

# NATIVE AMERICANS

*Cover Illustration:*

*The Lenape often wore decorative pieces such as pendant necklaces and feathers. After European contact, brass and copper earrings, bracelets and other items were added.*

*Cover illustration by David Künstler*



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*Van Cortlandt Park*  
PELHAM BAY PARK

**NATIVE AMERICANS  
VAN CORTLANDT & PELHAM BAY PARKS**

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The natural wonders of Van Cortlandt and Pelham Bay parks—towering oak-hickory forests, sweet-smelling meadows and serene wetlands—often captivate park visitors. Yet long before these sites were set aside as public parkland in 1888, Native Americans were attracted to the area by its beauty and bounty.

### THE FIRST PEOPLE

Over 13,000 years ago, as North America lay fixed in the icy grips of a 1,000-foot-tall glacier, extremely low sea levels exposed a land-bridge connecting Siberia to Alaska. Ancestors of the first Native Americans crossed into the continent via this route and, over time, made their way slowly south along ice-free corridors into the American heartland. These American Paleo-Indians, as the earliest Native American ancestors are known, were eventually separated from their Asiatic kin as rising sea levels, caused by warming temperatures, covered the land-bridge and formed the Bering Strait.

Some 10,000 to 12,000 years ago, Paleo-Indians inhabited the present New York region—then a cold, wet, arctic-like landscape sparsely vegetated with lichens, sedges and dwarfed woody plants. Meltwaters from the receding glacier had cut deep river channels, gouged glacial lakes and ponds, and sculpted swampy floodplains. Small nomadic bands roamed the tundra, hunting large mammals like mastodon, mammoth, caribou and giant beaver.

During this period, New York's coastline extended more than 50 miles south of its current position, forming a broad flat expanse. As rising sea levels gradually covered coastal areas, waterside camps were forced inland. A boreal forest of small pines and birch, and eventually a larger pine-spruce forest, slowly replaced the tundra vegetation. The new environment was less hospitable to many large mammals which relocated north to more suitable habitat. As hunting became more time-consuming, local Paleo-Indian bands followed game animals, leaving the region virtually uninhabited for some 3,000 years.

Around 6,000 years ago, the climate was much as it is today. A deciduous forest of oak, hickory, American chestnut, white pine and Eastern hemlock had evolved, providing favorable habitat for deer, bear, raccoon, fox, wolf and opossum. Groups, traveling from the southeast, settled near major waterways and coastal shores, where they lived comfortably off the area's abundant resources.

About 1,000 A. D., the native inhabitants of our region, now referred to as the Lenape, began to farm. As a result, they became less nomadic, settling in more permanent villages.



*The park's rich woodlands provided Native Americans with abundant resources for food, shelter, tools, weaponry and more.*

### LENAPE OR DELAWARE, MUNSEE OR MAHICAN

As Native groups spread across America, they adapted to specific environments. Historically, the Lenape were Woodland Indians and therefore led a very different lifestyle from the Cheyenne, for example, who were Plains Indians. Lenape people did not live in tepees or hunt buffalo. They also spoke a different language, Algonquian, once the most widespread linguistic group east of the Mississippi.

Algonquian dialects varied among the Lenape. Those in regions approximately north of the Raritan River in New Jersey spoke a Munsee dialect; groups to the south spoke an Unami dialect. Even the Algonquian word "Lenape" has many meanings: "a male of our kind," "our men," "men of the same nation," or "common," "ordinary," or "real" people. (Lenni-Lenape, although frequently used, is a redundant term meaning "the common, ordinary people.")

Although common in historic references, names like Mahican, Delaware and Algonquin inadequately describe local aborigines. These terms originated after most Lenape had left our region. However, scholars continue to use them to help identify distinct cultures. For example, the English word "Delaware" specifies Unami-speaking groups living along the Delaware Bay and River.

The Lenape who lived in the Bronx included the Wiechquaeskeck in the Van Cortlandt Park area and the Siwanoy in Pelham Bay Park's environs. Although distinguished by a geographical and group identity, both shared a common language and lifestyle which was similar to many other local aboriginal groups including Rechgawawanks, Sinsinks, Hackensacks and Matinecocks.

