

# ADVENTURES

IN WESTERN NEW YORK HISTORY

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## Prehistoric People of Western New York

BY  
RICHARD L. MCCARTHY  
AND  
HARRISON NEWMAN

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BUFFALO AND ERIE COUNTY  
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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VOLUME VII





*Archaic family group working at Chert Quarry—Diorama  
Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society.*



## PREHISTORIC PEOPLE OF WESTERN NEW YORK

by Richard L. McCarthy  
and Harrison Newman

**W**HEN mastodon and mammoth roamed the plains and lake shores of Western New York there also lived a hardy group of men who left traces of their passing in the very primitive stone artifacts — the articles they made — which still occasionally may be found today. Archeologists, people who dig in selected spots and study the relics they find to determine the early history of an area, have reconstructed from their artifacts and campsites part of the story of these men.

Either there were a great many of these people or they were here for a long period of time, for archeological evidence shows that they wandered over the greater part of New York State.

### *The Archaic Period*

In times past this part of the world was covered by vast sheets of ice, called glaciers. It is known that the last, or Wisconsin, stage of the glacier began to retreat about 15,000 years ago. Because their bones have been found in deposits of material made by the glacier, it is known that great, elephant-like beasts were living here at the time of the glacier's retreat.

The early people in this country hunted with a most beautiful type of stone arrowhead. These are easily recognized by the wide, shallow groove, or "flute," running down the center thickness of the points, sometimes on one side, sometimes on both. These points are frequently referred to by archeologists as "Folsom" or "Clovis" type points because they were first discovered near Folsom, N.Mex. The people who made them are often called "Folsom Men." Due to slight differences in these points between those found in the southwest and those found in the eastern States, our points are called eastern fluted points or just fluted points.

It was these same people who hunted the mighty beasts and gathered the wild fruits and berries in New York State during the last stages of the glacial period. They probably spent short periods in caves, where caves existed, when not actually on the trail, seeking protection from storms and from the great variety of dangerous, meat-eating animals who lived here at that time. It is a known fact that they used fire for an added defense against night-prowling beasts.

Folsom Men were nomadic. As a hunting people, they were continually on the move, never stopping in one place long enough to leave





*Eastern Fluted Point.*

8,000 to 9,000 years ago.

### **The Lamoka Culture**

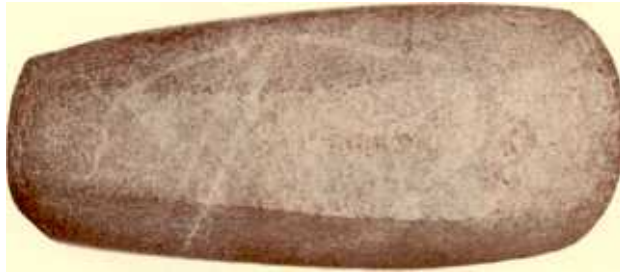
After several thousands of years, these people in New York were infiltrated or their place taken by another Stone Age people, the Lamoka. They are so named after a typical site found near Lamoka Lake in Schuyler County, N. Y. This site has been definitely dated as 5,383 years old, plus or minus 250 years, and it was reported by Dr. William Ritchie, State Archeologist. This date was determined by carbon analysis performed on traces of charcoal.

Dr. Ritchie established that the typical artifacts of this culture are the narrow, stemmed projectile points and polished, many-faced stone adzes. These people, too, seem to have been very widely dispersed over Western and Central New York. Many of their sites of occupation have been discovered in and around Buffalo.

Most of the known Lamoka sites are situated on streams, or near bodies of water. They were fishermen as well as hunters, and they used bone tools as well as stone ones. All of their artifacts show a definite cultural advancement, and some of Dr. Ritchie's findings indicated that they may have lived in round structures rather than in caves.

evidence of having been there for any length of time. They did not understand the use of metal, but were Stone Age people, and such of their implements as have survived are fashioned of this enduring material.

