

An Overview of Life before New Amsterdam

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The prehistory of New York City was a vibrant and complex period which archaeologists are still striving to understand. For almost 14,000 years Native Americans adapted to changing environments, from the cold of the Ice Age followed by gradual warming over the millennia and the appearance of our modern day climate about 4,000 years ago. Native Americans reacted to the new circumstances, changing the way they lived, building different types of housing, and making new tools. Over time, they changed their relationship to the land, occupying new areas and eating different foods that appeared with the changing climates. Archaeologists recognize these changes in climate, tool types, and lifeways and have assigned different names for the various cultures that lived in what is today New York City. These cultures are known as:

PaleoIndian period culture (12,000-7,000 BC), representing the earliest occupation by humans of the southeastern New York region just after the end of the last ice age;

Archaic period cultures (7,000-1,000 BC), referring to a time prior to the introduction of agriculture and the manufacture of pottery.

Woodland period cultures (1,000 BC to AD 1500), which saw the first use of pottery and the reliance on agriculture as the primary food; and

Contact period cultures (AD 1500 - 1700), which were those cultures occupying the region at the time of the first large scale contacts between Native Americans and European colonists.

The PaleoIndian period corresponds with the end of the Wisconsin glaciation. Sea levels were lower during the period due to sea water being trapped in the remaining glacial ice. Local forests consisted primarily of spruce and fir with small amounts of oak and other deciduous species. Many faunal species now extinct or no longer native to the area were present. These included mammoth, mastodon, horse, caribou, giant beaver, sloth, elk, moose, and peccary. Evidence for these mammals include mastodon remains recovered from beneath the Harlem River and from the Inwood section of northern Manhattan. PaleoIndian populations were small compared to later peoples. They joined into small bands of hunters and gatherers who roamed different parts of the area depending on the season exploiting the large animals mentioned as well as small game, fish, and a variety of plants. A small number of PaleoIndian sites have been recorded in the New York City region, including Staten Island.

With the end of the ice age, the climate became warmer and the environment changed from a pine forest to a deciduous one, which by about 2,000 BC became similar to our modern woodlands. During this time, Archaic cultures exploited the wider variety of animal and plants that became available as the climate warmed. Shellfish, especially oyster, also became an important food. Evidence for the use of shellfish can be found in the form of extensive shell middens (trash piles) found in many places on Staten Island, the Bronx and northern Manhattan.

Archaic hunters and gatherers still lived in small bands which traveled the land throughout the year, exploiting different types of food resources that became available to eat. Populations continued to increase throughout the Archaic, with people engaged in many new types of activities. This resulted in new types of archaeological sites developing such as spring fishing camps along the coast and major streams, fall open air hunting camps, rock shelters, shellfish collecting stations, burial sites, tool making and stone quarry sites, and small temporary villages. Early in the Woodland period, cultures began to make ceramic vessels. Hunting, gathering, fishing, and shell fishing continued to be the primary food sources but there also is evidence that various plants were domesticated, especially during the middle and late portions of the Woodland period. Native populations during the period settled into larger more permanent villages by 800 AD.

The Contact period is the time of the first large scale contacts between Native Americans and European colonists. By the end of the Woodland period (1,000 BC to AD 1500) Native American cultures began to resemble those of groups that were encountered by seventeenth century Europeans. At that time Native Americans of the New York City region were part of the widespread Algonquian culture. Specifically, they were a group of Munsee speakers who migrated into southeastern New York and southwestern Connecticut during Late Woodland times. It has been estimated that about 13,200 Native Americans occupied the New York City region at the beginning of European contact. Their settlements included camps along the major rivers and larger villages located at the river mouths. Fishing, hunting, and plant gathering sites also are known.

Of note in understanding the Native American cultures that occupied the New York City region during the Contact period is the existence of documents written during the period that mention them. An example is from Robert Juet, an officer on Henry Hudson's ship the "Half Moon", who provides an account in his journal of some of the lower Hudson Valley Native Americans. In his entries for September 4th and 5th, 1609 he states:

This day the people of the country came aboard of us, seeming very Glad of our coming, and brought green tobacco, and gave us of it For knives and beads. They go in deer skins loose, well dressed. They have yellow copper. They desire clothes, and are very civil. They have great store of maize or Indian wheat whereof they make Good bread. The country is full of great and tall oaks.

This day [September 5th, 1609] many of the people came aboard, some In mantles of feathers, and some in skins of diverse sorts of good furs. Some woman also came to us with hemp. They had red copper tobacco Pipes, and other things of copper they did wear about their necks.

Another example is by an early Dutch colonist named David Pietersz de Vries who in 1655 recorded a description of Native Americans who resided around Fort Amsterdam in lower Manhattan:

The Indians about here are tolerably stout, have black hair with a long, lock

Which they let hang on one side of the head. Their hair is shorn on the top of the head like a cocky s-comb. Their clothing is a coat of beaver skins over the body, with the fur inside in winter and outside in summer; they have, also, sometimes a bear's hide, or a coat of the skins of wild cats, or hefspanen [probably raccoon], which is an animal most as hairy as a wild cat, and is also very good to eat. They also wear coats of turkey feathers, which they know how to put together. Their pride is to paint their faces strangely with red or black lead, so that they look like fiends. Some of the women are very well featured, having long countenances. Their hair hangs loose from their head; they sometimes paint their faces, and draw a black ring around their eyes.

Problems and conflicts during the seventeenth century between Native Americans and the Dutch resulted in the deaths of large numbers of Native Americans. The introduction of European diseases such as smallpox further devastated the local Native American populations.