

American Indians

When humans first walked the shores of JPPM over 12,000 years ago, they traveled through a land that was very different from what we see today. At that time, the Patuxent River was a freshwater stream and its shoreline was located close to the middle of the current river. The Ice Age forest of pines and spruce was being replaced by birch, beech, oak, and hemlock, similar to the forest found in New England and Canada today. The megafauna the period is known for, like mastodons and giant beaver, were fast going extinct. In fact, there is little archaeological evidence to suggest that the first people in eastern North America spent much time hunting these large animals. Instead, they relied on deer, elk, fish, and the wild plants they gathered for food.



At the end of the Ice Age, the glaciers began to melt and sea levels to rise. By about 6000 years ago, the Chesapeake Bay and the tidal lower Patuxent River that are so familiar today began to form. But it was not until about 3,000 years ago that they reached their full modern form with extensive marshes and oyster beds. During the same period a climate similar to today's developed, along with a mixed hardwood forest like the one we see now. However, this forest was not entirely "natural" – Native Americans often burned large sections to create better forage conditions for the game that they hunted.



Archaeological evidence indicates that Indians were present on the property at least 9,000 years ago. Earlier sites are now under water, flooded by the widening Patuxent. These first Indians were semi-nomadic, traveling seasonally to various locations in search of food, stone for tools, and other resources. Long-distance trade networks developed early on, bringing stone from western Maryland, Ohio, and New York, to this area.

As populations increased, Indian groups began to exploit a wider variety of environments, which meant new tools had to be developed. Stone axes, adzes, spear throwers, and various grinding stones appeared. The developing tidal and freshwater marshes provided additional plant and animal resources, particularly oysters. Southern Maryland is dotted with huge shell middens that indicate how extensively oysters were used by the native people.

By 3,000 years ago, the first pottery was being made in this area, while bows and arrows were introduced around 1,000 years ago. An economy based on agriculture, particularly corn, beans, and squash, developed at this time. Villages became larger and more stationary, though seasonal hunting and nut gathering groups continued to travel during the fall and winter. By 600 years ago, some villages were even fortified. JPPM's recreated Indian village is partially surrounded by a palisade, based on archaeological evidence found at the Cumberland site which is located about 2 miles downstream from here.

Here along the Patuxent River early European explorers observed several villages, with the leading one located on Battle Creek, upstream from modern day Broomes Island. One is known to archaeologists as the Stearns Site, and can be visited here at JPPM. The people living at these sites shared many cultural similarities with most of the other Indians in the Chesapeake region, who spoke dialects of the Algonquian language group. In tidewater Maryland, there were two major chiefdoms, the Piscataway on the Potomac River and the Nanticoke on the Eastern Shore. Here along the Patuxent River European explorers in the early 1600s observed several villages whose Chief's Village was located on Battle Creek, upstream from modern day Broomes Island. Collectively known as the Patuxent Indians, they maintained their independence and were closely aligned with the Nanticoke. Pressures from European settlers and northern Indians eventually forced the Patuxents from their traditional homes. Some left to join other Indian tribes in Southern Maryland and the Eastern Shore. Descendants of these people still live in the region today.



In 1976 the Maryland Commission on Indian Affairs (MCIA) was established to support Native Americans in Maryland and to further the understanding of Native history and culture. For additional information visit the MCIA website www.americanindian.maryland.gov.

"The fifth river is called Pawtuxunt,... Upon this river dwell the people called Acquintanacksuak, Pawtuxunt and Mattapanient. 200 men was the greatest strength that could be there perceived. But they inhabit together, and not so dispersed as the rest." Captain John Smith 1612.