

Celebrating Vestal's 190th Anniversary

1823-2013

No. 2—Along the Rippling Susquehanna

For Vestal High School students and former graduates... "Along the rippling Susquehanna" is the opening line of the school alma mater; for Native Americans and early pioneers living on the south side of the river, it describes the waterway used for travel, water power, and as a food source.

The Susquehanna River, whose name is said to translate to "long and crooked river", begins at Otsego Lake in Cooperstown, NY and winds its way 444 miles to Havre de Grace, MD where it empties into the Chesapeake Bay. The 16th largest river, lying entirely in the U.S., it is the largest source of fresh water to the Bay by contributing 22 billion gallons per day. It is also the source of 446 million gallons of drinking water per day to communities along its course and is known in the Mid-Atlantic States as the "Mighty Susquehanna".

During the Late Archaic Period, 3000 to 2000 BC, small nomadic bands of Native Americans from various groups were hunting and fishing in the area that became Vestal. Archaeological evidence of their presence has been found along the river at Willow Point, the mouth of the Choconut Creek, and in Castle Gardens. Based on artifacts and organic materials recovered from those sites, Dr. Nina Versaggi, Director of the Public Archaeology Facility at Binghamton University, and Dr. Laurie Miroff describe small groups of Native Americans who subsisted by hunting, fishing, and gathering seasonal foods. Excavations at these sites have produced projectile points, broken pottery, burned bone, fire-cracked rock, and lithics or stone tools, all of which archaeologists use to reconstruct their cultural activities. Vestal's three Native American sites are:

Willow Point. In June of 1928 at the northern most point of land in Willow Point, the former E.K. Clark farm, 40 Native American graves were discovered at Fred Rider's gravel pit. State Archaeologist Noah T. Clarke and former state archaeologist Dr. Arthur C. Parker initially investigated the site. Rochester archaeologist William A. Ritchie continued those investigations through the end of 1930. Among pottery vessels, lithics, and other artifacts was a pottery pipe referred to as of the classic Willow Point style. Ritchie's finds were said to rank with the best in New York history.



Chugnut*. Rather than the name of a tribe or group, Chugnut was the name of an encampment near the mouth of the Choconut Creek that also encompassed the north side of the river. According to Dr. George P. Donehoo, it was a geographical group of Native Americans representative of several different tribes. It was here that Revolutionary War soldiers reported in their diaries of burning "houses" and destroying crops of beans, squash, and corn at Chugnut on August 18, 1779*. *Spelling changed to reflect more common usage and date changed to reflect the date given in the majority of diaries.

Castle Gardens. Archaeological excavations at the Castle Gardens site have revealed excellent examples of stone tools dating to the Late Archaic period. The large collection at Binghamton University includes; a highly polished, beveled edged celt used for an ax or pick, a polished slate atlatl weight, which when added to a throwing stick makes the spear travel farther, faster, and more accurately, net sinkers, drills, and projectile points. Dr. Robert Funk from the New York State Museum suggested that this narrow section of the river where an abundance of net sinkers were found may have been a fish-processing site where weirs caught spawning shad. Rare shell mounds were also found here.

When Funk's excavations in 1965 revealed a previously unidentified small, corner-notched projectile point carbon dating to 2600 BC* he named it the Vestal Point. Dr. Nina Versaggi feels it plausible that the corner notches or tal Point would have made them efficient for spearing fish at weirs in the river. *Update of year per N. Versaggi.



Vestal Point

In the summer of 1779 General Poor's brigade under General Clinton, broke the dam they'd built at the source of the Susquehanna in Cooperstown to create the water depth needed to float his boats, men, and supplies down river to meet General Sullivan who had come up the Susquehanna with his fleet of men, horses, and cattle. Both generals destroyed Native American sites on both sides of the river as they made their way to a location opposite the mouth of the Choconut Creek that was named Union in recognition of the event.