Archeologists can determine certain facts about these early inhabitants from discoveries made elsewhere in the United States, for they were very widely distributed. Science has found a method of dating their dwelling sites by measuring the radioactivity of certain substances found in the remains—bone, charcoal, etc.—the Carbon 14 method of dating. It has given us proof that their kind of civilization lasted for a long time. It is not known exactly when they first arrived in Western New York, but it is assumed they came here from



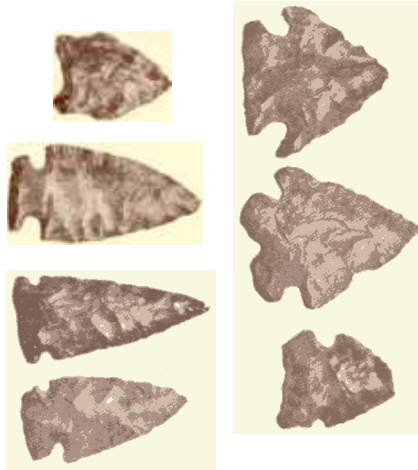
*Archaic Tools and Weapons,  
Beveled Adz, Arrowheads.*

### ***The Laurentian Culture***

As far as is now known, the next people to leave their mark on our district were the Laurentians. They were still very primitive, but we know that they were different from the Lamoka people because they did not use wedge-shaped adzes. Their arrowheads were side-notched and broader than the narrow, stemmed Lamoka points. The Laurentians made wide use of slate in curved, "semi-lunar" knives. They fished with bone harpoons, and they made plummet-like objects and the so-called bannerstones of rock.

The Laurentians, too, covered a great deal of territory. There is probably no point in our entire area which is farther than a mile removed from one of their sites of occupation. Evidently they ate quantities of fish, for they preferred to make their homes along streams and waterways. The authors know of one stream, about twelve miles long, which empties into Lake Ontario, along whose banks are located some thirty Laurentian sites.

The majority of these sites show archeological evidence of having been occupied by people of various cultures over a fairly long period



*Early Stone Artifacts  
from surface sites on  
Western New York Waterways.*

of time. If you follow a stream to its source anywhere in Western New York, you stand a very good chance of discovering one of these sites, either along the course of the stream itself or very near the source.

It is interesting to note that evidences of cultures up to and including the Laurentian are to be found generally spread throughout the whole northeastern United States. While the cultures themselves were practically identical, they have been given different names in different localities where slight dissimilarities, due to environment, may have been noted.

It is thought that these early peoples covered such vast tracts of territory simply because of the wandering life they were forced to lead as they followed the migration of game. Much of this movement was undoubtedly seasonal. The herds moved north or south as the weather changed. The people doubtlessly knew the best sources of wild fruits and berries and where and when fish spawned. They planned their movements in accordance with these facts of nature.

#### ***Early Woodland (Middlesex and Hopewellian Cultures)***

Present-day archeologists place the Early Woodland after the Laurentian in the sequence of cultures forming our local civilization.

No one knows for sure whether it was developed from the Laurentian or whether it was the result of migration of people and ideas from the

outside. The important thing to remember about the Early Woodland Indians is that they were the first people to make pottery, and therefore theirs is the first "ceramic culture" to be clearly defined in our area.

When wandering, hunting people settle down and become villagers and cultivators of the soil, it would seem that they learn to cook food in pots instead of over open fires. They develop the potter's art and create kettles to put food in instead of using shells, bones, and stones. This is true of civilizations the world over, so it is important to know that our first potters were the Early Woodland people.

It is interesting to think about how they first discovered a way to work clay into pots. Up until this time, housewives had either used stone receptacles or heated their food with hot stones in temporary holders of some sort which were ruined in the process. Perhaps it was a woman who first found how much quicker it was to make a pot of soft clay than to work hard stone. Maybe one day a child, playing in the mud, poked a finger into a ball of clay and noticed what a handy little dish it made. No one will ever know.

We do know, however, that the bits and pieces that the Early Woodland people left by their long-dead firesides are heavy, crude examples of the potter's art. Even then, women liked a little decoration on their kitchenware, and these pots have rather pleasing patterns of criss-cross lines pressed or cut into their surfaces. Sometimes these designs occur both inside and outside a pot. A particular characteristic of such double decorations is that the lines run in opposite directions. Pottery of this type is referred to by archeologists as "Vinette I" and marks the earliest Woodland sites.

