

An Introduction to Archaeology in Leetsdale, Pennsylvania

Archaeology? In Pennsylvania? Who knew? But there are several sites practically in our backyards that are older than the pyramids of Egypt. Sites such as the Meadowcroft Rock Shelter have been located in this state, which have existed for over 15,000 years. One site in Western Pennsylvania is not as old as Meadowcroft, but it is quite ancient in terms of human development here.

Leetsdale, a town in northwest Allegheny County, has drawn the attention of archaeologists, engineers and several other groups lately. This began in the 1990's when plans to construct a dam in that area were formulated. Several archaeological sites were uncovered as a result of investigating the area where the construction was to occur. Some of these sites date to the Middle Archaic Period, a time of 6,000 to 4,000 BC. The most recent occupation at the Leetsdale site is the Harmony Brickworks, which ended production in 1902 and dissolved in 1905. A small number of other time periods are apparent in Leetsdale and archaeologists continue to work to uncover more information that will lead to a greater understanding of the people who once lived there.



Leetsdale, Pennsylvania



The Middle Archaic period was a time in which people lived in family-based groups. Glaciers from the last Ice Age had receded enough that Pennsylvania's climate was a temperate one. Trees such as spruces, pines, and other furs could be seen in the forests.

The people surviving during this period relied on others in their groups. The men typically hunted fish, deer, rabbit and other small game while the women gathered food such as berries, nuts and seeds from the forests. Mussels, a shelled water animal, were also used as food if the culture lived near a river. All leadership status was earned, not inherited. One person having the most knowledge about fishing would lead the fishing party while another could lead the hunting party.



Mussels



Man using an atlatl

The people were nomadic. They did not stay in an area for long intervals; however, some recovered evidence suggests that there were temporary camps for the long winter and spring seasons. At this time, Leetsdale is thought to be a camp where early people inhabited for a time. Weapons during this era consisted of spearthrowers and atlatls. The Middle Archaic people also used projectile points (sharpened stones) for daily use.

On the Leetsdale site, several features or specific areas that were used by prehistoric people were located. Many of these were hearths, places where they could cook meals. Because these areas were used for cooking, the sandstone rock around them become reddish in color and crumbled easily. This is referred to as FCR or fire-cracked rock. Sometimes in hearths, charcoal remains of plants can be found. Other features include garbage, fire, and storage pits. Later in the Archaic period, steatite or soapstone bowls were used in daily life. Before this, baskets were utilized but no definite remains have been recovered; baskets made of plant fibers would have long since decayed.



Fire-Cracked Rock (FCR)

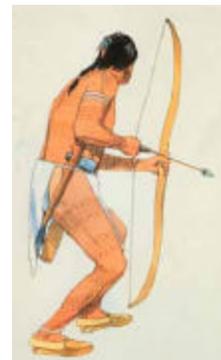
Although there is not much evidence of the Late Archaic period at Leetsdale, evidence from the Early Woodland period (1,000 to 300 BC) has been discovered. At this time, the Native Americans in Pennsylvania still relied on hunting and gathering as a means of collecting food; however, the people began making ceramic pottery. Native Americans cultivated very few crops and therefore did not need to have permanent homes. These people lived together in small communities.



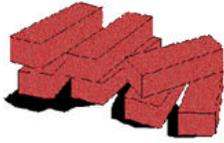
Prehistoric mound

Near Leetsdale, there are several prehistoric mound sites. These served as burial mounds for cultures in the Early Woodland era. They are very significant to archaeologists and historians who have an interest in those who lived in that area during that time. The building of mounds in northeast America is isolated to the Woodland period. A group named the Adena constructed them. During the Middle Woodland period (300 BC to 900 AD), the Hopewell produced larger mounds and earthworks than that of the Adena. The Hopewell also carved ceramic pipes. Shells, precious stones, and jewelry recovered from that time indicate that these people traded with other tribes.

Later in the Woodland period (900 to 1,600 AD), the introduction of corn, beans and other domesticated crops occurred. Native Americans began to settle an area for longer periods and built houses. The bow and arrow used for hunting allowed for a more successful pursuit of prey. Larger animals such as bear, deer and turkey were hunted. These food sources were more reliable. Fire-cracked rock and projectile points are still found in this time period; however, the projectile point seems to have evolved from a spear point of the Archaic period, to an arrow point. Much of the same happened in Leetsdale during this age as in the rest of northeast America.



There is a lack of archaeological material at Leetsdale until the 1700's. The Delaware Indians inhabited this area until 1780 when the Europeans purchased the region. Ownership changed several times throughout the 19th century, but in 1888, German separatists (a religious group) contracted for the area and constructed the Brickworks there. The Harmony Brickworks operated from the 1890's until 1902. Archaeologists have recovered many artifacts from this time. They include pulleys, bricks, desks, clocks, axes, glass, sand, and many other relics from the Brickworks. Material was much more recent and quite sturdy. Many historical records exist about this brick-making factory, including well-preserved lists of inventory, so a fuller recreation of the past is available.



Harmony Brickworks

Today, archaeologists, geologists, palynologists (people who study pollen) and others are still working to retrieve information and artifacts from Leetsdale. They must deal with problems such as time limitations and inclement summer weather, but they will recover as much as possible to try and rebuild the lives of those who lived in our region as much as 8,000 years ago. By understanding the past, we connect ourselves with it. In this manner, we are able to better appreciate the lives of different cultures and those that lived so long ago.