# EARLY RESIDENTS OF WYOMING VALLEY

Who Were They and Where Did They Go?

WHEN?
Before 1600

WHERE? Forty Fort and surrounding area

EVENT
Early visitors and residents of Wyoming Valley

VOCABULARY
Archeologists
Palisades
sheathed

The first place the archaeologists turned their attention was a quiet rise of land near the Forty Fort airport, the sort of place that gave no hint of what lay beneath its soil. When John Orlandini and Francis Garrahan arrived there in the summer of 1986, they came with the urgency that always shadows an excavation destined to be buried under playing fields. Day after day they knelt in the earth, uncovering charcoal smudges that, once tested, whispered a date from a thousand years before—A.D. 980.

The story that emerged was fragmentary but unmistakably human. Freshwater mussel shells glittered in the sun like pale coins; bones told of hunting and river fishing. And mingled among them were kernels of ancient corn, survivors of fires long extinguished. Traces of a stockade appeared—only part of it, but enough to suggest a protective ring—along with the ghostly outlines of both round and oblong houses. Some showed signs of rebuilding, as though the people who lived here were beginning to settle, to anchor themselves to this place. Or perhaps they returned only in certain seasons, retreating here when the river rose or danger prowled the valley.

Across the river, the past surfaced again at what would later be called the Parker Site. In 1967, Robert and Alice Parker stumbled upon it—first the glitter of mussel shells, then shards of pottery, then the unmistakable points of ancient weapons. The Frances Dorrance Chapter soon uncovered the truth: the Parkers had found an enormous refuse heap that once accumulated beside a dirt causeway. That causeway had stretched across a ditch encircling a stockaded village of nearly 15,000 square feet—larger than half a football field.

The ditch dropped four feet down and widened to nearly fourteen. The soil dug from it had been heaped inward, forming the bed for a palisade set just inside the ditch. Five parallel rows of heavy posts, eight feet wide altogether, formed a stout barrier with a narrow gateway threading through it. Inside the enclosure, eight rounded depressions—each large enough to hold a small room—held layers of charred marsh grass, burned logs, cracked stones, blackened corn, and potsherds shattered by heat and time (Lottick 19).

Hoes, netsinkers, scrapers, hammerstones, pestles started to emerge from the ground under the careful brushing away of the dirt that once help them captive. Stones shaped by hands long vanished still bore their cutting edges. Netsinkers, smooth and notched, spoke of fishermen who cast their woven lines into the Susquehanna and nearby streams. Shad was plentiful in the river as was animal life in the valley and surrounding mountains. Bone and antler objects, delicate as needles or thick as awls, survived as well—hairpins, beads, fishhooks, ornaments, fragments of ladles. The earth surrendered the remains of ancient meals: butternuts and plums, hickory and persimmon, and always corn—bushels of it, charred to permanence.

Radiocarbon dates placed the bustling life of this village somewhere between A.D. 1470 and 1600. Whoever lived here lived deeply, confidently. This was no temporary camp; it was a home.

And it was not alone. As Lottick later wrote, three such fortified villages once stood across the Wyoming Valley (19). Ira F. Smith III described the people who built them: residents of year-round towns protected by timber and earth, linked by causeways, ordered by passageways of parallel posts. They lived in houses sheathed in bark, smaller cousins of the great Iroquoian longhouses. They rested in rounded sweat lodges—structures that, as Wallace observed, spoke to their remarkable cleanliness compared to Europeans of the same era. Against the stockade walls lay circular and oval semi-subterranean rooms, spaces for tasks or rituals now forgotten. Their lives were shaped by tools of bone, clay, stone, and wood—simple materials worked with remarkable skill.

ONLINE RESOURCES

Delaware Nation

Susquehannocks

PRINT RESOURCES


Dziak, Mark. *Digging Up Wyoming Valley: An Archaeological Search in Northeastern Pennsylvania*. Dallas PA: Misericordia University. 2014.

Lottick, Sally Teller. *Bridging Change A Wyoming Valley Sketchbook*. Wilkes-Barre, PA: Wyoming Historical and Geological Society. 1992.

Orlandini, John. *Ancient Native Americans of the Wyoming Valley*, Shavertown, PA: Orlandini. 2008.


And then, around 1575, the villages fell silent.

No one knows why. Perhaps sickness—smallpox, measles, influenza—swept through, as it had in so many river valleys. Or perhaps the soil, pressed too hard by years of cultivation, gave up its strength and forced the people to move elsewhere. Trade routes shifted; rumors of better alliances or richer hunting grounds may have beckoned. Whatever the reason, the people walked away, leaving only their tools, their hearths, and the faint impressions of their homes for future hands to rediscover.