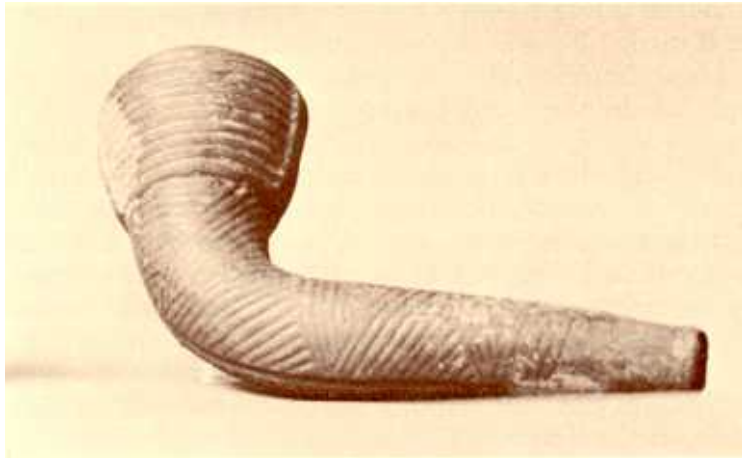
Other Woodland Indians made even fancier patterns on their pots by patting the wet clay with paddles wrapped with cord. This produced a sort of beaded effect. Still others showed their individualism by making different types of collars or rims on the vessels, and even working contrasting designs on them. Some of these pots are flared outward at the lip, and some turn in.

There are also variations in the "temper," or fusing material mixed with the clay from which they were made. As bricks are stronger when made with straw, so pots are tougher when grit, that is crushed stone, or shell is added to the softer clay. It is possible to identify the origins of some of these potsherds (fragments of a broken earthen pot), depending on whether shell or grit was used in this way. For instance, iron pyrites, little flecks of bright ore resembling gold, shows up in many clay artifacts recovered in southern Ontario and on the Niagara Frontier, but is not apparent in items found farther east.

At about the same time as the Woodland people learned to make

pottery, they changed their nomadic habits and began to settle down. Their first houses were round and not very large. They were probably covered with hides, bark, or even sods for warmth and protection, and archeologists have discovered that the fires for cooking were made right in the center of each one. Their homes must have been rather smoky and uncomfortable. They would never have been acceptable by modern health standards, for the ashes and garbage were usually disposed of by being buried inside of their houses.

These were still quite primitive people, but they had begun to enjoy community life. Perhaps at first, members of a family would make their homes near one another, and then larger groups were formed. We do not know anything about their religion except that they made provision, by ceremonial burials, for a life in the hereafter. Red ochre was sometimes used to cover the bodies, and also, artifacts were left



*Late Woodland Clay Pipe.*

with the dead. Mounds were built for the dead, and cremations were made. Many of the finest artifacts of this period are found in these burial sites.

With their newly-discovered skill at making pottery, the Early Woodland people were not content until they had developed it into a high art. Pots were gradually made larger and more elaborate. They did not confine themselves to kitchen or tableware, but even experimented with pipe-making. Though we cannot tell which culture first discovered the art of smoking, the Laurentians may have been smokers. Some stone pipes were still used by the Woodland Indians, as they were more durable than clay ones, and most likely, men were as reluctant then, as



now, to part with their favorites. However, like pots, clay pipes were more easily fashioned than stone ones, and some of the Early Woodland models are even strangely and wonderfully made.

Along with the Western New York Woodland people there is also some evidence of another or "intrusive" society of mound building people, sometimes known as the Hopewellian culture. They presumably came here from the south and west, as they are known to have inhabited most of the Ohio River valley at this time. They were members of the Early Woodland culture, but they brought many artifacts made of materials peculiar to their earlier home. We are not surprised to discover objects made of white or parti-colored flint, or chert, when excavating mound sites in Western New York. These may have come from Flint Ridge, Ohio, which is still a major source of this kind of stone, which is sometimes referred to as chalcedony. The pipes made by these Hopewellian people, too, were different — often being fashioned of a soft stone called steatite.