## THE PREHISTORIC BRONX

Before Europeans set foot in the Bronx, Van Cortlandt Park's rocky terrain was much the same as today. Millions of years of geologic activity formed the steep ridges of Fordham gneiss which surround the low-lying, Inwood marble valley. Tibbetts Brook, or Mosholu, flowed freely into a rich brackish wetland—where salt and fresh waters mix south of the Van Cortlandt House. (Mosholu is the Algonquian word meaning "smooth stones" or "clear water.") After crossing the marshes, the brook flowed southwest along Broadway, passing west of the small triangular island of Papparinem (today's Kingsbridge area) before emptying into Spuyten Duyvil Creek.

Picture Van Cortlandt Park with no disruptive roads, no buildings, no play areas, no mowed lawns and no lake. (Tibbetts Brook was



*Today's Parade Ground in Van Cortlandt Park was once a principal Native American settlement.*

dammed around 1690 to create Van Cortlandt Lake.) Indian Field and the Parade Ground flats were sites of Wiechquaeskeck planting fields, the latter housing a principal settlement. In 1890 an excavation on the Parade Ground, the northern reaches of a tract known as Keskeskick to the local Lenape, revealed an extensive village. (Keskeskick, derived from the Delaware language, means "sharp grass or sedge marsh.") The researchers unearthed pottery sherds, stone artifacts, fire pits and burial sites.

The Wiechquaeskeck fished in nearby streams or traveled to the Hudson River or Spuyten Duyvil Creek to catch bass, sturgeon, oysters and clams. Van Cortlandt's greenspace was a hunter's delight—ducks, geese and snapping turtle in low-lying wetlands; deer, raccoon and wolf in wooded uplands; and turkey and rabbit in open meadows. "In their waters are all sorts of fowls, such as cranes [= herons], bitterns, swans, geese, [and] ducks...." reported Amsterdam writer Nicolaes van Wassenaer in his 1624 compilation of news from New Netherland. "Birds fill also the woods so that men can scarcely go through them for the whistling, the noise, and the chattering."

In similar fashion, Pelham Bay Park was a collection of small islands, beachy peninsulas and vast salt marshes. There was no Orchard Beach; Hunter and Twin islands were separate from the mainland; and Pelham Bay was not buried under a parking lot.



*"Gray Mare," deposited by the last receding glacier 10-15,000 years ago, sits perched along Hunter Island's northwest shore.*

The Siwanoy settled along the tidal inlets and open shorelines of Eastchester and Pelham bays, Long Island Sound and the Hutchinson River estuary. A number of villages dotted the coastal greenspace including a principal settlement near Turtle Cove and another near the present Bartow-Pell Mansion.

Many sites in Pelham Bay Park are reputed to have been spiritually significant to the Siwanoy. Two places where local Siwanoy practiced ceremonial rites are glacial erratics (boulders deposited by receding glaciers)—Mishow, located at the Kazimiroff Nature Trail entrance, and the Gray Mare, on Hunter Island's northwestern shore.

Pelham Bay Park's shores, reminiscent of New England's rocky coast, were covered with numerous fishing stations. The rich aquatic life supported the Siwanoy with all manner of fish and shellfish. Wooded interiors and spacious fields helped balance the Native American diet with a variety of fruits, nuts and animal life.

## A LENAPE PORTRAIT

Despite their "red man" image, Native Americans have a bronze or reddish-brown skin color. In general, most Lenape had black hair, brown eyes and were "... well set in their limbs, slender round the waist, [and] broad across the shoulders. . . ," noted Adriaen van der Donck, a prominent New Netherland lawyer. Men appeared clean-shaven; the few chin hairs that did grow were plucked out.

Native Americans greased their hair and bodies with animal fat for numerous reasons, as noted by English traveler Charles Wooley in the late 1670s: "They preserve their Skins smooth by anointing them with the Oyl of Fishes, the fat of Eagles, and the grease of Rackoons, which they hold in the Summer the best Antidote to keep their skins from blistering by the scorching Sun, their best Armour against the Musketto's . . . and stopper of the Pores of their Bodies against the Winter's cold."

