Ancient Farmers

Nearly seventy Woodland period sites have been found in Centre County. Most of these sites date from A.D. 800 to 1600 when farming had become central to the way of life of many Native Americans. These sites were small hamlets, single farmsteads, or small camps that people set up while they were tending their crops, hunting and gathering, or quarrying for stone to make tools. Larger groups of people lived in more permanent hamlets or villages along the Susquehanna West Branch and the lower reaches of Bald Eagle Creek near Mill Hall.

Archaeologists have excavated portions of two hamlets. In the 1970s, Penn State archaeologists worked at the Fisher Farm Site on the banks of Bald Eagle Creek near Unionville. A second hamlet, called the Shuey Site, is located along Spring Creek on the western edge of Bellefonte. The Bald Eagle Archaeological Society worked there in the 1990s with the kind permission of the landowners.

At both sites, archaeologists first discovered stone artifacts and pieces of pottery in the plowed topsoil. Once they dug below this plow zone, they identified dark areas of soil that marked various activities of Woodland Native Americans. Circular or oval patterns of postholes are the remains of small houses. People placed poles from saplings into the earth to build a house frame. They probably covered the frame with large pieces of bark, hides, or grass mats.

Archaeologists believe that these were igloo-shaped structures where food was smoked or dried and stored. Large dark stains in the soil are the remains of hearths for cooking or heating, while others were the traces of food storage pits.

In some of these pits and structures, archaeologists found seeds of corn, squash, sunflower, beans, and other plants. Some of these plants were probably being grown near the houses. Most of the animal bones found at the Shuey site were from deer, showing how important deer were for providing food, hides for clothing, and bone for tools. The inhabitants may have only stayed at sites like Shuey and Fisher Farm during the growing season, returning to larger villages where their harvest could be stored for the winter.