

The Schuylkill River, Shad, and the Native American Connection

The Lenni Lenape Native Americans lived near the Schuylkill River hunting and fishing to sustain their population. At the time of the meeting of William Penn with their people in the late 1600s, they carved canoes from felled tree trunks using fire as a method to soften the interior wood to prepare it for scraping. From these canoes the Lenni Lenape would row out to position their nets that were woven from native grapevines and strung with stone sinkers designed to catch schools of Shad.

Women remained by the riverside, dug clay from the river banks, pressed it into slabs and molded it into pots and bowls used for cooking over fire pits. Abundant runs of Shad in the Spring that were caught in their nets were then smoked in primitive mounds or covered in salt when it was available to preserve the fish for consumption during the leaner months.

The Archaic Native American ancestors of the Lenni Lenape became adept spear fisherman and improved their tools used for fishing when game became scarce. Fish hooks carved from bone along with brush nets and weirs trapped migrating Shad while small hunting parties traveled down river in short trips in search of small game. Women remained bustling about their wigwam huts tending to young children and preparing the fish along with bean, corn, and squash.

About 3,000 years ago migrating bands of Native American hunters decided to create a more permanent home near the Schuylkill River where the Shad were an abundant food source. These people soon evolved into the Lenni Lenape expanding the use of axes and hoes as they began to develop methods of tilling the land and incorporating agriculture into their lifestyle. As their fishing skills improved they began an active practice of trade using the Algonquin language to communicate with other tribes either as Unami or Minsi language speakers.

Some speculate that it was the Schuylkill River Shad that drew the migrating Native Americans to the Phoenixville area, and the Shad as a regular food source that allowed the Lenni Lenape to become a culture that remained living by the river where they learned how the native soil produced certain plants, which helped them develop into a successful agricultural and trading society.