

A GLIMPSE OF THE LENAPE

The Night Before



BY DANIEL WOLFF



COVER PHOTO: CLAY EFFIGY FACE, LIKELY ONCE ATTACHED TO A TOBACCO PIPE  
Photo courtesy of Lenape Lifeways, Inc.



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### The Night Before

**I**t's black on the river. And still. The autumn sky is a mesh of stars.

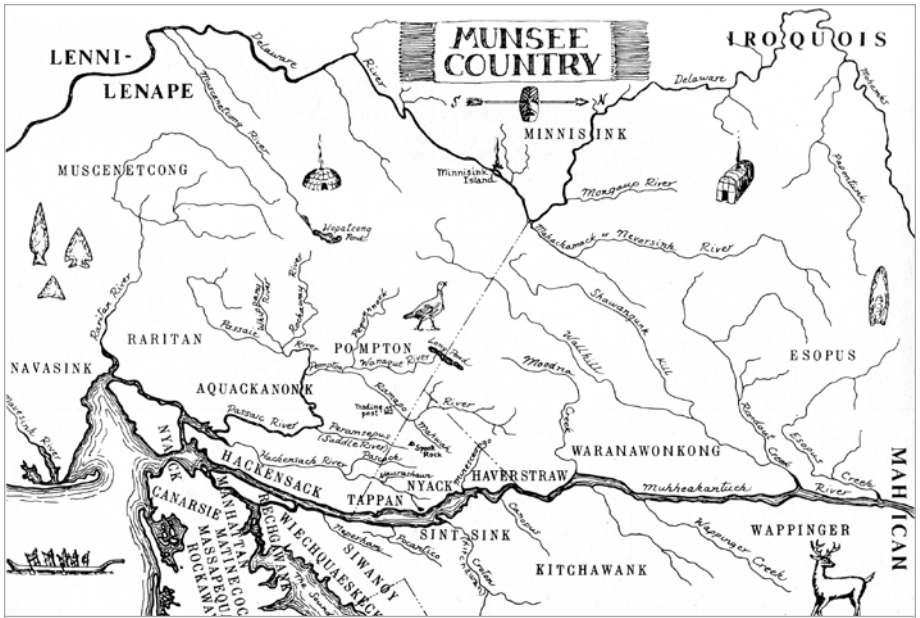
In the darkness of the river valley, there have always been only three tiny sparks visible from here: the orange campfires of the *Alipkonck*, the *Sintsinck*, and the *Kichtawanck* bands.

Tonight, there's been a fourth light reported, riding on the black water just downriver, already changing the world.

All of these people are *Lenape*. On this, the side where *kishux* – the sun – goes down, is the camp of the *Tappan* who speak *Munsee*, a dialect of the Delaware language. There are other bands, of course. Upriver are the

*Haverstraw*, the *Esopus*, and the *Warranawankng*. About four days hard walk that direction, *Lenape* land ends, and the main Iroquois nation begins. Going downriver, there are the *Hackensack*, the *Navasink*, and the *Raritan*. A half day's hard walk that direction brings you to the harbor, where the river meets the ocean. Tonight, the *Wiechquaeskecks* will have a fire going on the rocky north end of the island, *Manhatta*. But from here, on the shore of the *Tappan* bay, none of these can be seen or heard. Bands of a dozen families or more camp all up and down this river valley, and there is almost no sign of them.

This is *Muhheakantuck* – the



LENAPEHOKING. The Salomon Collection, Claire Tholl, illustrator, The Historical Society of Rockland County.

river that flows both ways – and it has its own particular kind of quiet. The night is still enough to hear *tème* – the wolf – howl from the ridge of an inland mountain. But there’s also the constant hum of mosquitoes that keep pressing in despite the protective layer of raccoon grease and the smoke off the small fire. Somewhere out in the dark, enormous rafts of *kwikwinkëm* – duck – mutter in their sleep; now and then, one startles awake, quacking, then settles back. Out beyond them, in deep water, the occasional booming splash is *wisahosid* – the sturgeon – twice the size of a grown man, leaping out of the water and crashing back down.

