



Alexander H. Mosley, Jr., a member of the Lenape tribe. He is performing a Grass Dance, the historic purpose of which was to flatten the grass before a pow-wow.

THE DELMARVA PENINSULA once teemed with wildlife. Its pristine rivers were spawning grounds for shad and sturgeon. Oysters, mussels and other shellfish abounded in the bay and estuaries. And inland forests boasted old-growth trees of gargantuan proportions. With paddle and canoe, it was possible to navigate the length and breadth of the land through a network of waterways created by the industrious beaver and his dams.

Delaware's First Environmentalists

BY JOSEPHINE ECCEL
PHOTOS BY ROBIN RAY

This was Lenapehokink, home of the Lenape [leh-NAH-pay], who were “the first people of the first state,” as Dennis Coker, Principal Chief of the Lenape Indian Tribe of Delaware, is proud to point out. His community of about 800 related residents in Kent County’s Cheswold area is a remnant of the Native American tribe whose Delaware roots go back thousands of years. The name “Lenape,” according to some translations, means “first people,” or “original people.”

Because they occupied the vast region that encompasses the Delaware River watershed from its headwaters to its terminus in the Bay, the Lenape were also called Delaware Indians.

The state recognizes two tribes within its borders: the Lenape and the Nanticoke Tribe, based in Millsboro. However, the Nanticoke arrived later, sometime in the late 17th century, pushed eastward from their homelands along the Chesapeake Bay by encroaching European settlement.

Both groups belong to the regional Confederation of Sovereign Nanticoke-Lenape Tribes of the Delaware Bay, which also includes the Nanticoke Lenni-Lenape Tribal Nation, based in Bridgeton, New Jersey.

As white settlement increased, the Lenape migrated west, many as far as Oklahoma or north into Canada, where tribal communities still live together preserving their culture.

Among their peers, Chief Coker explains, the Lenape were known as “The



One classification of the Native Regalia is the Women’s Fancy dress. Fringed capes are edged with yarn of multicolored designs. A matching apron is worn to cover the waist, and fringed side tabs are added. Instead of leggings, most dancers wear jogging pants with fringe below the knees. Bells are worn between the ankles and moccasins.



Cory Jackson with her newborn Maeha at a pow-wow in Millsboro. Cory is a member of the Nanticoke Tribe and Maeha is Nanticoke and Lenape.

Negotiators,” “The Grandfathers,” or “The Peacekeepers,” who fought only when necessary.

Culture

The Lenape had no written language. Their traditions and legends were handed down generation-to-generation by word of mouth. But we have contemporary accounts left by European explorers and missionaries.

William Penn, who arrived from England in 1682, described the Lenape: “tall, straight, well-built, and of singular proportion...and mostly walk with a

lofty chin.” Of their language, he wrote: “I know not a Language spoken in Europe that hath words of more sweetness or greatness, in Accent and Emphasis than theirs...” The founder of Pennsylvania also wrote of the Lenape egalitarian spirit of sharing with each other when he presented them with gifts.

Theirs was a hunter-gatherer and farming culture. They were also survival guides, introducing Europeans to the “Three Sisters” – corn, beans and squash, all of which quickly became staples of the Colonial diet – and remain so for Americans to this day.

Lenape men cleared the land using a slash-and-burn technique. In the traditional division of labor, women planted, harvested and cooked the food in hand-made clay pots, sewed the deerskin clothes and cared for children. Men were the shelter builders, toolmakers, defenders and hunters.

Their tools and weapons were fashioned out of wood, bone, antler and stone. Some stones were chipped into a

foraging, netting, trapping and herbalism.

Herbs collected from the wild played both a religious and medicinal role in the lives of Native Americans. Today, leaves of sage or sweetgrass are still used in certain Lenape ceremonial cleansing rituals.

The traditional diet was healthful, says Chief Coker, and included fish, nuts, berries and plenty of vegetables, along with red meat and fowl when the hunt was successful. Native people were grateful for every part of the animal. Besides providing food, clothing and shelter, animal products had other uses: grease was used as insect repellent or colored for facial or body decoration, and parts such as teeth or shells were made into jewelry, wampum and tools.

The Lenape's oval, round-top homes, called wigwams, were fashioned from bark and skins laid over a frame of saplings. These shelters accommodated an extended family. Lenape were a matrilineal society, so when a couple married they moved in with the wife's family. As game and other resources diminished in the surrounding area, wigwams would be abandoned and the village moved, allowing the land to recover and the wildlife to be restored and revitalized.

The "first" conservationists

Native Americans lived in harmony

Lenape language is included in the Algonquian Group called Eastern Algonquian and has three distinct bands: Unilachtigo (Turkey Clan), Munsee (Wolf Clan), and Unami (Turtle Clan). Also under the classification of Eastern Algonquian belongs the related language of Nanticoke-Conoy.

The three Lenape clan totems, wolf, turkey and turtle, will be featured on the new one dollar Native American coin to be released later this year to commemorate the first treaty made by the new United States with the Delaware Indians in 1778.

razor-sharp points by flintknapping, an essential skill, since metal was virtually unknown prior to European contact. Many of these necessary skills were passed down from generations, such as



This watercolor by Russell Ray is of the Delaware Native hunters during the 1800s, moving west into Maryland on a winter hunting trip. The Delaware natives were mainly coastal dwellers. "This was my rendition of two lone hunters seeking out game for the tribe during the winter months," Ray says.



