

The Area Before Limerick Township Existed – from Native Peoples to William Penn Pre-history to Penn’s arrival on 27 October 1682

When the first European explorers happened upon the Delaware Bay in the late 1500’s and first decade of the 1600’s, there were already thousands of people living in the greater Delaware Valley, including the area that will eventually become Limerick Township. Limerick will celebrate the 300th anniversary of incorporation as a township in 2026, however before 1726, there were people living in and travelling through this area. The land where we now live was inhabited by the Lenni Lenape, an indigenous people who existed for centuries before anyone from Europe ever set foot on these lands.

Traditions of the Lenape Nation say that their ancestors lived on the land stretching from what is now New York, through all of New Jersey and Eastern Pennsylvania, down into Delaware along the shores of



Map # 1

Delaware Bay. The Lenape people were farmers and hunters and lived with their immediate family and friends in a small clan, in villages spread throughout the Delaware Valley. There is some debate among scholars about the Lenni Lenape’s subsistence pre-European contact, whether they did actually farm or were strictly hunter/gatherers, and what their communities were like. However, it’s generally believed that they didn’t establish large, centralized towns since there’s no archaeological evidence to support that, and those that have been discovered through archeological research show that in the 1600’s settlements were small and were established close to the Schuylkill and Delaware Rivers, and their tributaries. The same evidence has established that some of these towns were in existence six thousand years ago. Unlike many other Eastern indigenous groups, they did not build palisades or fenced

settlements and their villages consisted of up to a dozen or so wigwam type houses. Summer and fall would be spent near the water fishing, gathering shellfish and farming, while in the winter, the Lenape would move further inland for shelter from the damp cold near the coast in semi-permanent villages, while hunting and trapping around the headwaters of streams and creeks that flowed eventually into the Delaware River.

The Lenape territory in what became Pennsylvania, including present-day Limerick Township, stretched westward to what is now Lancaster County. The land along both banks of the Susquehanna River was the home of the Susquehannock or Minquas peoples. The Susquehannock language was aligned with that of the Iroquois north of them, rather than to the Lenape dialects of the groups living to their East. In this area the Lenape roamed throughout their territory hunting, fishing and farming. As farmers, they grew corn, beans and squash during the summer months nearer to the Delaware River. However, they still did not establish long-term settlements due to their heavy tillage of the land, the soils they farmed gradually lost their productivity. As a result, Lenape frequently relocated.¹ Within ten to twenty years of farming surrounding areas, the ground would become less fertile to the point that the village would have to relocate and begin farming again. And during the winters they would move inland, hunting and trapping along the rivers and streams of the Delaware Valley. They lived in groups of thirty to fifty

The Dutch established the New Netherlands colony in 1614 through the Dutch West India Company, and built three settlements, two on what they called the North River in New York and Connecticut, and one on Burlington Island, below present-day Trenton, NJ, on the South River, or what we know as the



Map # 3

Delaware. The Swedes came a little later, but in a larger way, and established several settlements from Swaanendael near Cape Henlopen in 1631, Fort Christina in present-day Wilmington, Delaware, in what is now Upland, Pennsylvania and on Tinicum Island in what is now Philadelphia. These were fur trading outposts along the west bank of the Delaware River with the native groups actively hunting and trapping along the banks of the Delaware and Schuylkill Rivers, and their tributaries, for pelts to exchange for European goods. One result of this new economic boom was an armed conflict between the Susquehannock and Lenape in the 1630's, since the Lenape stood in between the Susquehannock lands and the Swedish and Dutch Delaware River trading outposts. This conflict drove the Lenape out of the west bank of the Delaware into what is now New Jersey and resulted in a significant decline in the Lenape population in the Delaware Valley. By 1638 the two groups were able to reach an agreement giving access to the European

outpost on the Delaware to both, and the Lenape were back onto the west bank of the bay and river.

The Dutch were well-established in New Amsterdam, present day New York City, and they were well-aware of the growing presence and increasing commerce by the Swedes to their south. In 1655, Peter Stuyvesant led an army of 340 soldiers and seven warships to the Delaware River from New Amsterdam. New Sweden was captured and became New Amstel, being incorporated into New Netherland colony. It's interesting to note however, that Stuyvesant allowed the Swedes to stay in their settlements, under Dutch control and this likely encouraged the continued migration of Swedes, Finns and the Dutch to colonize the Delaware Valley. Of course, while all this was going on, there continued to be wars and conflict back on the European continent, and the mother countries of these settlers were involved in a series of wars amongst the European states.

A series of these conflicts were the Anglo-Dutch wars between England and The Netherlands, starting with the First War from 1652–1654, followed by the Second Anglo-Dutch war from 1665–1667. It was during the second war that the Dutch were forced to surrender Fort Amsterdam in present-day Manhattan to the English, only to recapture it in 1673. However, at the end of the third Anglo-Dutch war, 1672–1674, the English regained control of New Amsterdam permanently through the Treaty of Westminster that ended the war in 1674. At this time, England had solidified its control of the North American colonies from New England in the North through the mid-Atlantic region down to present-day Georgia in the South.