Just inland off the beach, the dark forest of hickory and oak is tangled with vines as big around as an arm. A sweet smell wafts down from the ripe grapes and berries. Firewood has gotten scarce here – it’ll be time to shift camp soon – but the chestnuts and black walnuts have started to drop. In the daytime, the women and children collect them in woven baskets and store them for the coming winter.

Deeper in the forest, there’s the almost imperceptible rustle of game: white-tailed deer settling in the thickets, raccoons coming out to hunt bird eggs, *tahkox* – the turtle – passing slowly over mucky ground. Somewhere, a

black bear grunts. And on the ridge where the wolf howls, a cougar passes, but it makes no sound.

This is the first and last and most important knowledge: to know about the plants and animals. Without it, a person starves. And even with all the passed-down wisdom of how animals behave and which places to avoid, a moment's lapse of concentration and a life is gone. Children two and three years old sleep in this river camp tonight; because of the high odds that they won't live to adulthood, they still haven't been given names. And if they do survive, the young women may be lost in childbirth, the men on their long hunting trips. A *nēntpikès* – a person knowledgeable in herbs – might cure a wound or infection. The sick can take a sweat bath, crawling into a small hut or *wigwam*, breathing the steam off heated rocks where special plants have been laid. But even the strongest treatment won't break some disease. Few will live to see old age.

Over generations, this riverbank has provided regular campsites. A little creek runs not far away: good water, cold

through most of the summer. The same dozen families return here because of that, and because there are rich oyster beds in the *Tappan* bay. Oysters as big around as a small boy's belly. Wade out, pry one loose, force it open with a stone chipped thin for just that use, eat it raw and salty, and drop the shell on the shore. Great piles of shells accumulate this way: one of the few lasting signs that people live here.

*Muhheakantuck* is called the river that flows both ways because the ocean pushes a wedge of salt water against the river current, bringing whales, seals, and fish of all sizes and descriptions. In the spring there are so many, it almost seems you could walk across their backs.

When a certain small tree blossoms white in the spring, the *schawanammek* – shad – have started to swarm upriver to spawn. Four hundred foot long nets woven out of tree bark fiber get staked in the shallows; wooden markers carved into the faces of *manētuwàk* – spirits – show where they're set and call the fish in. Then, so many shad and stripers and eel bulge the nets that the wooden faces bob up and dance.

The nets catch more than the families can eat, so the women slit and clean the bellies with rocks chipped into sharp knives, then lay them on racks over hot stones till the flesh is dried. Where the creek comes down, there's thick clay; the women make carefully decorated pots from this, then use them to boil fish heads for oil. The pots of oil and baskets filled with dry fish will be carried inland for the cold, hungry months to come.



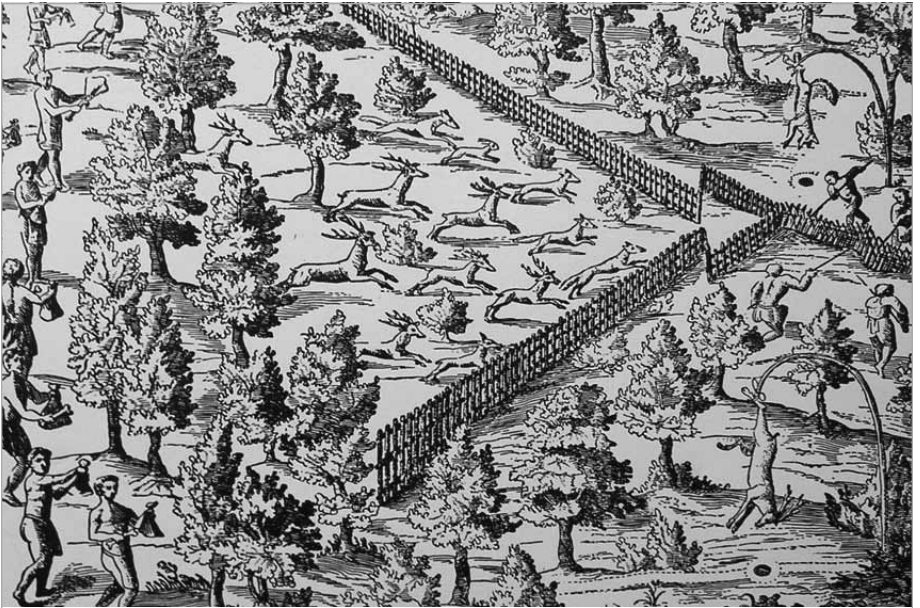
MINISINK POTS, ESTIMATED TO BE 400 – 1000 YEARS OLD. Photo courtesy of Lenape Lifeways, Inc.

