John Smith's Susquehannocks: The Archaeological Context of a Native Culture

Saturday, October 27, 2018
The State Museum of Pennsylvania
300 North Street
Harrisburg, PA 17120-0024

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Society for Pennsylvania Archaeology
Pennsylvania Archaeological Council
Zimmerman Center for Heritage
Susquehannaheritage.org

Program Chair, James T. Herbstritt

John Smith's Susquehannocks: The Archaeological Context of a Native Culture

Please join us for this interesting examination of John Smith, Susquehannocks, as these knowledgeable experts explore the historic and archaeological record of the Susquehannocks Indians.

For more than 200 years, between 1550 and 1763, much of the Susquehanna River Valley was home to the Susquehannocks. Their society was matrilineal, tracing kinship through the female line. They were dependent on maize agriculture, along with other domesticated foods, and lived in some of the largest Indian towns in Pennsylvania, with one thousand or more people.

Their impact on the Colonial period was far-reaching, especially in the fur trade during the 1600s.

Capt. John Smith, founding father of the English colony at Jamestown, Virginia, was the first European to describe the Susquehannocks in detail. During his exploration of the Chesapeake Bay in 1608, he stopped at the mouth of the Susquehanna River, where he made contact with many Susquehannocks and stated that they "are the strangest people of all those countries, both in language and arms."

At the height of the fur trade during the mid-1600s, competition with other northern Iroquoian groups, namely the Seneca and Mohawks, led to upheaval and discord. By the late 1600s, conflict amongst these Iroquois groups as well as with Europeans, led to the Susquehannocks dispersal and eventual disappearance from the Susquehanna Valley in the late 1700s. The story of the rise and fall of the Susquehannocks was the fate of many Indian tribes in the eastern United States.

The program also includes a flip-knapping demonstration, instruction in recording archaeological sites and artifact identification. Admission to The State Museum of Pennsylvania is included with registration. We welcome archaeology and history enthusiasts to this informative program that will provide insights into this fascinating period in our nation's history.

Session Descriptions

Opening Remarks 9:00 a.m.–9:15 a.m.
Beth Hager, Director, The State Museum of Pennsylvania

Introduction and Logistics 9:15 a.m.–9:30 a.m.
Paul A. Reber, Ph.D., Director of Archaeological Services
Helverson Associates, Inc.

[Session 1] 9:30 a.m.–10:00 a.m.
Culture History of the Susquehannocks
Barry C. Kent, Ph.D., Pennsylvania State Archaeologist (retired)

This presentation traces the culture history of the Susquehannocks as seen through archaeology and historic documentation. It begins with a brief summary of their origins in the Susquehanna Valley. Changes in the culture history and patterns of behavior of the Susquehannocks are closely tied to their interaction with other native and European cultures. We will examine these influences and provide an overview of the impact on these relationships. The pattern of movement of Susquehannock settlements will be further examined as reflected in their changing way of life, leading up to the horrific events of 1763.

[Session 2] 10:00 a.m.–10:30 a.m.
Defining Proto Susquehannocks
Jasmine Gollogly, M.A., T.R.C. Environmental Corp.

While the Susquehannock Indians are historically known as the dominant tribe of the Susquehanna River region, the origins of the tribe are less certain. Sharing many traits with the Five Nations Iroquois, the Susquehannocks are believed to be Iroquoian migrants, moving rapidly south along the Susquehanna River during the seventeenth century either in flight from Iroquoian aggression or in search of economic opportunities. The Upper Susquehanna River Valley, an area straddling New York and Pennsylvania, has traditionally served as a convenient homeland for the nascent tribe, known as Proto-Susquehannocks. Unfortunately, the archaeology and research supporting this claim are undermined by technical and theoretical problems. Analysis of previous scholarship in the Upper Susquehanna River Valley will help to expose the problems inherent in Proto-Susquehannock research and provide recommendations for further research.

Break 10:30 a.m.–10:45 a.m. – coffee and snacks

[Session 3] 10:45 a.m.–11:15 a.m.
Ethnogenesis and the Beginnings of Susquehannock
James T. Herbstritt, The State Museum of Pennsylvania

Nearly 60 years have passed since John Witthoff published “Ancestry of the Susquehannocks” (Witthoff and Kinsey 1959) in which he stated that the Seneca and Cayuga Iroquoians were cognates to Susquehannock culture. Recent archaeological research suggests that modifications to this theory are required by linking other northern Iroquoians with groups who were not Seneca Iroquoians. This revised Iroquoian association points directly to the West Branch and North Branch traditions as the ancestors of Susquehannock culture (Herbstritt 2018). Witthoff’s term “Proto-Susquehannocks” originated in the Deep Valley/Glacial High Plateau sections of northcentral Pennsylvania and nowhere else. This presentation introduces the archaeo- logical contexts of the West and North Branch traditions with a discussion of Proto-Iroquoian/Iroquois pottery types as they apply to the development of Susquehannock. The settlement and community patterns of these groups and a solid set of radiocarbon dates connect these cultural traditions.

