

IN THE SOURLANDS

Living with a good heart

By Caroline Katmann

On a breezy October afternoon that was much like an autumn-colored quilt in motion, descendants of New Jersey's native people, the Lenape, bestowed a blessing upon the Delaware River near the site of the proposed PennEast pipeline crossing. A small group of opponents of the project from both New Jersey and Pennsylvania were fortunate to have the opportunity to witness and participate in the ceremony. Their reasons for attending ranged from a deep belief in the power of the Lenape blessing to a no-holds-barred commitment to do ANYTHING to stop this horrendous pipeline project.

The Lenape are the Indians of the Late Woodland Period (1000 – 1650). It is said that the Lenape definition of spirituality can be summed up with the words, *living with a good heart*. At the recent Delaware River blessing, Chief Chuck "Gentle Moon" Demund, of the Lenape Nation in Pennsylvania asked us to approach those with opposing views with strength but also with open hearts and minds.

How appropriate it seemed for the Lenape, the indigenous people of this area, to gather for this purpose! Surely, there must be power in a blessing bestowed by those who know that trouble comes when we act as though we are separate from nature rather than an integral part of it. "The word 'Lenape' simply means 'people.' The word included everything. We're all related. There are four-legged people in the forests. Trees were considered one-legged people. Two-legged people felt a profoundly personal relationship with the earth." (p. 23, *The Common Sense Life* by Donald Repsher, Scribes Valley Publishing, 2015.).

When Europeans first came to New Jersey, the natives they encountered were the Lenape. The Lenape were divided into two groups – the Munsee and the Unami ("persons from down river"). Sourland Mountain was in the territory of the Unami.

There were a few Native American names for what later became known as Sourland Mountain: Neshannock, Woosamonsa, Witchamenting. Most Lenape settlements in New Jersey were near water. In this area, there were settlements along Stony Brook, Bedens Brook and the Neshanic River. There were Indian Burial Grounds on Welisewitz, Larson, Dutch Lane, Spring Hill Road and Snyderstown Road. Two villages, Wissamonson and Minnepenasson, were about a mile apart, along a trail known as the Wissamonson Path, which followed the course of Main Street in Pennington, Rt. 31 North and Route 654 East.

A number of Indian burial rounds have been discovered along or near Wertsville Road in East Amwell. Artifacts have been found in several places around Neshanic and Neshanic Station. Indian artifacts from the region are on display in the Hopewell Museum – among these artifacts are a 500-year old stone mortar and pestle found on the Carle Elberson farm in Hopewell and several arrow heads, scrapers and other stone tools found on Canal Road in Somerset.

In the mid to late 1600s there were probably no more than approximately 15,000 Lenape in all of New Jersey. The Lenape came to the Sourlands in winter to hunt and for argillite (compact sedimentary rock composed mainly of clay material), which was used to make tools for broad scraping and butchering blades (not so much for arrowheads). There were probably no more than 50 Lenape living in the Sourlands at any one time. They lived and traveled in small groups here on the mountain - a good arrangement for successful hunting. By the end of the 1600s, disease (smallpox, measles, typhus and influenza) carried by white people killed many Lenape.

“The Lenape were a sedentary and peaceable people, living a marginal existence in small, isolated settlements, unprotected by palisades or other defensive works. Indeed, until the white man came they had no need of protection; but as their numbers declined and as an unending stream of European settlers encroached upon them, the Lenape began to sell their lands or simply to abandon them – the Unami moving west into Pennsylvania, many eventually ending up in places as distant as central Canada and Oklahoma.” (*New Jerseys Sourland Mountain* by T.J. Luce. Sourland Planning Council, 2001.)

Today, many Lenape Nation tribal communities are actively reviving their traditions and communities in order to meet the challenges of the future through an understanding of history. The cultural, historical and environmental programs offered by many Lenape communities share the traditional teachings that often focus on respect and commonality among all living things. The Sourland Conservancy is currently arranging for a Lenape presentation as part of its 2016 (30th Anniversary year) Train Station Series.

If the descendants of a people displaced, diseased and nearly annihilated by invading civilizations can still believe that a worthwhile human life is one lived with a good heart, I suppose it would behoove the rest of us to find it within ourselves to do the same.

Resources

Websites:

www.lenapenation.org

nanticoke-lenapetribalnation.org

Articles: http://www.nj.com/hunterdon/index.ssf/2015/10/penneast_foes_host_lenape_blessing_for_delaware_ri.html

Books:

The Common Sense Life by Donald R. Repsher, Scribes Valley Publishing, 2015.

New Jersey's Sourland Mountain by T.J. Luce, Sourland Planning Council, 2001.

Religion and Ceremonies of the Lenape by Mark Raymond Harrington, General Books LLC, 2009.

Videos:

Delaware River Blessing: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K7aDWltWU3s>

Caroline Katmann is the Executive Director of the Sourland Conservancy. The Conservancy has worked to protect the ecological integrity, historic resources and special character of the Sourland Mountain region, through education and advocacy, since 1986. Visit us at www.sourland.org.