

INDIAN BACKGROUNDS

of the

Patuxent Wildlife

Research Center



Marine Biological Laboratory
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WOODS HOLE, MASS.



United States
Department of the Interior
Fish and Wildlife Service
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Exhibit of Indian Relics

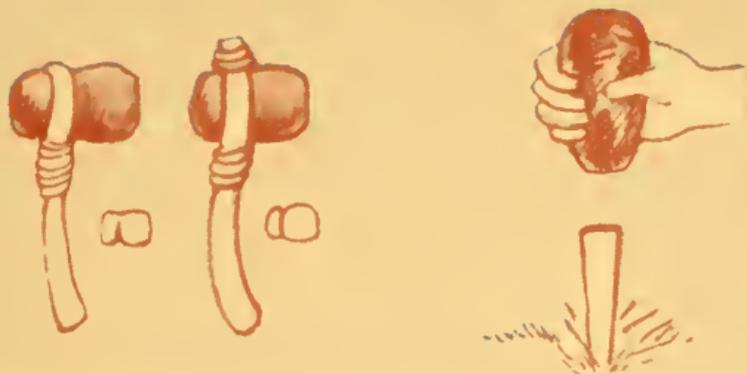
The Indian artifacts on display in the C. Hart Merriam Laboratory were collected on the grounds of the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center near Laurel, Maryland, between 1937 and 1960. They were picked up by employees and visitors to the Center, mostly in areas now being farmed. In fact, almost every time the fields in areas marked on the map are plowed or cultivated, additional Indian relics are uncovered—often an arrow point, a spear head, a blade, or a scraper, occasionally an ax head, a drill, or a hammer. All are mute reminders that American Indians once lived on these lands that in 1937 became America's first Federal wildlife experiment station.

Local Tribes of Indians

What manner of Indians lived in these parts? While the items on exhibit have not been dated, archaeologists believe that some of them are associated with an Indian culture going back perhaps several thousand years. Some are doubtless of much more recent origin. We know of course that Indians were in this region when the first European settlers arrived.

There is evidence that tribes belonging to three great Indian "linguistic families," the Algonquian, the Siouan, and the Iroquoian, crossed and





recrossed the area along the Patuxent River below where Laurel, Maryland, is now. Algonquians were in the area most continuously about the time of the arrival of the Europeans.

The Patuxent Indians were Algonquian stock. Their principal village, called Patuxent, was located in what is now Calvert County, Maryland. Ethnologists are not certain but they think that these Indians were closely related to the Conoy, if not an actual part of them. In 1608 Captain John Smith estimated the strength of the Patuxent village at about 40 warriors, which would mean a community population of about 200.

What is the meaning of the word Patuxent? The exact meaning is not known, but linguists who have studied Algonquian dialects think that it is related in meaning to Patuxet, which was the name of a Massachusetts village on the site of Plymouth. The Indians there told the colonists that Patuxet meant "at the little fall." It is possible that the Patuxent village in Maryland was located near a small falls or rapids and obtained its name in that fashion.

The Patuxent Indians were a friendly people and they got along well with the Maryland colonists for as long as the tribe existed. Remnants of the Patuxent Tribe and certain other groups were gathered onto a reservation at the head of the Wicomico River in 1651.



Iroquoian tribes moved from
the North

Patuxent area occupied mostly by
Algonquian tribes



Present area Wildlife Research Center
Indian artifacts found in open areas

Siouan tribes moved in from the South

Indian Way of Life

To the Indian, fish and wildlife were the bread-and-butter of a rugged culture. Deer, bear, and turkey were some of the species the Indian hunted with spear and arrow to supply the necessities of life—food, clothing, and shelter. These animals were all eliminated from Prince Georges County by the advance of White Man's civilization, but recently deer have been reestablished, and they can be seen again quite commonly here at the Center and in adjacent areas. Wild turkeys were restocked in 1960, and they may one day be restored as the deer have been.

