First Arrivals

Paleoindian Period - 15,000 B.C. to 8000 B.C.

The New World

If you visited North America on a time machine around 25,000 B.C., there would have been no one to greet you. It was the last Ice Age! Much of North America was covered by huge ice sheets, sometimes over a mile thick. An ice sheet covered much of northern Pennsylvania, although it never reached Centre County. Ocean levels were much lower than now because so much water was captured in ice. Because this sea level drop exposed land under the Bering Sea, people living in eastern Siberia finally crossed into Alaska around 20,000 B.C.

Entering Pennsylvania

By about 15,000 B.C., these first people – called Paleoindians by archaeologists – spread south into North and South America. Evidence from Meadowcroft Rockshelter in southwestern Pennsylvania suggests that people were there about 14,000 B.C. The first evidence of Paleoindians in central Pennsylvania is the presence of Clovis spearpoints that date to about 9000 B.C., although some may have been here earlier.

Hunting Big Game

Paleoindians hunted Ice Age animals such as mammoth and mastodon with long stone-tipped spears. Although these huge animals provided critical meat and hides, people also hunted caribou, deer, elk, and birds; fished; and gathered wild edible vegetation. Only their stone tools survive, but they would have used hides, bone, wood, and grasses to make other tools, clothing, and shelters. Because they lived by hunting and gathering resources, they moved frequently in search of food, living in temporary shelters made of sapling frames covered by hides, or using natural rockshelters.

End of the Ice Age

By around 10,000 B.C., Paleoindians were confronted with a rapidly changing world. Within hundreds of years, the tundra vegetation of grasslands and shrubs was replaced by forests of spruce and pine trees, grassy meadows, and clusters of deciduous trees along streams. By 9000 B.C., most of the Ice Age fauna, including the mammoths, mastodons, saber-toothed tigers and giant beavers, became extinct. These early people of the New World had to change to survive in a very different environment.