Lenape men and women frequently painted their bodies and faces for ceremonial rites, war and festive occasions, or to mourn the dead. Several colors—black, red, yellow, blue, and white were used; figures and designs were added for effect. Red, a favorite color, could be made from bloodroot, a groundcover plant still found in the forests of Van Cortlandt and Pelham Bay parks.

During the historic period, women generally wore their hair loose; men often styled their hair as a mark of status—either removing all hair but a long forelock positioned toward the front, back or side of the head, or sporting a "mohawk" style.

Men and women were often naked to the waist: Men wore two flaps of animal-hide breechcloth and women wore an unsewed, wraparound skirt. As the weather cooled, furs from bear, raccoon, rabbit and other animals were worn. Moccasins and stockings were usually deer-skin, but some were made of corn husks or reeds.

Wampum was frequently used for decoration. These tubular beads were produced from two types of shell: The white bead came from the knobbed whelk (*Busycon carica*); the rarer purple or black wampum was ground from the Northern quahog or hard-shelled clam (*Mercenaria mercenaria*). Wampum adornments, including earrings, bracelets, and arm-, waist- and headbands, were symbols of wealth and social status.

Unable to coin money in the New World, the Dutch found wampum an adequate medium of exchange for both colonists and Native groups. Although the majority of Lenape made practically no wampum, southern coastal New York and Long Island, including the Pelham Bay Park area, was known as the "mine of New Netherland" because of the large quantities of wampum produced.

## LIVING BY THE SEA, HUNTING BY THE SEASON

Even after adopting agricultural practices, the Lenape remained, to a large extent, hunter-gatherers. Families would often be away from their principal village until the first winter storms, thereupon, groups banded together for warmth and mutual preservation.

Fishing was a primary livelihood, providing a healthy meal nearly year-round. Spring fish runs provided large catches with minimal effort, an essential food source at a time when seeds were being sown and new plants sprouting. Shellfish, including oysters, hard and soft-shell clams, mussels and scallops were gathered throughout the summer and often served as emergency winter fare. Local historian Reginald P. Bolton stated that "some of the ancient oysters found near (Pelham Bay Park's) shore . . . are eight inches in length, each oyster a meal in itself."

Local Native Americans employed a variety of fishing techniques including spear, seine, bow and arrow, weir, trap and even bare hands. To date, no fishbone-hooks have been unearthed in Lenape environs although they have been discovered elsewhere.

The chief mode of transportation for the Lenape in our area was the canoe. Despite popular belief, local Native Americans did not make birch-bark canoes because birch does not grow big enough this far south; elm bark was used instead. Tulip tree, pine and oak were used



*The tall, thick, straight trunk of the tulip tree was often used to make dug-out canoes.*

to make dug-out canoes because of their straight thick trunks. Some dugouts were 40 feet long and held up to 20 people.

From the earliest signs of spring until winter had gripped the countryside, the Lenape hunted a multitude of birds and reptiles in field, marsh and forest. Summer was a good time to hunt marsh birds and other seasonal game including frogs and turtles.

After the harvest, Native bands made the necessary provisions for the coming winter. Men hunted mammals intensively at this time because fur was thicker and flesh fatter than any other season.

The most hunted mammal was the deer, which provided many resources beyond food. The hide was used for clothing, shelter and shoes; antlers were used to chip arrowheads; tendons served as bow cord; and bones were made into awls and other tools.

Local bands sometimes joined in communal hunting drives. Most hunting, however, was carried out by individuals using spear, club, knife, trap, snare, net, bare hands or, more often, bow and arrow.

Fire was sometimes used as a tool to keep forests open and parklike, making prey more visible. In addition, animals were attracted to these areas by new plant growth and fire-induced berry shrubs. Although not all Native Americans adopted the practice, it is likely that local

aborigines did. Van der Donck, who was well-traveled throughout the region, mentions the use of fire in his *A Description of the New Netherlands* (1655): "The Indians have a yearly custom. . .of burning the woods, plains and meadows in the fall of the year. . .[It is done] to render hunting easier,. . .to thin out and clear the woods . . . [and] to circumscribe and enclose the game within the lines of the fire..."

