

# INDIAN BACKGROUNDS

*of the*

## Patuxent Wildlife

## Research Center



United States  
Department of the Interior  
Fish and Wildlife Service  
Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Conservation  
Circular 138



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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 Paruxent 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 recovered—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.

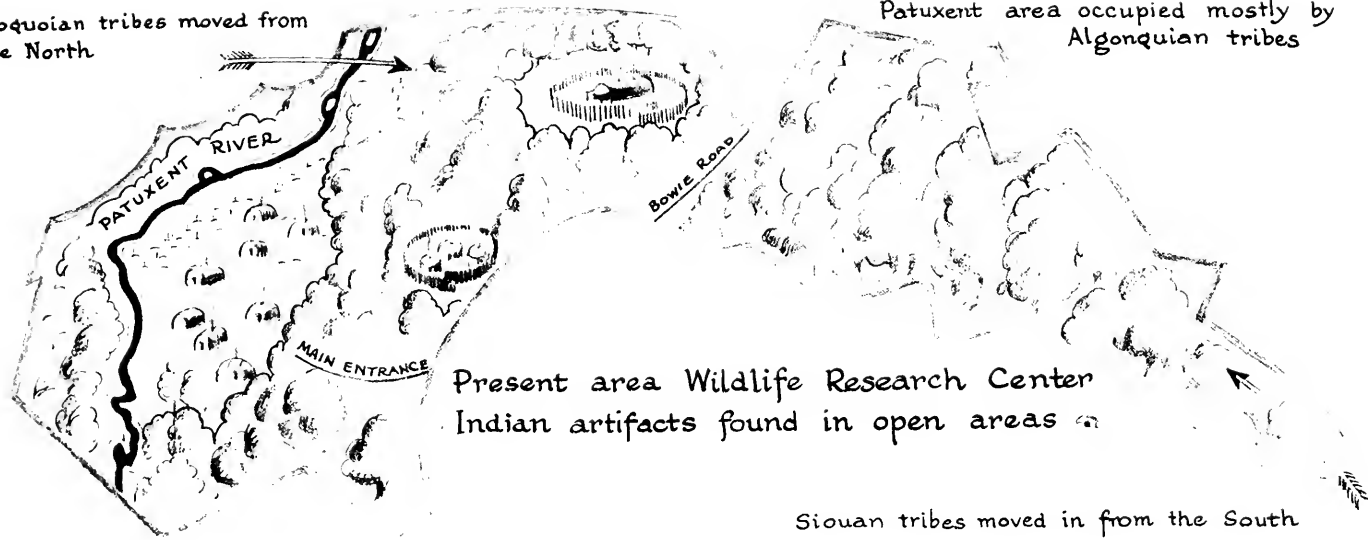
### Local Tribes of Indians

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 Indian "linguistic families," the Algonquian, the Siouan, and the Iroquoian, crossed and



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



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