They called themselves *Lenni-Lenape*, meaning, the “original people,” the “first people,” the “true people.” *Len* meant “original” in both words and is redundant. When William Penn arrived in 1682, there were some eight-thousand aboriginal people in the land of the Lenni-Lenape. Their homeland stretched from the Delaware River Valley to the lower Hudson River Valley (including Manhattan), covered all of New Jersey and Delaware, eastern Pennsylvania and southern New York.

The Lenape divided themselves into four group or bands – the Munsee, the Unalimi, the Unsami, and the Unalachtigo. The Munsee (Munsi) were the “People of Stone Country” (north of the Delaware Water Gap). The Unalimi were the “People Up the River” (Trenton area). The Unami were the “People Down the River” (Philadelphia region). And the Unalachtigo were the “People Near the Ocean” (southern New Jersey).

The Lenape spoke a dialect of the Algonquian language, and their speech was mutually intelligible throughout their region. The Lenape were said to be unaggressive and passive, and they lived in peace with each other and neighboring tribes. But they were not a united nation with a king who ruled them. They had no urban centers. Lenape communities in the Delaware River valley were simply bands of fewer than 50 related individuals, little more than extended families.

The Lenape were a stone age, hunter-gatherer nomadic people with a quite traditional culture. They produced no metals; and did not possess the wheel or draft animals, or writing or paper or cloth. Their tools were of horn, bone, stone, wood. They had no domesticated animals except dogs. They had recently begun to make pottery. They were prehistoric; their past was not recorded. No one in their society was completely sedentary. Villages were occupied only seasonally – to grow crops. Villages were moved and abandoned frequently, perhaps every dozen years, when the soil for crops became infertile. It is estimated that a hunting territory for a village of 200 inhabitants occupied an area of 272 square miles or 175,000 acres.

We are calling our Indians the Lenni-Lenape because that is what they called themselves. But early in the 17th century, other human beings began to move into the neighborhood. The Dutch, the Swedes and the English began exploring this land of the Lenapes. These strangers called the large bay at the mouth of its great river, the “Delaware.” How did that happen?

In 1610, a no-nonsense governor, Sir Thomas West, the 3rd Baron De La Warr arrived at Jamestown, Virginia, in four ships to rescue this English outpost on the eastern coast of North America and to prevent settlers from giving up and going home. The Baron De La Warr (1577-1618) was an aristocrat and army officer, who employed violent tactics against the Powhatan Indians. English troops raided Indian villages, burned houses and cornfields, and stole food. These actions proved effective against the Indians. Governor De La Warr’s naval commander was Samuel Argall (1572-1626). On a voyage of exploration, Argall named a great bay to the north after his sponsor, Baron De La Warr (pronounced then as we say “Delaware” today) Thus, the native people and the wide river are named after the bay for a minor English nobleman who never saw them!

What impression did these aboriginal Americans make on the first white people who saw them? When the famous soldier of fortune and a founder of the Jamestown colony Captain John Smith
explored the northern reaches of the Chesapeake Bay by boat in 1608, he encountered the Susquehannock Indians – the enemies of the Lenni-Lenape people. Smith was awe-struck by their size and strength. He described them as “giants” whose voices echoed when they spoke if coming from a cave. The Indians Smith met, he tells us, were strong, robust, and quick on their feet, capable of walking long distances and of carrying large burdens. The Indian social scientist C.A. Weslager computes their height as 5 ’7” to 5’10”. They “mostly walk with a lofty chin,” said William Penn).

Except during rain or cold, members of a Lenape family spent most of their time outdoors, using their wigwam for sleeping. The wigwam had no windows, and a simple doorway curtained with animal skins. In each one-room hut, which was constructed of branches, bark and hides, there was an open fire pit on the earthen floor. A hole in the roof vented smoke. Outside each dwelling, was a second fireplace where the family ate.

The Indian diet was simple, based on the “three sisters” -- corn, beans and squash. This diet included fish, flesh and fowl in season, and was varied with herbs, berries, grapes and plums. It was high in grains, fibers and protein, but lacked sugar and milk products. The family dined twice a day. An acre of land was needed to grow corn, beans and squash for each family on land wrested from dense forest. Many synergies operated. Corn stalks provided poles for beans to climb, and large squash leaves smothered weeds and kept the soil shady and moist. The Indians practiced shallow hoe agriculture by scratching up mounds of soil to plant seeds in, thus reducing soil disturbance and erosion. European farmers dug deeper with plows that broke up the sod in straight rows on land cleared of trees.