#### *Middle Woodland (Point Peninsula)*

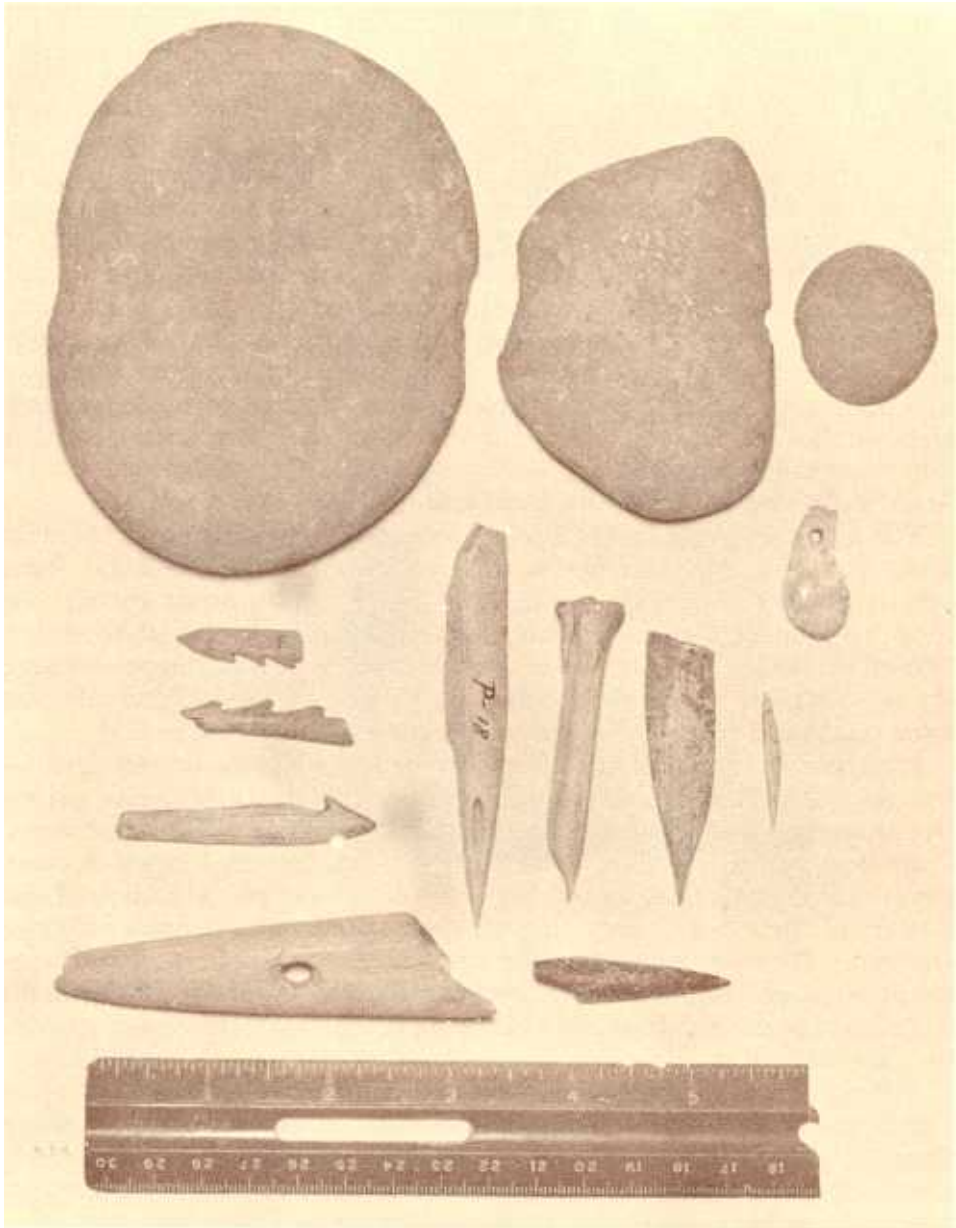
The next step in the cultural sequence of our area is called the Middle Woodland. Once people began to live in communities and eat from pottery, society developed and cultural variations began to appear. In New York State the outstanding inhabitants of this period were the "Point Peninsula" people. They are so called by archeologists because the most typical site of their culture is located at Point Peninsula. In some places the Hopewellians carried over into this same period.

It should be noted that, of the two major cultures in our area at this time, the Point Peninsula people were perhaps a bit more primitive than the visitors from Ohio, but they certainly outnumbered them.

By now, all the Middle Woodland Indians had developed a more complex civilization than their ancestors had enjoyed. We know, from a study of their burial sites, that they practiced some definite religious customs. These, particularly in respect to the mound-building Hopewellians, were very elaborate. Nothing was overlooked which might contribute to the comfort and well-being of the deceased on his journey into the hereafter.

It is thought that the mounds themselves probably had some religious significance. It should be remembered that all such earthworks in our area are merely outlying examples of this very complex culture, which was centered in Ohio, where effigy mounds and other large earth structures are common.