[Session 4] 11:15 a.m.–11:45 a.m.
Subsistence, Seasonality, and Ritual at the Lemoyne Site
Andrew Wyatt, M.A., Senior Archaeologist, AECOM

The Lemoyne site is a palisaded early seventeenth century Susquehannock village located on the Susquehanna River near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. As part of data recovery excavations in 2007 and 2008, 43 pit features of various sizes and depths were identified, several of which contained discrete fill layers. Refining of artifacts between layers in individual larger features suggest that they were filled fairly quickly; however, seasonality of fills are indicated by preserved food remains. This presentation will focus on the well preserved food remains and other artifacts from these features, and their implications for Contract period subsistence, seasonality, and ritual at the site.

Lunch 11:45 a.m.–1:15 p.m. – on your own – see order form for boxed lunch options.

[Session 5] 1:15 p.m.–1:45 p.m.
Susquehannock Chronology and Community Patterns in the Upper Potomac River Valley
Robert D. Wall, Ph.D., Towson University

The presence of Susquehannock peoples in the upper Potomac valley has been explored more fully at several new sites in the last few decades. It is now understood that Susquehannock settlements are no longer considered to be anomalies in upper Potomac prehistory. Rather, they represent a brief but intense presence in the region for approximately two decades. This short period, evidenced by the presence of early Susquehannock sites in both the North and South Branch valleys, abruptly ends ca. 1620, based on glass trade bead and ceramic analysis from Potomac valley sites. This brief presence in the upper Potomac also appears to be manifested in the community patterns of these settlements. The lack of longhouse structures on these sites represents their transient nature. Perhaps short-term use was due to the uncertainty of existence in these new lands or to fulfill a specific short-term need. Whatever the reason, the lack of enduring settlements is reflected in the nature and the organization of upper Potomac region sites.
Following his first contact with the Susquehannock role in 1608, John Smith described them as a “grant-like people.” The accuracy of this observation has been confirmed from two vectors. The first proof was the direct study of the human skeletal remains of populations believed to be part of the Susquehannock Confederacy. Comparison of the stature of one group of these people from a site in West Virginia with other Susquehannock skeletal samples reveal a very tall population. These Susquehannock people were then compared with samples of contemporary Native populations in the nearby region. Comparisons between the Susquehannock and other Native American populations of this period reveal that Susquehannock males are significantly taller, while female Susquehannock average height is similar to that of other groups.

This biological evidence has since been confirmed by the discovery of independent historic observations that confirm John Smith’s perceptions of the unusual height of the Susquehannock people.

**[Session 6]**  8:45 a.m. – 9:15 a.m.

The Susquehannocks in Colonial Pennsylvania

Timothy J. Shannon, Ph.D., Professor of History, Gettysburg College

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**[Session 7]**  9:15 a.m. – 9:45 a.m.

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All but the smallest Susquehannock ceramic vessels were made for purposes surrounding the preparation and consumption of food. Over the course of the seventeenth century, bronze and copper kettles were integrated into existing patterns of food preparation and consumption. As kettles replaced the highly public and visible ceramic family cooking pot, the remaining ceramic vessels produced were increasingly limited to private use. The makers of ceramic pots changed production to meet their changing needs. In this presentation, it is argued that as the social context of the Susquehannock ceramic cooking vessel shifted from both public and private spaces to exclusively private use, the technical and decorative functions of those vessels also changed. The changing materiality of cooking vessels therefore reflects sensitive adaptations to the new materials introduced by Europeans but not acculturation or cultural or artistic decline.

**[Break]**  9:45 a.m. – 10:15 a.m.

**[Session 8]**  10:15 a.m. – 10:45 a.m.

The Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail

Jackie Kramer, Outdoor Recreation Planner, National Park Service

This session will provide an overview of the Susquehannocks’ interaction with the colonial peoples of early Pennsylvania, from their involvement in the sixteenth-century fur trade until the destruction of Conestoga Indian Town in 1763. We will focus on their responses to the challenges of colonisation and the ebb and flow of their influence among other Native peoples and their colonial neighbors in Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, and New York.

**[Session 9]**  10:45 a.m. – 11:15 a.m.

The Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail

Jackie Kramer, Outdoor Recreation Planner, National Park Service

The Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail is the nation’s first national water trail. The trail includes the great rivers that flow into Chesapeake Bay including the Susquehanna River from Haver De Grace, Maryland to Cooperspack, New York. This presentation will provide an overview of the themes of the trail and how the National Park Service is partnering with state and non-profit organizations to tell the stories of the trail that support the themes, including the American Indian stories of the Lower Susquehanna River. Information about the Susquehannock site at Native Lands County Park in York County, PA and in role in telling these stories will also be presented.

**[Closing Summary/Discussion]**  11:15 a.m. – 11:45 a.m.

Paul Raber, Ph.D., Heberling Associates

Information about the Susquehannock site at Native Lands County Park in York County, PA and its role in telling these stories will also be presented.

**[Session 8]**  11:45 a.m. – 12:15 p.m.

Session 8

Closing Summary/Discussion

Paul Raber

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**[Session 9]**  12:15 p.m. – 12:45 p.m.

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**[Closing Summary/Discussion]**  12:45 p.m. – 1:15 p.m.

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**[Session 6]**  1:15 p.m. – 1:45 p.m.

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**[Closing Summary/Discussion]**  1:45 p.m. – 2:15 p.m.

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