

Native Americans in Glen Ridge

The Original Ridgers

I HAVE HAD an interest in Native American history ever since I was a kid, and for the past seven years I have been teaching a class on the subject at Glen Ridge High School, using a textbook I wrote. Yet arriving at the true story can be difficult, and no more so than when investigating the Native history of our own town.

The original Ridgers were the Yantecaw, who are almost forgotten but for a street name at the north end of Glen Ridge, near Brookdale Park. The Yantecaw were a segment of the Munsee tribe who, in turn, belonged to the larger and better known Lenni Lenape, sometimes also called the Delaware.

Information specific to our area is scanty. Elizabeth Coombs of the Bloomfield Historical Society and Herbert Fisher, who worked on the Bloomfield Historic Sites inventory in the early 1960s, put together anthologies of the available findings—notably, evidence that Brookdale Park was the site of a small transient Native settlement. The Van Giesen, Garrabrant, and Hyde families, who farmed the land where the park is now located, collected dozens of arrowheads, stone fish hooks, and paint pots. They also discovered a stone-lined fire pit and, reportedly, human skeletons while digging a house foundation. Other tantalizing reports speak of stone pylons (perhaps used to mark the seasons) in the park and a rock shelter located under what is now the grandstand.

Even less is known about other Native sites around Glen Ridge. Watsessing Park gets its name from a Lenni Lenape word meaning “Stony Hill.” A handful of late-19th- and early-20th-century histories of Glen Ridge,

such as one by Henry Cordley, speak of “Indian Hill,” a mound-like structure located near present-day Mitchell Place. The original street in Glen Ridge, the “Old Road” along what is now Bloomfield Avenue and Glen Ridge Avenue, is said to have originally been a spur of the Minisink Trail, a major east-west footpath.

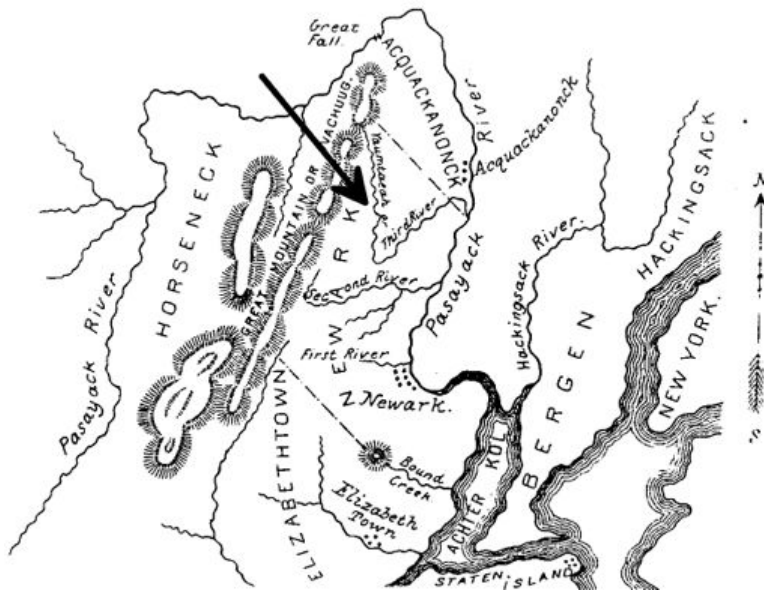
The nearest well-documented settlement to Glen Ridge was Acquackanonk, located on the banks of the Passaic River in present-day Passaic or Clifton. Dutch explorer Jasper Danckaerts visited there in March 1680, by which point Dutch settlers had bought the land; the last Native inhabitants left soon thereafter. The New Jersey Indian Site Survey led by archaeologist Dorothy Cross in the 1930s found evidence of extensive habitation along the Passaic. One site near Dundee Dam in Garfield, just south of where the Parkway crosses the river, dates back 3,000 years. Local archaeologist Edward Lenik discovered petroglyphs there in 1992. Just northwest of Willowbrook Mall, in the Great Pierce Meadows, is a 3,000-year-old burial site studied by archaeologists Herbert Kraft and Alan Mounier.

Although historians know little about the original inhabitants of our area in particular, they have gathered a good deal of general information about the Lenni Lenape from colonial-era accounts, archaeological digs, and accidental excavations. The Yantecaw constructed large wooden homes many of us know as longhouses. They built dugout canoes to utilize the local waterways for both transportation and trade. The Yantecaw were expert fishermen, constructing



Sidney Hyde Arrowhead Collection, found on the site of what is now Brookdale Park. Courtesy of Bloomfield Historical Society

Parkway crosses the river, dates back 3,000 years. Local archaeologist Edward Lenik discovered petroglyphs there in 1992. Just northwest of Willowbrook Mall, in the Great Pierce Meadows, is a 3,000-year-old burial site studied by archaeologists Herbert Kraft and Alan Mounier.