Spring is the rich time for fish, but even now, in the fall, men will pick out a tall tulip tree and drop it by lighting a fire at its base, then burn it hollow and smooth it with stone gouges. In these canoes, they go out into the dark and hold torches over the water so they can spot the swirls

of bluefish and the giant sturgeon. There are still crabs for the children to catch in the shallows, and always the *wisamèkw* – whiskered fat fish – that feed on the bottom.

In the flood plains, where the spring waters deposit rich black earth, the women plant mounds of tangled maize and squash and bean. All summer, they've scared away the crows and groundhogs. At the last *wèski kishux* – new moon – a harvest celebration began. The pumpkins and beans were brought in from the fields, the surplus maize stored away for winter. Everyone danced to drums and heron bone flutes, young boys found young girls, old people told their stories, children shook turtle shell rattles.

On this dark fall night, it's almost time to beat the woods for *abtuhw* – deer. Their coats will be thick by now, warm for blankets. Men and women will go up to the top of the hills and form a line, then rap on bones and hollow logs to drive the *abtuhw* forward, down to the river, where they'll be forced into the water or a fenced-off corral. There, the arrows and spears take them, the sharp rocks skin them, their flesh is cooked or dried and preserved.



DRIVING DEER INTO AN ENCLOSURE OR FYKE. Collections, The Historical Society of Rockland County.



DUGOUT CANOES. Collections, The Historical Society of Rockland County.

All of this for the coming winter, the hard season. It's spent away from the river, back inland where there's more protection from wind and snow. A semi-permanent shelter rises by forcing cut saplings into the ground, bending their ends together, then covering that arched structure with bark and stuffing the cracks with grass and husks. A chimney

hole lets out the smoke from the small hearth fire. Men trap in the winter; women mend clothes and prepare meals and raise children. But most of the time is spent waiting out the cold and hoping there's enough food to make it through.

In that smoky dark, with a group of interrelated families listening to the north wind and



LONGHOUSE. Photo courtesy of Lenape Lifeways, Inc.

trying to stay warm, people tell stories. There's the story of snow boy, for example, who turns other children's fingers black with frostbite and is finally set off down the river on an ice floe, promising to return as snow and help the hunters track.

And there are the stories of the *manëtuwàk*. In a landscape this changeable, this charged with beauty and danger, everything has a spirit: plants, animals, the rock bluffs. The creator, *Kishëlemienk*, made the world with his thoughts, then assigned spirit beings to keep it in order. *Mahta'ntu* is the evil one, who causes mosquitoes and stinging wasps. *Mësingw*, the keeper of the game, maintains the balance of nature, letting people feed themselves without destroying animal and plant populations. His half red, half black face watches over the campsite. And then there is each man's guardian spirit, which comes to him as boy of twelve or so when he goes off into the woods alone on a vision quest.

During the long winter months, there's time to make images of these spirits. The lip of a clay beaker is turned into the beak of a turtle. A stone pestle, used for grinding corn, is chipped and



MËSINGW, KEEPER OF THE GAME. Image courtesy Seton Hall University Museum, photography by Tom Sobolik.

smoothed till it has the head of a bear. And the bowl of a pipe, filled with tobacco and smoked during long hours of meditation, has been carved into a solemn spirit face that stares at the smoker and calls on him or her to consider the powers beyond.