Archeologists distinguish between the various Woodland cultures by studying the differences apparent in the fragments of their pottery types, which are many and varied. At the Lewiston Portage site, for instance,



*Middle Woodland Artifacts (L. to R. 2 net sinkers and line sinker, 4 harpoons, 3 awls, 1 pin — ornamental elk tooth, bone arrowhead) excavated by Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society, at Portage Site, Lewiston, 1959.*

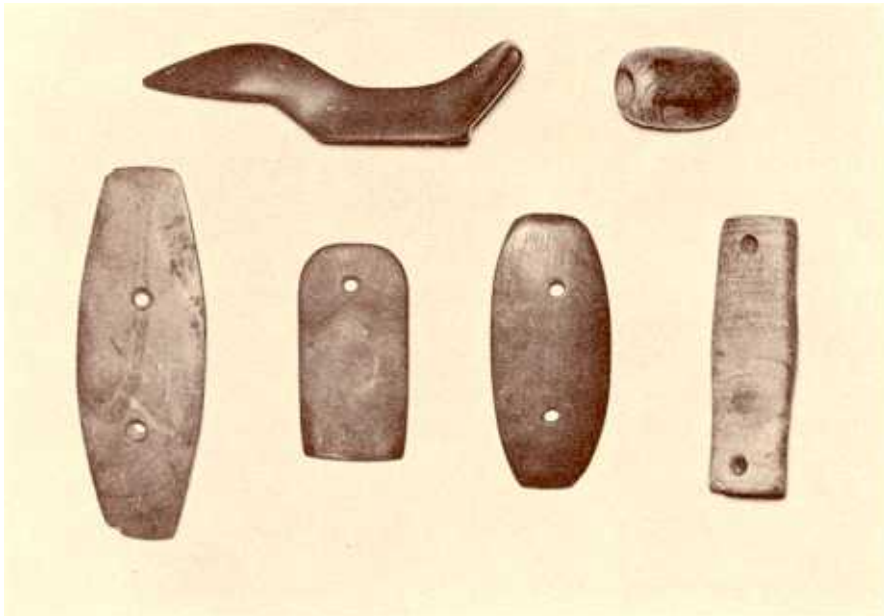


35 decorative types of Middle Woodland pot- and rim-sherds have been recovered. This offers an almost complete sequence of the types common to this period in Western New York as a whole.

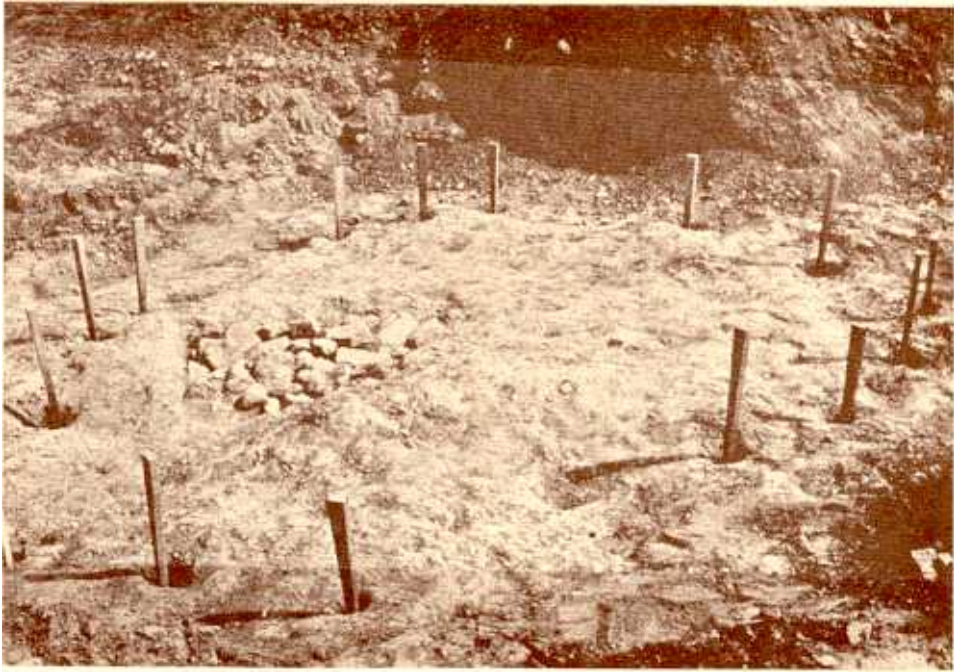
These sometimes beautiful and very complicated designs were probably evolved by Indian women, who were the master potters of their day. Anyone who has ever tried to work wet clay can but wonder at the clean lines and mathematical precision in the decoration of these artistic objects, and admire the perfect balance achieved between applied design and the shapes of the pots themselves.