This woman wears the Women's Traditional dress for the pow-wow. It is made of hide skin with some ornamentation.

with their environment. "Our philosophy is to take only what you need and give thanks for everything you take," Coker says. "We do not exploit resources, we use them. When you interact with your environment on a daily basis, you know you've got to protect it because you are going to depend on it."

The Lenape felt a connection with all of nature. Even today, Chief Coker says,



Dennis Coker, Principal Chief of the Lenape Indian Tribe of Delaware (L) and Bill Daisy, Assistant Chief of the Nanticoke Tribe (R), attend a pow-wow.

prayers often end with "all my relations," because "that prayer is for everybody: the leaf, the rock, the tree... Everything has life. Everything has purpose." All are related, he says.

Relationship with nature had a deeply

personal and spiritual significance as well. As Lenape youth entered puberty, they would embark on a vision quest, spending several days in the wilderness alone, fasting and seeking guidance and self-knowledge. An animal might appear – whether real or in a dream – which would thereafter serve as a spiritual guide and which could be called upon for help and direction.

Life for the Lenape changed after contact with Europeans, starting in the 1600s. Iron pots, metal tools, woven cloth, mirrors, combs and guns were exchanged for the luxurious native beaver pelts.

“There was a level of greed that set in that really upset our economy,” laments Coker. “We started to forget our mandate of resource protection. We started to hunt the beaver [for pelts to trade] and the decline of the beaver was really the beginning of the decline of our culture.”



The Jingle dress, introduced in the 1980s, is made from multi-colored fabric decorated with tin jingles. The number of jingles on a child's dress is about 130. A woman's size varies depending on the design of the dress. The dancer carries a feather fan, often wearing eagle plumes of feathers in her hair.

Beaver pelts were shipped across the Atlantic Ocean by the thousands. With the decimation of the beaver population came the loss of dams and wetlands. Europeans moved in, built homes, fenced off fields, planted crops and harvested timber. Coming from a continent where every inch of ground belonged to

For More Information:

The website of The Confederation of Sovereign Nanticoke–Lenape Tribes gives links to the three state-recognized related tribes of the region and documents their shared history. <http://nanticokelenapemuseum.org/confederation/>

Website of the Lenape Indian Tribe of Delaware.
www.lenapeindiantribeofdelaware.com

Website of the Nanticoke Indian Tribe, based in Millsboro. Includes information about Heritage Days and the annual fall powwow. www.nanticokeindians.org

The Museum of Indian Culture, 2825 Fish Hatchery Road, Allentown, Pa, 18103, or 610-797-2121, offers Lenape history and culture exhibits, educational programs, guided tours and a research library. www.lenape.org

someone, they could not understand the Natives' inability to recognize ownership rights. But land to the Lenape was like air or water. “Resources were shared. They were for the community, for all of mankind. We don't own land,” explains Chief Coker. “We are stewards.”

The Lenape were forced to concede more and more of their land; some villages simply disappeared, victims of smallpox epidemics from which the Natives had no immunity. The Cheswold group survived by “hiding in plain sight,” as Coker describes it.

Conservation lessons today

Promoting the Lenape “mandate to care for Mother Earth,” Chief Coker encourages young people to study science, to “understand the denigration that has affected our ability to live off the land.”

In the space of 400 years, it has often become unhealthy to drink from a natural water source or to consume more than a certain amount fish caught in the wild. “Mother Earth is suffering,” he says.

“We are obligated as Native Americans to protect our environment [and our culture] for the next seven generations,” Coker says. “That is our instruction from the Creator. We have to conduct ourselves in a manner that considers the survival of our children for seven generations. Somebody saw to it that I was here seven generations down the road; it's my responsibility to give seven generations from me the ability to survive.”

One of the goals of the Lenape Tribal

Center in Dover, where Chief Coker's office is located, is to preserve the culture. That includes ceremonies, crafts, skills and the respect for nature that was an integral part of the Lenape way of life. Coker advocates healthy eating, growing food and buying produce from surrounding farms as a way to reduce a person's carbon footprint. The Lenape also support the move toward alternative clean energy.

“It's important for me to instill this wisdom and initiative in our youth because they are the future caretakers of Mother Earth,” he says. Chief Coker was also involved in the Delaware State Parks “Child in the Wild” program, which encouraged youngsters to get outdoors and interact with nature. Chief Coker consults with groups that have input on environmental policy, such as the Mid-Atlantic Regional Council on the Ocean, and as a member of the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management's alternative energy initiative task force.

“It's going to take all the citizenry of this country to realize that we only have one Mother Earth, and we have to respect her,” he says. “I fear that Mother Earth will cleanse herself if we don't do it. And it may not be as easy to deal with it if she does it for us.” **OD**

JOSEPHINE ECCEL, A FREQUENT CONTRIBUTOR TO OUTDOOR DELAWARE, IS A FREELANCE WRITER BASED IN WILMINGTON.