PREHISTORIC OVERVIEW

REGIONAL PREHISTORY

The prehistory of northern Delaware has been divided into four periods:[1] 1) The Paleo-Indian Period (ca. 12,000 B.C. - 6500 B.C.), The Archaic Period (ca. 6500 B.C. - 3000 B.C.), The Woodland I Period (ca. 3000 B.C. - A.D. 1000), and The Woodland II Period (A.D. 1000 - A.D. 1650). The time frame between A.D. 1650 to approximately A.D. 1750 marks the final years of Native American occupation of the area during early European colonization of the state.

THE PALEO-INDIAN PERIOD (ca. 12,000 B.C. - 6500 B.C.)

The Paleo-Indian Period marks the initial occupation of the state by small groups of nomadic Native American hunters and gatherers. Their presence coincided with the amelioration of late Pleistocene glacial environmental conditions throughout eastern North America and the beginning of early Holocene conditions; that is, cold temperatures and alternating periods of wet and dry conditions. The economic system of the Paleo-Indians was largely based upon the hunting of large, cold-adapted animals including both migratory and non-migratory species. Although direct evidence of Paleo-Indian use of non-mammalian food resources is lacking in the archaeological record of Delaware, paleoenvironmental data indicate that their exploitative territories include habitats in which plant foods and other edible resources were

available. Palynological and geomorphological data suggest that the vegetation in Delaware during the Paleo-Indian Period consisted of a mosaic comprised of deciduous and boreal forests and grasslands that would have provided graze, browze and shelter for a variety of small and large mammals. In conjunction with various surface water settings, these habitats would have been focal points for Paleo-Indian foragers.

The stone tool kit of the Paleo-Indians was characterized by a limited number of bifacial and unifacial implements that suggest a heavy emphasis on the procurement and processing of animal resources. These include projectile points, hafted and unhafted knives, scrapers, and less formalized flake tools. Of these, the fluted point is the diagnostic hallmark of the Paleo-Indian Period. Other point styles indicative of the later part of this cultural period include both unfluted triangular forms and notches and stemmed points. The distributions and environmental settings of Paleo-Indian sites and isolated point finds, suggest that these people maintained a lifestyle that consisted of relatively frequent movements of single or multiple family groups to and from resource-rich habitats. It appears that this basic subsistence/settlement strategy persisted with only minor variations for approximately 5,500 years.

Relatively large numbers of Paleo-Indian hunting and processing sites have been located in northern Delaware near Hockessin and the Wilmington Medical Center[2]. Paleo-Indian sites possibly related to the procurement of lithic raw material for

the production of stone artifacts may be associated with jasper outcrops in the nearby Iron Hill formation.

THE ARCHAIC PERIOD (ca. 6500 B.C. - 3000 B.C.)

The Archaic Period is characterized by a series of changes in prehistoric Native American technologies, subsistence, and settlement[3]. These shifts are interpreted as gradual human responses to the emergence of full Holocene environmental conditions. The landscape was dominated by mesic oak and hemlock forests. Reductions in open grasslands brought about by warm and wet conditions resulted in the extinction of certain cold-adapted grazing animal species (i.e., caribou and bison) that were the favored prey of Paleo-Indian groups. Alternatively, these vegetational changes were favorable to browsing animals such as deer who flourish in such settings.

An increase in sea level during the beginning of the Holocene in northern Delaware effected the rise of local water tables thus creating several large swamps such as Churchmans Marsh. At this time, Native American populations in these locales shifted from the more hunting-oriented foraging pattern of the Paleo-Indian Period to one in which plant foods became a more important part of their economies. Large swamp habitats such as Churchmans Marsh served as locations for the first large residential base camps (e.g., the Clyde Farm Site) possibly occupied by several different family groups. Associated with these larger group camps are more numerous and smaller procurement sites situated in various settings in northern Delaware that would have

been favorable for hunting and gathering activities during different seasons of the year.