The wise men – *sachem* – pass on these traditions from family to family through the mother's line. But some knowledge dates back





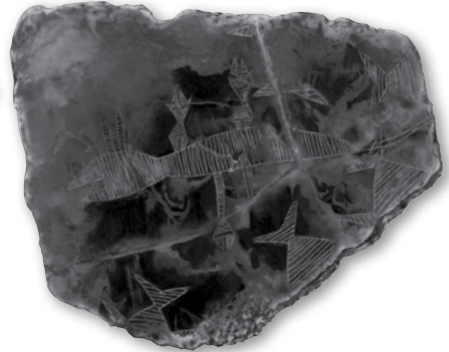
HUMAN EFFIGY FACE TOBACCO PIPE, ESTIMATED TO BE 400 – 1000 YEARS OLD. Photo courtesy of Lenape Lifeways, Inc.



ANIMAL-HEADED STONE PESTLE, ESTIMATED TO BE 4000 YEARS OLD. Image courtesy of the New York State Museum, Albany, NY.

farther than anyone can recall. Along the main trails, where people camp when travelling, the occasional rock is scratched with drawings of big animals and sea creatures. They're from a time before, when the people hadn't learned how to plant maize or make fish nets or shoot a bow and arrow. Instead, they made spears to hunt the walrus that were here when ice covered the valleys. Their ancient spearheads still turn up along the river: evidence of a mysterious, shared past before people even called themselves *Lenape*.

Since then, for many generations, the *Lenapehoking* – the people's homeland – has extended to the next range of mountains, down the river to the coast, and a long ways along that coast in both directions. Beyond the *Lenapehoking* are other peoples with other traditions and beliefs. Now and then, one of

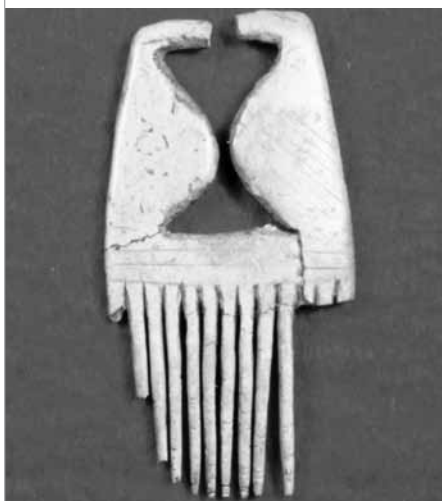


ENGRAVED PLATE OF MICA, DEPICTING A HORNED WATER MONSTER (HEAD TO LEFT). Image courtesy of the New York State Museum, Albany, NY.



THE JENNINGS PETROGLYPH, SANDSTONE, ESTIMATED TO BE 4000 YEARS OLD. Photo courtesy of Lenape Lifeways, Inc.

them will pass through, bringing word of how they live. And the *Lenape* – young men especially – take advantage of the summer months to wander outside the river valley: following the long trails, exchanging arrowheads and



ORNAMENTAL BONE COMB. Photo courtesy of Lenape Lifeways, Inc.

pottery, collecting the pink and white shells that are made into currency: *wampum*. They also pick up the latest news.

That's how, twelve days ago, word came back that something large with white wings or fins had entered the mouth of the river. This had happened before, within memory of the oldest people, but the visitors always stayed briefly and left. This time, the white thing remained, unmoving, for days. Then, it started to make its way upriver.

Messengers ran from band to band. People came to the headlands to watch its progress and guess what it was. A fish? A monster? An evil spirit? Or a visit from heaven? Finally, the people

decided it was a kind of huge canoe or travelling house and must be carrying a great spirit, maybe *Kishëlemienk* himself.

Yesterday, it stopped just below the *Tappan* bay. Tonight, it's that fourth light, riding on the water.

Everything is ready. Feasts of harvest food have been prepared to welcome the visitors. The men have laid out feathers to wear tomorrow; the women have prepared their best clothing: tanned deer hide decorated with colored shells and porcupine quills. In the darkness, on the beach below, the long canoes are lined up. At *kchinkwebële* – sunrise – the glow will rise behind the *SintSincks'* camp. This strange night of the four lights will end. The *Lenape* will paddle out to greet the future.



PETROGLYPH OF HANDS IN RED SANDSTONE, ESTIMATED TO BE 1000 – 3000 YEARS OLD. Image courtesy Seton Hall University Museum, photography by John Stokes



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