## FIELD AND FOREST

From April to October, as Lenape men fished and hunted, the women spent much of their time cultivating maize (corn), their principal crop. Unlike today's corn, maize was about four inches long with only eight rows of kernels.

Large groups of men and women cleared fields for planting by girdling trees, slashing brush and burning branches and trunks. The women sowed and tilled their fields by hand during the spring and were sometimes helped by older men and young children.

Other than maize, the Lenape did not plant other grain crops but did grow beans and squash. Beans were grown alongside maize so that eventually the three- to four-foot-high maize would serve as a "pole" for the beanstalk. Tobacco, an important ceremonial plant, was usually cultivated by men.

Throughout the growing season, women and children foraged the wilderness searching for a variety of foods to supplement their diet and serve as winter provisions. Wild onion, wild lettuce, water lily and Jack-in-the-pulpit roots are some edible plants which still grow in the parks. Smartweed, sunflower and canary grass were also gathered. Often leaves, stems, seeds and roots could all be eaten.

Mushrooms were collected from the forest floor. Fruits were picked as they ripened. Strawberry, blackberry and grape were abundant in this area. Botanical knowledge, however, was a necessity. For example, May apple fruit is a treat, but its roots are poisonous.

Autumn was the period for harvesting nuts—chestnuts, acorns, walnuts, beechnuts and hickory nuts—which were husked, dried and stored for later use. Although most nuts could be shelled and eaten directly, acorns had to be soaked to remove the bitter, cramp-inducing tannic acid. Nuts could be powdered for use in soups or stews, ground into meal or flour, or rendered into nut oil which was preserved for cooking and healing.

## THE LENAPE HOUSEHOLD

Lenape homes were of two types: Dome-shaped or long and angular. Both were constructed of young, pliable saplings, two to three inches in diameter, that were bent toward the top and lashed together. Hickory, chestnut, ash and elm were often used. The frame was then thatched with grass or covered with overlapping bark or animal hides. Small huts were constructed for one or two families; larger abodes, housing several families, were often built in the winter when the population became more concentrated.

Cooking pots were hung from a supported, horizontal pole over a centrally located fire pit. A small opening in the roof let smoke from the fire escape. Woven mats covered the doorway. Furnishings were simple—a grass mat to sleep on, some wooden dishes and cooking utensils, and a few personal items. Sometimes partitions were erected for privacy.

Because the Lenape believed everything was inherited through the mother, newlyweds usually moved into the bride's mother's home until their own hut was built. Once completed, it became the wife's property.

Meals were not at fixed times, but Lenape generally ate one meal in the morning and one in the evening. Cornmeal mush was eaten almost every day, often with meat or fish. Vegetables were eaten as they ripened, but most were stored for winter use. Special treats were beaver tails, striped bass heads, fat meat with chestnuts, and parched, ground corn; corn stalks were sucked as sweets.

## SPIRITS, CONCOCTIONS AND THE AFTERWORLD

The Lenape saw themselves as an integral part of a natural world filled with innumerable spirits in the plants, animals, clouds, stones and other natural elements, each no less important than humans.

According to the Lenape, sickness, accident and death were attributable to spirits—either evil spirits or those who had been offended. Although every family was knowledgeable in medicinal plant lore, an herbalist or shaman (doctor) was sought to cure persistent illness or to prevent death.

Specific rituals and concoctions were used for certain illnesses. Various preparations from the black walnut tree were used to treat stomach cramps, induce vomiting, reduce inflammation and cure ringworm. A tea made from elderberry flowers was given as a tonic to newborns and to cure colic.



*Pelham Bay Park's vast saltmarshes served as hunting and fishing sites for the Siwanoy and were favorite burial grounds as well.*

However, despite medicinal knowledge, the average Native American only lived 35 to 40 years. Climatic extremes and food shortages were difficult hardships to overcome.

When death resulted, preparations were begun to inter the body. After a period of viewing, the corpse was placed into a small grave, usually 6 to 18 inches below ground level, in a fetal-like position. Graves were lined with bark, tree boughs or other materials so that the body did not touch the earth. Favorite possessions and necessary items were placed in the grave to help the deceased on his journey to the afterworld.