Archaic tool kits differ from those of the Paleo-Indian Period in that they include a number of artifacts indicative of plant food processing (i.e., grinding implements and stone mortars). Although Archaic groups in northern Delaware appear to have been less mobile than the preceeding Paleo-Indian populations, they were more mobile than later Woodland Period groups. The sizes of archaic exploitative groups seem to have fluctuated seasonally and with the availability of food resources.

THE WOODLAND I PERIOD (ca. 3000 B.C. - A.D. 1000).

Based upon palynological and geomorphological data from the Middle Atlantic region, the Woodland I Period has been described as a time of "dramatic change in local climates and environments" in which "a pronounced warm and dry period" (i.e., a mid-postglacial xerothermic) began at approximately 3000 B.C. and persisted to approximately 1000 B.C.[4] During that period, the mesic oak hemlock forests of the Archaic were replaced by more drought-resistant (xeric) oak and hickory forests and more abundant grasslands. Although these conditions effected the drying up of some interior streams, continued sea level rise resulted in the creation of highly productive and large brackish water marshes in areas of the Delaware River and the shores of the Delaware Bay. In essence, the xerothermic is hypothesized to have effected shifts in the distributions of plant and animal species and the establishment of new resource-rich settings in some areas of the state.

In turn, these proposed shifts in climate, environmental conditions, and resource distributions are believed to have resulted in radical changes among resident prehistoric Native American populations in the study area including a trend toward greater sedentism and more complex systems of social organization and interactions. For example, major river floodplains and estuarine swamp habitats became the primary resource zones and the locations of large residential base camps occupied on a multi-seasonal or year-round basis. Such sites are particularly prominent in several sectors of northern New Castle County relatively close to the Hare Corner project area. These include the Delaware Park Site, the Clyde Farm Site, the Crane Hook Site, and the Maamans Creek Site. Artifact assemblages and features from these sites suggest intensive utilization by prehistoric populations and a trend toward more sedentary lifeways.

The tool kits of Woodland I groups are generally similar to those of the Archaic with the addition of such items as heavy woodworking tools, soapstone and ceramic containers, broad-bladed points, and netsinkers. The increased abundance of plant processing tools over the preceding period suggests more intensive utilization of plant foods which by the end of Woodland I times, may have approached the level of productive intensification. The presence of non-local lithic materials such as argillite, ryolite, and soapstone are interpreted as indicators of incipient regional trade and exchange networks. The presence of soapstone and ceramic vessels are viewed as items that facilitated more

efficient food preparation and storage of surplus foods. Pit features employed for food storage and the remains of prehistoric dwellings have been documented at the Delaware Park and Clyde Farm Sites.

The inferred reduction in overall group mobility, the presence of certain artifact types indicative of intensified resource processing, the possible generation of food surpluses, the presence of artifact caches and the possible existence of increased inter-regional exchange networks as inferred from the presence of non-local lithic raw materials are interpreted as indicators of the initial development of ranked social organization as opposed to earlier egalitarian systems.

THE WOODLAND II PERIOD (A.D. 1000 - A.D. 1650)

The Woodland II Period within the Middle Atlantic region is marked by the introduction of hoe-type horticulture; particularly in areas south of the Potomac River, portions of Pennsylvania, New Jersey's Upper Delaware Valley, and New York State. However, there is no archaeological evidence in northern Delaware to support a shift in subsistence from predominately wild plant foods to cultigens. A similar pattern has also been recognized in the adjacent New Jersey Coastal Plain. Based on archaeological evidence from large residential base camps in northern Delaware, no significant changes in social organization nor abandonment of intensive plant utilization and hunting are evident.

THE CONTACT PERIOD (ca. A.D. 1650 - A.D. 1750)

This approximately one hundred year period marked both the initial contact between the Native American inhabitants of Delaware and European colonists and the total collapse of traditional native lifeways and socio-political organization. The picture is further complicated by the paucity of sites dating to this important period within the state. However, historical sources indicate that resident Native American populations had minimal interaction with European settlers and were subjugated by the Susquehannock Indians of southern Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. A small number of descendants of the original Native American inhabitants of Delaware still reside in the state today.