper left-hand corner of this image. Photograph by Kimberly Morrell, 2011.

**(Bottom)** Members of the AECOM archaeological team carefully excavating and documenting a Native American hearth feature. Photograph by Jennifer Rankin, 2013.







Most of the sites found thus far are thought to have been used as short-term encampments, where small numbers of people stayed for perhaps just a few days at a time. While at these sites, native people hunted for game, foraged for plant foods, gathered needed raw materials, and made or repaired stone tools. Other sites discovered during this project have been much larger in size and are thought to represent either favored locations, revisited time and again for many hundreds or thousands of years, or larger campsites occupied by the members of a single extended family for a period of several weeks or months. So far, none of these sites are believed to represent examples of the small, seasonally occupied Indian villages or hamlets Europeans described during the earliest years of colonization. This does not mean that native hamlet sites do not still survive somewhere in Philadelphia; it only means that such sites have yet to be discovered.

Archaeological excavations at these sites have produced approximately 50,000 artifacts manufactured, used, and discarded by native peoples over a period of several thousand years. Unfortunately, in this part of the country, ancient objects that were made of softer plant and animal materials—such as clothing, baskets, or fishing nets—typically do not survive in the ground for long periods of time. The artifacts that most commonly survive are those more durable objects made from stone or fired clay, such as stone tools and fragments of pottery. These sites have yielded a wide variety of skillfully crafted stone tools, including many different styles of projectile points (commonly referred to as “arrowheads”) and stone knives.

Other tool forms recovered include drills, scrapers, adzes, and other woodworking pieces; hammerstones used to make other tools; and netsinkers used in fishing. Among the more beautiful objects found is a slate gorget with an elaborate incised decoration on one side and two drilled holes allowing it to be worn around the neck like a piece of jewelry. While this particular artifact likely held a special meaning for the person who wore it, the exact message it was intended to express is unknown today.

In addition to these types of artifacts, archaeologists have also identified a series of intact hearth features, or firepits, at several sites. Marked by concentrations of cobbles and pebbles that have been cracked apart through contact with the heat of fire, these hearths also frequently contain remnants of wood charcoal that can be carbon-dated to more precisely determine when a camp was created. While the City of Brotherly Love is now an impressive 333 years old, C-14 dating of charcoal from the I-95 hearths has shown that native people lived in the Philadelphia area for more than 5,000 years. The oldest hearth feature discovered within the project area was carbon-dated to approximately 3563 B.C. As archaeological investigations for this project continue, additional—perhaps older—sites might be uncovered. A handful of recently excavated artifacts possess characteristics suggesting that they could date to earlier times, and might eventually be shown to come from native occupations as old as 6000–8000 B.C.

A selection of stone tools and other artifacts recovered from Native American sites along I-95. The artifacts shown here include netsinkers, a selection of projectile points (“arrowheads”), a clay pipe fragment, and a groundstone adze.

*Photograph by Thomas J. Kutys, 2015.*

Like the pieces of a huge jigsaw puzzle, the artifacts recovered from these sites along the Delaware River waterfront provide critical clues about how the native people who made these objects lived, and about how they interacted with, and adapted to, the world around them. Because the Lenape Indians and their ancestors left no documents or written records in their own language, archaeological exploration and documentation is one of the best ways to learn about native cultures as they existed before European contact. As research into these artifacts continues, we look forward to sharing what we have learned about Philadelphia’s Native American people through future articles in this journal. Until that time, we hope this helps to inform and remind readers of the incredible historical and cultural contributions of the native people who made this area their home. The Lenape Indians played a critical role in the creation of Philadelphia, and evidence of their continued heritage is all around us today (remember that next time you go to Manayunk, Conshohocken, or Passyunk). The archaeological sites now being discovered along the Delaware River waterfront are proof of the continued presence and vitality of that ancient Native American legacy.

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## Artifact Round Up

### Incised Two-Hole Gorget

circa A.D. 800 - 1550



This is an ornamental artifact that Native Americans attached to clothing or wore as a type of pendant or necklace. Manufactured from a piece of ground and polished slate, this gorget features two hand-drilled holes and a series of incised geometric designs on one side and around its outer edges.

The word gorget comes from the French word gorge, meaning “throat,” and originally described a piece of armor used to protect one’s neck and chest in battle. The term was later applied to this type of Native American artifact because of its perceived similarity in appearance to European military gorgets. Native Americans may have used gorgets not as armor, but rather as representations of tribal, family, or personal symbols or insignia—or as charms believed to possess earthly or supernatural powers. This particular artifact is thought to be associated with local Lenape (or Delaware Indian) people, but unfortunately, the exact meaning of the symbols decorating it remain unknown.

- Douglas Mooney