Civilization during this period was evidently advancing rapidly. Not only do we find evidences of religious and artistic effort, but these people had leisure to develop an interest in their personal appearance. Bone combs, shell and shark-tooth ornaments, and ear-plugs show that they were interested in how they looked. The quantity and quality of their pipes also show a time of peaceful and leisurely growth.

The Woodland people used side-notched and triangular arrowheads, some of which were complete triangles. These were thinner and more carefully worked than earlier types. An exception would be the early fluted points, which were designed for use against larger wild life than the Woodland Indians had to hunt, and which represent the finest examples of the flint worker's art.



*Middle Woodland Artifacts of polished stone.  
Birdstone, stone tube, 3 gorgets, early type of birdstone.*



*Outline of lodge floor on Sackett site, Canandaigua, N. Y. Stakes mark postmolds. Gap for doorway is at lower center. Fire-broken stones and heap of ashes indicate near-center hearth.*

*Reproduced by courtesy of the Rochester Museum of Arts and Sciences.*

### **Late Woodland Culture (Owasco)**

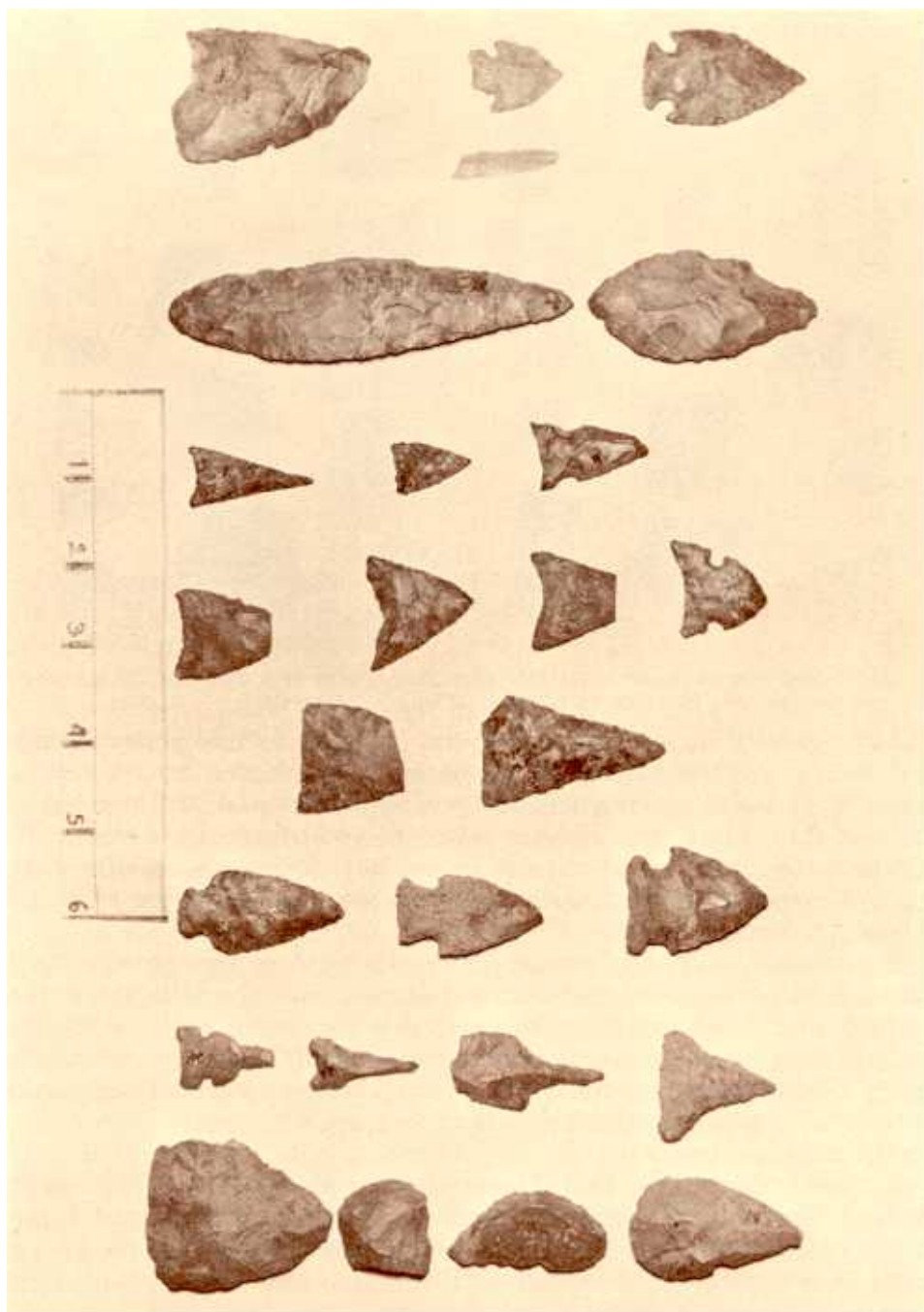
The mound-building Hopewellian people, on their home grounds in Ohio, were probably the most advanced culture of the woodland period, but here in Western New York, the Late Woodland Owasco Indians seem to have created the most complicated art forms in pottery.