The Lenape looked for three conditions in choosing a village site: a supply of fresh water, well-drained and sunny land for planting crops, and an area facing the sun that would be warm in winter. Although the Wissahickon Creek offered fresh water, the deeply shaded ravine of the lower valley was probably never suitable for even a temporary encampment.

The duties of a Lenape woman were well understood. She was the farmer, planter, harvester, cook, deer hide tanner. She gathered firewood, carried water, wove baskets, and cared for the children. Lenape men felled trees, cleared the land for crops, set animal traps, built wigwams, and hunted for game and fish on long hunting trips. For the Lenape, tobacco, an indigenous plant, had an almost sacred character. Men smoked powdered tobacco leaves in clay or stone smoking pipes.

Lenape men were expected to be proud, courageous, resourceful, independent, defiant in the face of adversity — says Bernard Bailyn, scholar of early American history. But the Indian was expected to be devout in their reverence for the spiritual world and for their personal guardian spirits. In hunting, they were required to act with reckless courage when hunting. Danger was not to be feared, but sought. A man who lacked the stamina for month-long searches for animals to feed the family, would be shamed and humiliated. The Indian man did not so much fear death, but shameful death and defeat.

Pastorius says that the Lenape “cultivate among themselves the most scrupulous honesty, are unwavering in keeping promises, defraud and insult no one, and are very hospitable to strangers…”

In this aboriginal American culture, no one possessed or “owned” land. Land was held and used communally, ultimately by the tribe. Individuals possessed only things they used, such as farming tools, hunting equipment, cooking utensils. They had no private and absolute land rights in the land, only rights of use derived from the group. Rights were never absolute, but were shared altogether and were impermanent. Their chiefs did not have servants or seek accumulated wealth.
The Lenape society was primitive and their social and political economy was egalitarian and lacked central authority. The one constant in their world was the forest, which provided native people with materials for food, shelter, fuel and tools. It was, plainly, a traditional culture with little change sought or guessed at. But Pennsylvania entered an agricultural revolution about 1,000 CE. Corn and squash were domesticated in Mexico and spread north. The Lenape people and other Indians were flourishing due to these improvements in their diet. But on the threshold of the arrival of Europeans in the Delaware Valley, catastrophe swept over the Lenni-Lenape and all New World aboriginal people: Epidemics of European diseases. Smallpox was the most devastating. By the early 17th century, smallpox had already decimated the Lenape. According to Contosta and Franklin, there may have been 20,000 Lenape in 1600, but wars and epidemics reduced their numbers to around 4,000 by 1700.

New World people had lived in complete isolation from European diseases for thousands of years. Therefore, the Amerindians had developed no immunity to protect them from smallpox, cholera, typhoid, measles and influenza, and scarlet fever, diphtheria, chicken pox and whooping cough. The armies of the Spanish conquistadors brought highly contagious smallpox with them to Aztec Mexico in 1520, causing sudden death to millions of Indians. The same thing happened to the Inca Empire in Peru after 1532. Smallpox swept ahead of European armies and colonists. There was no warning, no way to avoid the fatal sickness. Indian villages became societies of widows, widowers and orphans. Medical science has only recently come to awareness of these deadly epidemics among New World inhabitants.

On the eve of the English settlements, Bernard Baylin tells us, the leaders of the Native American people were still confident, still hopeful for the future. Their question “was not how to destroy the invaders and wipe out the pathologies they brought with them, but how to use the strangers and their goods within the traditional culture, and how to absorb the apparent benefits of European civilization.” Quoted from “Metropolitan Paradise”.
TISHCOHAN and LAPOWINSA, two Lenape chiefs painted by Gustavus Hesselius in 1735. He was one of three brothers who came from Sweden to Pennsylvania. The portraits were commissioned by William Penn’s son John Penn. Hesselius was the first professionally trained portrait painter in the colonies.” Not only are these Lenape men portrayed in meticulous detail, but their facial expressions convey a sense of resigned defeat” (quoted from “Metropolitan Paradise”).

**Bibliography:**

In the next issue of our *Yesterday and Today* Column, we will consider *How the Lenni-Lenape met William Penn!*