Pelham Bay's shorefront was a favorite burying ground for local Lenape. In his *History of Westchester County* (1846), Rev. Robert Bolton noted numerous burial mounds near the water's edge. One contained "a large-sized skeleton, by the side of which, lay the stone-axe and flint spear of the tenant of the grave."

## A LIFESTYLE DISRUPTED

In 1524, Florentine navigator Giovanni da Verrazano and his crew became the first Europeans on record to view the Lenape near New York harbor: "So we took the small boat. . .to land which we found densely populated. The people, . . . dressed in birds' feathers of various

colors, . . . came toward us joyfully, uttering loud cries of wonderment and showing us the safest place to beach the boat.”

As Verrazano’s account implies, local Natives had been actively trading with passing vessels by this time. Fishermen, overwintering in New York harbor and other inlets, began trading with Lenape for furs as supplementary income. As they returned to the same spot year after year, trade became more intense and better organized.

The fur trade became the motivating factor for Dutch colonization, but its effect upon Native Americans was devastating. As European trade goods became virtually indispensable, the Native American was swept into the modern world. Iron hatchets and hoes outmoded the Lenape’s primitive stone implements; copper kettles did not break like clay jars and were easily mended; and animal hides could be more profitably sold than worn.

Guns became prized trade goods. As Native Americans began to covet and collect furs exclusively for bargaining power, guns made their hunting more efficient and less time-consuming. Natives became more dependent on Europeans for pellets, gunpowder and repairs. In addition, local Native groups, once careful not to deplete wildlife, now hunted irresponsibly, thereby jeopardizing the availability of game for food and clothing.

The liquor trade was a continuing factor in the strife between Native Americans and colonists. Many Lenape were susceptible to alcohol addiction, yet unable to tolerate its effects. Alcohol abuse contributed greatly to numerous problems on frontier settlements.

## COLONIAL SETTLEMENT

In 1624, the first settlers arrived in what was to become New York City and, within two years, Fort Amsterdam was established. To secure a legal claim to the land, Governor Peter Minuit “purchased” Manhattan island for 60 guilders (or about 30 dollars) worth of goods. Yet the Lenape continued to use it—cutting trees for canoe-making, fishing from coastlines and hunting in wooded areas. The European idea of ownership was not compatible with their own practices. To the Lenape, land could not be bought and sold; it was a resource to be shared by the community. Dutch transactions were considered partial payments for temporary use.

During Wilhem Kieft’s governorship (1638-1647), the colonial population doubled in a five-year period. As settlements spread and land values increased, the Lenape often insisted on further payment.

The Lenape way of life became virtually impossible: hunting grounds were sold and then cleared for farmland; fishing rights were violated by colonists; and the increasing population of settlers built homesteads upon what were once native planting fields.

Ordinary tensions were made worse by Kieft, a hard drinker with a violent temper, whose policies did little to relieve the situation. In late 1639, Kieft levied a tax on local Lenape payable in furs, corn or wampum. When Kieft threatened groups who ignored the tax, skirmishes broke out and continued over the next two years.

Hostilities climaxed in 1641 when one of the Wiechquaeskeck robbed and murdered an elderly Manhattan homesteader. Shock waves rocked New Amsterdam and Kieft demanded that the murderer be turned over to Dutch authorities. The Wiechquaeskeck sachem (leader) refused, noting that the culprit had avenged his uncle’s murder by the Dutch 15 years earlier. Local violence escalated.

In February 1643, raids by hostile Iroquois groups demanding tribute led local Algonquians to seek refuge at Dutch settlements. Kieft seized the opportunity to avenge unpunished crimes. On the night of February 25, about 80 soldiers crossed the Hudson River to Pavonia (today’s Jersey City), one of two settlements where fleeing Native groups had gathered. In a grisly attack, the Dutch surprised the Lenape and massacred them, killing about 80 to 100 men, women and children there and at Corlear’s Hook in Manhattan, a settlement near the present-day Canal Street and Broadway.

Kieft’s revenge backfired. The Lenape retaliated and, within a year, all of New Netherland was besieged. Local Siwanoy bands in the East Bronx destroyed homesteads, killing newly arrived settler Anne Hutchinson and most of her family. By the time peace was achieved in August 1645, it is estimated that 1,000 Native Americans had lost their lives.