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Shad, a saltwater fish related to the herring, swam up the Susquehanna River to spawn until the late 1820's. On dark April nights men would stretch nets across the shallow frigid river and wait to hear the churning water that signaled their arrival. Menhaden or American shad ranged from 3 to 5 pounds providing ample food for humans and wildlife. By fall the three to four inch shad fry would navigate through eel weirs to make their way toward the Chesapeake and the open Atlantic where they matured in preparation for their return up the Susquehanna. Two major fishing areas mentioned in early histories as being on the south bank were Peter LaTourette's and John Mersereau's.

By 1796 the Susquehanna's fast-running spring waters carried rafts of logs and lumber, cut by Vestal lumbermen from our heavily forested hillsides, down the Susquehanna to markets near Harrisburg and Baltimore. "Logging", which consisted of cutting and hauling logs, took place from August to winter. In winter skids, sleds or snow chutes were used to move the logs close to a stream in preparation for the spring "log drives" that moved them toward the river where large rafts were carefully lashed together to prevent damaging the wood. There were four categories of rafts; "spar" which was constructed of tall straight trees, "timber" made from squared logs, "lumber" which consisted of logs sawn into lumber, and "arks" which were flat bottom rafts that carried cargo and often had a small cabin for the raftsmen or watermen. When the 30 foot wide, 200-300 foot long rafts destined for the Chesapeake or Delaware Bay reached deeper water near Port Deposit, they were stacked 3 and 4 high to form "floats". The process required forcing the raft under the one ahead. At the end of their journey the rafts were carefully disassembled.

Records indicate that In 1840 George Ross of Ross Corners employed 25-30 men to cut and assemble rafts. Fayette L. Rounds, Vestal's first stationmaster, kept a diary of his raft trip from Vestal to Marietta, PA during April and May of 1881. The following is an excerpt:

April 24 – Left Vestal at 3 PM. Stopped at Bassett's an hour and tied up at the "Pines" at 11 PM.

April 25 – Left the Pines at 3:15 AM. Stuck on a rock above Skinner's at Rocky Forest Mountain in attempting to land at 9 o'clock PM. Tried for an hour to get off but was so dark we concluded to wait till morning.

April 26 – Got up at 4:15, uncoupled the raft and started on again at 4:45. Tied up at Forty Fort at 7 PM.

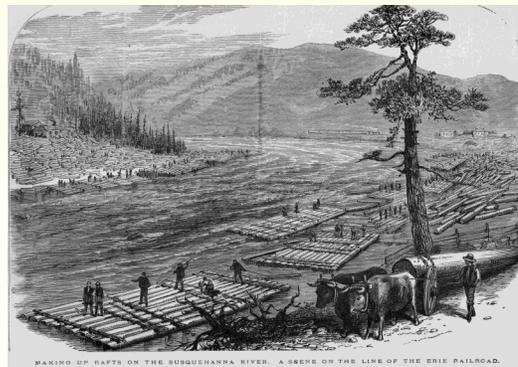
April 27 – Left Forty Fort at 4:20 AM. Found four feet of water at Wilkes-Barre. Potatoes worth \$1.10 at Plymouth. Went through Nanticoke shoot at 9 o'clock. 2 feet of water in the shoot. Our steering pole broke and let the forward platform (unreadable) on the bottom of the shoot. Broke off the forward ends of two (unreadable). Swung the raft around and went stern frist (sic). Tied up at Espy at 7 o'clock PM.

April 28 – Left Espy at 3:35 AM and arrived at Northumberland at 5:15 PM. Worked at rafting over the forward (unreadable) till 8 PM.

April 29 – Left Northumberland at 4:30. Landed at Green's Dam at 6 PM. Stuck on a rock just before landing and pulled the raft off with a Yankee windlass.

April 30 – Left Green's Dam at 4:30 AM. Landed at Harrisburg at 9:30 AM. Had an offer of \$15 at Harrisburg.

The diary entries which end on May 7 when the raft was sold are followed by his itemized expenses and a list of the board feet of planks or lumber sent by Vestal residents. Raftsmen typically returned by foot traveling 50-60 miles a day only to jump another raft for the trip south. Five to six trips could be made during the high water season.



While the sparkling waters of the rippling Susquehanna provided prosperity to Vestal residents, its darker side brought death and destruction over the years....but that's a story for another time.

F.L. Rounds' diary, additional information, and sources for this article are available at the Historian's office.