During the Owasco period pots show a complete change from the earlier forms. They have gently-rounded bases instead of pointed ones. They display a great variety of decoration, very little of which makes use of Middle Woodland designs. Collars on these pots are quite complicated. Some were built up and edged with miniature battlements — almost like a castle — and many of the rims were decorated both inside and out.

Pipes, too, were still in the process of getting finer and fancier. They were being made larger, and in addition to imaginative abstract designs, many were made in the actual forms of animals or human faces. Arrowheads, however, were being created smaller with broader bases, and had scarcely any resemblance to previous types.

The religion of the Owasco people seems to have been fairly highly developed and was complicated. It is known that animals probably had





"dig" years of flint

found Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society



*Late Woodland Artifacts found at Oakfield, New York, said to be a transition site into Early Iroquois development, from the collection of Dr. L. L. Pechuman.*

considerable significance in this respect. One ceremonial pottery dump has been discovered which contained only bear bones, mixed with a quantity of different fragments of pottery and covered with a heavy layer of ash. Most probably, according to archeological evidence, this ceremony included a putting out of old hearthfires and starting new ones. Complicated rituals such as this indicate the existence of social classes, including a priesthood.

Sometime during the Owasco period, houses began to change from round huts to oval structures and became larger. The villagers began to protect themselves with stockades. This palisading indicates a substantial increase in the population and subsequent disagreements which made protection necessary. Neighbors had leisure time to observe and desire the possessions of others. Wars became frequent.

### **Prehistoric Iroquois**

Evidence shows that the Owasco culture existed throughout most of New York with its heaviest concentration in the central part. There is also considerable reason to believe that these people were the ancestors of our present-day Iroquois.

In the Western New York area there are sites which show a definite transition — changeover — period from Owasco to Iroquois. Both late Owasco and early Iroquois pottery types occur on them, and arrow-



heads vary from broad to narrow triangles. The style of houses changed from oval to long with square instead of round ends. Pipes found on these sites are still in process of evolution, becoming longer and more beautiful. Replicas of human figures, or effigies, begin to be common. Some pipes have "Maskets," small, stone representations of faces, carved on them which probably had religious significance. These may even have been the forerunners of the Iroquois False Faces.

It is estimated that this transition began to take place between 1100 and 1200 A.D. By the time the earliest white visitors appeared, at the beginning of the 17th century, Iroquois civilization was at its peak.

### **Weapons**

The lives led by these primitive peoples were reflected in their weapons as well as in their pipes and pottery. Many flint arrowheads and spear points call attention to their presence in our part of the world.

When existence depended on nomadic wanderings in an endless search for food, and danger stalked the earth in the form of out-size carnivores, or flesh-eating animals, man depended on his large, fluted flint spearheads for hunting and defense. The varied types of flint used to make these articles show the wide territory covered by the earliest hunters in their travels. Some points that had been found were made of materials ranging from Pennsylvania jasper to white Flint Ridge, Ohio, chalcidony, and include the gray Onondaga chert, found locally.

After the glacial period, the larger animals became extinct. People, also, were probably hard pressed to survive in the wake of the ice sheets. Anything edible was no doubt most welcome, from grubs to grasshoppers. However, the chief sources of pot roast in those days were the deer, bison, caribou, and other grazing and browsing animals. Projectiles needed to bring down this lighter and faster type of game were not as elaborate nor as large as the earlier fluted points. It is probable that crude bows and arrows were invented on this side of the Atlantic ocean about this time, although the ancient "atlatl," or throwing-stick, and the spear it projected, was still very much in use.