## BRONX LANDOWNERS

As a result of his role in the peace settlement process, Adriaen van der Donck received a tract of land from the Dutch in 1646 that encompassed Van Cortlandt Park. He subsequently purchased the tract from Wiech-quaeskeck sachem Tacharew. Although van der Donck owned the land for almost ten years, he spent much of that time out of the country. It is believed that he maintained good relations with local aborigines, since his property was left unscathed during periods of violent unrest.



In 1654, Thomas Pell, an English doctor from Connecticut, purchased a large tract of land from local Siwanoy, part of which was to become Pelham Manor. The treaty was signed at the famous Treaty Oak near the Bartow-Pell Mansion. (Although the tree was destroyed by fire in 1906, the site is presently marked by an iron fence and an elm tree.) Ironically, one of the deed signers was Ann-Hoock or Wampage, a Siwanoy who, folklore maintains, claimed, by using her name, to have been Anne Hutchinson's murderer.

According to Pell family history, Wampage became christianized. His family settled in the area and remained friends with the Pells. (In fact, Pell's grandnephew, also named Thomas, married Wampage's granddaughter, Anna.) However, for those Lenape who did not adopt European ways, the abundance of cleared lands and planted orchards made their traditional way of life difficult. As late as 1675, a general court of assize ruled "that the Indian's at Mr. Pell's or Anne Hoock's neck, be ordered to remove to their usual winter quarters, within Helgate, in Manhattan). . . " Many Lenape left the area as the 18th century began.

In 1730, local Natives gathered for the last time on the Pell's front lawn and, with New York Governor John Montgomerie in attendance, settled the boundary between New York and Connecticut. According to R.P. Bolton, the last sale of Lenape lands in Van Cortlandt Park took place in 1701 between Jacobus Van Cortlandt and Karacapacomont, a Rechgawawank woman, and her son Nemeran.

## WITHOUT A HOMELAND

The Wiechquaeskeck and Siwanoy population had dramatically decreased by the time of English rule. Scholars estimate that the original Lenape population was between 8,000 and 12,000 before Europeans arrived. By the 1700s, their numbers had dropped to an estimated 2,400 to 3,000.

Many groups were decimated by the ravages of war and conflict; countless others were felled by epidemic diseases - measles, smallpox, typhus, influenza, venereal diseases and malaria - which swept rapidly throughout the countryside.

Although difficult to trace, many local Native Americans migrated north and west into the country's interior. Some Siwanoy traveled to the uplands of Westchester County where they remained under the sachem Katonah. Others settled above Stamford, Connecticut where they became known as the Stamford Indians. Both groups probably contained Wiechquaeskeck who had become intimately connected with Siwanoy during the last half of the 17th century.



*This early 20th century photograph shows the famous Treaty Oak where, it is believed, Thomas Pell purchased the area in 1654.*

Many Wiechquaeskeck settled among the Wappinger during the last decades of the 17th century where they gradually became known as River Indians. A majority of them were displaced in local land disputes in the 1730s and '40s; some joined the Mahican at Stockbridge, Massachusetts who eventually emigrated west to Wisconsin.

Many Munsee-speaking bands (possibly including Siwanoy and Wiechquaeskeck) joined the Minisink and moved into Pennsylvania and Ohio, but were eventually dispossessed. For the most part, many Lenape descendants today live in communities in Oklahoma, Wisconsin and Ontario, Canada. However, scattered tribal members remain in parts of New Jersey and upstate New York.

As westward paths were littered with broken promises, exiled Lenape settled among other tribes until their unique culture became a blurred Delawarean heritage. (Ohio and Oklahoma Delawares, however, have maintained more distinctive cultural characteristics.)

Today, park visitors can contemplate the Native American way of life in remnants of their ancestral homes. The forests, meadows and wetlands of Van Cortlandt and Pelham Bay parks, preserved for their natural richness and captivating beauty, remain living testaments of a rich Lenape heritage.

## REFERENCES

This work relied heavily on Herbert C. Kraft's *The Lenape* (1986) for much of the cultural background on our local Native Americans. It was also very useful as a guide to Native American names, terminology and the reliability of other source materials.

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