Prerevolutionary map shows Acquackanonk, a Native American village sold to the Dutch in the late 17th century. It was the last of a chain of settlements that once stretched along the Passaic River. A major tributary, the Third River, runs near Brookdale Park (arrow). Courtesy of Barrows Collection of the Glen Ridge Historical Society

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fishing lines out of plant fiber and carved bones into the shape of hooks. Their more effective method of harvesting fish would have been the use of nets and fishing weirs. Fishing weirs, whose remains can still be seen at Dundee Dam when the water is low, were complex fish traps constructed of either stone or large wooden stakes hammered into the river bottom and enclosed with nets. The weirs allowed fish to wander in, but because of their design made it difficult for the fish to find their way out.

Across the state, archaeologists have unearthed small Lenni Lenape settlements with no remains of permanent structures—presumably, temporary villages. Many were located near the ocean, and historians suspect that these small villages were for small bands of hunters who visited the sites on a yearly basis. At these sites, they would have buried tools necessary for survival in shallow pits and spent their down-time making new arrow points or skinning and butchering animals.

The food acquired at these second homes depended upon location, but the list is quite extensive. The Yantecaw diet would have included clams, lobster, mussels, and other kinds of seafood if vacationing near the shore. Inland hunters would have brought home bear, deer, turkeys, and mastodon, before they went extinct. Yantecaw women tended the fields and grew maize, squash, and beans.

Life went on for our original Ridgers for thousands of years in much this way. After the Europeans arrived, both cultures attempted to live side by side and share the area, but sadly this was not to be. The Dutch often com-

plained that Native dogs (semi-domesticated wolves) attacked their cows, while Dutch cows often trampled and ate Native crops. As a result, treaties ensued that took more and more of the Native land and brought an end to a once-prosperous culture. No full-blooded Lenni Lenape are left today and very few people speak their native tongue.

When you look out your windows or take a walk down one of our town's picturesque streets, think about the original Ridgers. They lived, hunted, farmed, raised their families, loved, died, and were buried right here on the same land we call Glen Ridge. They had very similar aspirations as we do and even summered down the Jersey shore.



Spear point found in the garden of 60 Highland Avenue in June 1994. Seton Hall archaeologist Herbert Kraft dated it to approximately 500 B.C.

Chris Savio with George Musser

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ing strip for trees too narrow. The roadway in Glen Ridge will average, I think, about thirty-six feet and the planting strip less than three feet. Given forty-two feet exclusive of sidewalks, the roadway of streets for local use only need not be more than twenty-four feet (the space required for three vehicles), leaving eight or nine feet on each side for trees and a liberal lawn strip. All of this twenty-four foot roadway, however, should be paved from curb to curb and not be merely a narrow sixteen foot strip in the centre, as at present. Of course, thoroughfares should have wider paved roadways.

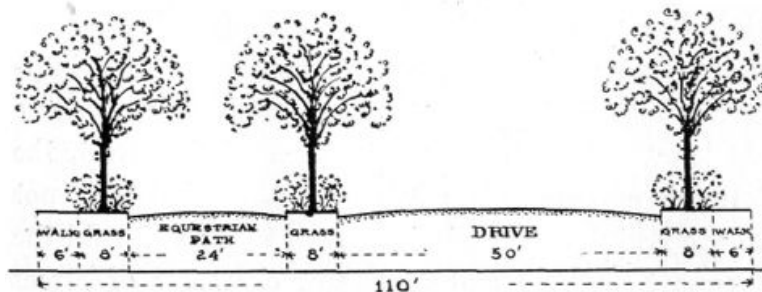
More important than the right proportional subdivision of the street into sidewalk, planting strip and drive, is the method of its location. Most streets are part of a general town plan and should be so located as to contribute to the convenience and beauty of the general plan. Then the different functions that each has to fulfill should be taken into account as far as possible.

The street trees in Glen Ridge are usually of good species (Sugar Maples and American Elms), but as a rule they are poorly planted and even more poorly main-

tained. For Glen Ridge to longer neglect its street trees is to lose the value of one of its chief assets. A proper street tree ordinance should be adopted, like that of East Orange or Newark, for example; the street trees promptly placed under the care of a Shade Tree Commission, and given that careful and artistic attention which they need and deserve.

Attention also might be turned with advantage to street names, revising existing designations where necessary so as to avoid confusion. These names should be selected, moreover, with some regard to Bloomfield and Montclair, for in this respect, especially for streets running east and west, these places are as one. The names of streets in Glen Ridge, such, for example, as Ridgewood, Hillside and Highland, are significant and attractive. This interest may be increased by a method which prevails in Europe, and, to some extent, in this country, of adding distinctiveness by using appropriately a greater variety of terms for streets. In Germany we have Strasse, Platz, Markt, Ring, Anlagen, etc.; in England, Road, Hill, Square, Crescent, Place, Circus, Row, Drive, Terrace, etc.

(To be continued)



Proposed cross-section for Ridgewood Avenue