The eastern tribes of Algonquians lived in wigwams made of sheets of bark fastened to a framework of saplings. Some of the wigwams were round or oval; others were rectangular. The frames and the overlapping bark were usually bound together by various plant fibers. The favorite fiber for making strong cords was obtained from the inner bark of basswood saplings. Fine threads were often made from the fibrous bark of

the stems of milkweed and of the closely related dogbane gathered just before the fruit is ripe.

Large floor mats were woven of bulrushes and cattails. Dishes were made of clay and of soapstone, and one can still find fragments of the pottery dishes around many old campsites in Maryland.

Indians living along Chesapeake Bay and its estuaries were excellent fishermen and hunters. Their canoes were of the dugout type, made from a single log which they shaped and hollowed out with stone axes and by burning. When the cutting and burning were completed, the cavity was filled with water and hot stones were placed in the water to heat it until the wood became pliable enough for wooden cross braces to be driven in at the middle to give it the proper spread.

In addition to the great variety of birds and mammals which the Indians obtained with bows and arrows or with snares and deadfalls, many kinds of plants were used for food. Small patches of corn, beans, squash, and occasionally other plants were cultivated around the villages. Even

greater quantities of wild seeds, fruits, and vegetables were gathered by all the eastern tribes.

Acorns, particularly those from the white oaks, were an important food. The acorns were parched and the hulls were removed by flailing. Usually the bitter flavor was eliminated by a series of steps: First the acorn "meats" were boiled until nearly cooked, then the water was drained off and the acorns were placed in a net bag and boiled again in water to which wood ashes were added. Finally, they were removed from this water and simmered in fresh water to remove the lye left by the wood ashes. They were then ready for drying and grinding into meal. Stone or wooden mortars and pestles were used for grinding. The acorn meal was cooked with various kinds of meats or made into a mush seasoned with bear oil.

Some tribes are reported to have removed the bitter flavor from acorns by grinding the "meats" before removing the bitter tannin. A thin layer of fine gravel was placed in a tightly woven basket. The meal was scattered over this gravel, and the



basket was placed on two heaps of gravel with a drain between them. Water was poured slowly over the meal; when it seeped through the gravel filter without any yellow stain, the tannin was gone, and the meal was removed and dried.

All the wild fruits and nuts that we use today were also used by the Indians. The tubers of the arrowhead plant, which grows abundantly in the marshes, and those of a common wild bean called the “ground nut” were used like potatoes.

Most of the clothing of the eastern Indians was made from animal skins. These garments were frequently colored by natural dyes. The roots of the sumac, when boiled, yielded a yellow dye; the spotted jewelweed or “touch-me-not” gave an orange-yellow dye; butternut husks furnished a brown dye, and butternut bark a black; boiled roots of the bloodroot plant gave a red or orange-red color, and boiled hemlock bark was a source of dark red coloring.

Applying Indian Craftsmanship Today

There is much that the White Man has learned from the Red Man. For thousands of years, these





primitive people lived off the natural products of the land. They knew how to provide themselves with shelter, food, and clothing by primitive craftsmanship and a knowledge of wild plants and animals.

Although we are living in a machine age, we still use the primitive craftsmanship and lore of Indians in scouting and camping. Wild game is no longer essential to us as food, but hunting continues as a healthy outdoor sport. About a fourth of all Americans enjoy hunting and fishing. A small but growing percentage of them use bow and arrows in pursuing both big and small game. Our armed services apply the primitive ways of the Indian in training airplane pilots and crews in survival techniques. During World War II this training saved the lives of many airmen who were forced down in wild and often unfriendly territory where they were forced to live off the land for long periods.

Natural Resources Vital to Civilizations

That a primitive race of Americans lived on these very grounds some 350 years ago is historically interesting and exciting. Quite naturally, the Indian relics on display remind us of this early period in our history. Many changes have taken place here since the time of the Indians. Many more changes will occur in the future. Of one thing we can be sure—Natural Resources were the foundation of the Indian's culture; they are of no less importance to us today. Our rich inheritance in fertile soils, clean water, productive forests, and bountiful fish and wildlife is the backbone of our abundant way of life. For our own survival we must keep that backbone healthy and strong.