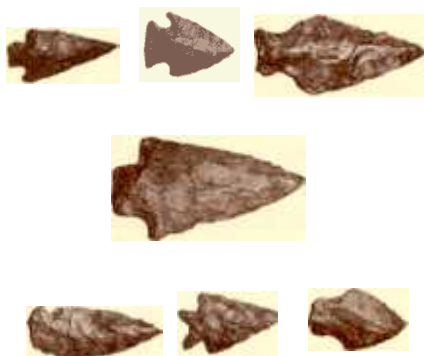
Later on, during the Hopewellian and its contemporary Early and Middle Woodland cultural periods, people led more peaceful, prosperous, and sedentary lives. A great deal of trade and travel were carried on, probably for many centuries. During this time, all types of decorative arts flourished, and the making of heavy stone spear and arrow points went into decline. This is proved by the comparatively small number of any sort of projectile point found on sites of this type.

However, at a still later date, when population increased and various cultures began to vie with one another for control of what is now

Western New York, points again became important. Ammunition was needed for the wars of survival. Once more their numbers increased in proportion to other artifacts, and refinements in technical design appeared.

The Owasco and other early Iroquoian arrowheads were smaller and more delicate and, if possible, more deadly than earlier models. They were meant to kill, and they were projected by a greatly improved type of bow.

It is interesting to note, in any study of flint points recovered in Western New York, that the majority of them were made locally of the familiar gray, Onondaga chert. Two of the chief quarries for this material were located in Ft. Erie, Ont. and at Divers Lake, near Indian Falls, N. Y. Nothing is left of the former site, but at Divers Lake the ancient steps, or platforms, used by primitive Indians to reach desirable veins of the chert are still in evidence.



*Types of spearheads and arrowheads found at Divers Lake Flint Quarry from the collection of Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society 1961 Research project.*

This place, in fact, is of great interest to anyone who makes a study of local Indians. It is the last existing remnant of ancient Lake Tonawanda, and is dated by geologists as being approximately 12,000 years old. Located in a fold at the base on the Onondaga Escarpment, it is so well-hidden that many people are not aware of its existence. In fact, "Hidden Lake" is one of its many names. It now covers about 1½ acres of ground, and is spring-fed. It is very deep, and inhabited by large snapping turtles. The water is steel-blue, cold, and very clear. The flint ledges overhang the lake to the south and east; on the other side, level ground extends toward distant Lake Ontario. As was usual in the case of



*Working ledges at Flint Quarry,  
Divers Lake, New York.*

flint quarries, there are no village sites in the immediate vicinity of Divers Lake, and according to legend, a sort of universal peace was always maintained at such places.

The ledge has obviously been worked for a period of many years. Detritus, or waste material, has accumulated over half-way up the face of the main section, and there is evidence of ancient flint workshops all around the shore of the lake itself.

Over the centuries, this place was very important to the Indians. They have many legends concerning it. The Indian name for the lake was "Spirit Lake" and they observed certain religious ceremonies there up until historic times. It was thought that supernatural beings inhabited the deep, cold water, and these ceremonies were designed to keep them friendly.



Modern Iroquois still maintain a wholesome respect for the entire area. Even white men, upon visiting it, are conscious of the air of mystery and great age which surrounds this spot. It is comparatively unchanged since the first hunters quarried there for their ammunition untold centuries ago.

Varied cultures have left their mark on our part of the world, from the Folsom-type mammoth hunters to the highly artistic Owasco pipe makers, up to and including the prehistoric Iroquois. It is interesting to note that no real evidence has so far been discovered to refute the modern Iroquois' belief that they developed without benefit of outside influences.

No one knows the ultimate source of the American Indians. They may have come from Asia by way of the Bering Straits in ages past or they may be native to this continent, like the horse and the camel. Many different theories have been suggested, and thousands of words have been written about where the American Indian came from. The strongest evidence points to the Bering Straits theory. Need for further research is indicated, especially in the Niagara Frontier section. No time should be lost, as projects for developing industrial and residential areas are rapidly destroying sites and wiping out valuable evidence of earlier cultures.

Meanwhile, one thing is certain — for all practical intents and purposes — these people were, and are, truly Native Americans.

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Editor: Thelma M. Moore.



# SOME ARCHEOLOGICAL SITES OF NEW YORK STATE

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SCALE IN MILES