The area that was to become Limerick Township in this period was still unsettled by Europeans, being the home of the local Lenape groups as it had been for thousands of years previous, and any European trappers and traders working in the area. This would remain this way until after Penn arrived in October 1682. In 1671, the European population was estimated to be 858 people, stretching mainly on the west bank of the Delaware from the present-day Lewes, Delaware area to the south up to areas just north of the Swedish settlement at Upland/Tinicum (township). At this time, the population was mostly Swedes, Finnish and Dutch totaling one hundred and forty-two households out of one hundred and eighty-three, and the English with twenty-six households, Germans, nine households and then a handful of others.⁵ Families would establish homesteads near the safety of the permanent settlements close to the

Delaware, since threats to Swedish and Finnish settlers would come from both Dutch and English, and occasionally indigenous groups attempting to maintain control over the land. Prior to Penn's arrival, English settlers experienced the same, mainly from the Dutch during the Anglo-Dutch wars, and the Lenape, who were allied with the Swedes and Finns up until Penn's arrival.

The full-scale colonization of the Delaware Valley ultimately came from the English; and beyond the handful of English settlers already here, began with settlements on the east bank of the river, in present-day New Jersey, in 1675 in Salem, and 1677 in Burlington. Prior to that, small groups of Quakers attempted to establish settlements north of Upland on the Delaware River's west bank near the Schuylkill River but were unsuccessful. But during the second half of that decade, approximately eight thousand settlers arrived on the west bank of the Delaware River, predominantly English Quakers, increasing the size of the European population by tenfold.

The next step in organizing the New York colony was the extension of the Duke's laws into the areas previously known as New Sweden in 1676, and the creation of separate county borders within the area including the three lower counties of Pennsylvania that would eventually become Delaware. In Pennsylvania in 1681, Chester County was formed out of the Upland settlements, and Philadelphia County further north. Although settlements remained close to the Delaware River and didn't yet move up toward the piedmont areas including what would become Limerick Township after William Penn's arrival.

During this time in England, Admiral Sir William Penn Sr. is owed 16,000 pounds for repayment of a loan made to King Charles II of England. The admiral's son, also William Penn, requested that the loan be repaid with land in America. Charles agrees and grants Pennsylvania to Penn on March 4th, 1681. It's not surprising that Penn requested the land, since the 1670's the Quakers were working to establish their presence in the new colonies, and the Delaware Valley was out of reach from the Puritans settlers in the north and the Catholic settlers in the south. In 1682, Penn departed England and sailed to the new Province of Pennsylvania. He lands at New Castle on October 27, 1682, and changes the name of Upland to Chester. He then proceeds to where he will establish the City of Philadelphia. Estimates put the population of this area during the 1680's at around three thousand and growing, although no permanent homesteads that we know of were established in the Limerick area at that time.

It's estimated that in 1600 there were upwards of 20,000 Lenni Lenape living in the Delaware Valley. However, the 17th century would prove to be the beginning of the end of indigenous North Americans living in the Delaware Valley. The 17th century brought several wars amongst the neighboring groups, and combined with epidemics brought by European settlers, the Lenni Lenape population was reduced to about 4,000 people when Penn arrived in 1682.

Gregory Pusak, Jan. 2024

Special thank you to The State Museum of Pennsylvania, Section of Archaeology for their assistance with the research for this article.

Notes

Map # 1: Map of Lenape languages and tribes. Map terms translated from German original into English. 22 July 2013, Author: Nikater, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unami_language

Note # 1: “The Original People and Their Land: The Lenape, Pre-History to the 18th Century”, Walter Licht, Mark Frazier Lloyd, J.M. Duffin, & Mary D. McConaghy and Daniel Richter, Native Americans’ Pennsylvania (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania Historical Association, 2005), 28.

Note # 2: “Phase I/II Archeological Investigations Heritage Golf Club Property – Limerick and Lower Pottsgrove Townships, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania” – Unpublished report, Michael L. Young & Donna Andrews, February 2003.

Note # 3: Phase I/II Archeological Investigations Heritage Golf Club Property, Unpublished Report, Young & Andrews.

Note # 4: At the Crossroads: Indians and Empires on a Mid-Atlantic Frontier, 1700-1763 by Jane T. Merritt., 2003, University of North Carolina Press)

Map # 2: Paul Wallace’s map of Native American paths in Pennsylvania, based on his work in 1952. Wallace, Paul A. W. “Historic Indian Paths of Pennsylvania.” The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, vol. 76, no. 4, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1952, pp. 411–39

Map # 3: Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dutch_Americans Dedden, 11:31, 30 April 2006

Note # 5: Lenape Country: Delaware Valley Society Before William Penn, Jean R. Soderlund, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013)