

Cultural Resources

LITTLE ARCHAEOLOGICAL OR HISTORICAL RESEARCH focusing on the Middlebrook-Brownsburg Corridor has been published. Written histories of Augusta and Rockbridge counties contain bits and pieces of information about Native American sites, European frontier settlements, and the establishment of several communities. Families with longstanding ties to the project area share a rich oral tradition, as well as personal documents and photographs, and their stories and remembrances have enriched this overview.

Native American Settlement

Numerous archaeological sites known to local residents are reminders of the first people to inhabit the Middlebrook-Brownsburg Corridor. Collections of spearheads from plowed fields indicate the travel and trading patterns of the first people thousands of years ago: in addition to local materials, chert from eastern West Virginia was carried by native Americans through the saddles and gaps of Little North Mountain, and even rhyolite from the Maryland Blue Ridge appears in some collections.¹

Only nine Native American sites are formally recorded with the Virginia Department of Historic Resources (VDHR) for the Middlebrook-Brownsburg Corridor.² Based on archaeological studies of other parts of the Ridge and Valley, predictive models for site locations indicate that Native American settlement in the project area should be intensive in places, particularly along water courses and near springs and gaps. Although poorly known at present, these sites are our primary link to a people who lived in the upper James and Shenandoah valleys for approximately 12,000 years.

Archaeologists divide the era of Native American occupation prior to European contact into three cultural periods tied to the changing ecology of the region: PaleoIndian (ca. 9500–8000 B.C.); Archaic (ca. 8000–1500 B.C.); and



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A small selection of prehistoric Native American artifacts from the Swoope area. Spanning several thousand years, stone and clay artifacts such as these have been found on many farms in the Route 252 Corridor and mark the past settlements of Native cultures in the upper Valley.

Woodland (ca. 1500 B.C.–A.D. 1500). These are identified by characteristics unique to the particular period, including spearhead shape and size, pottery decorations, tool types, and site locations.

PaleoIndian Period

The PaleoIndian period marks the initial immigration of people into North America. Sites from this period are rare, and to date, none have been documented in the Middlebrook-Brownsburg region. Affected by a climate much cooler than ours today, small bands of hunters and gatherers moved with seasons, probably settling at one place for no more than a few months.

Archaic Period

Most of the Native sites documented in the Middlebrook-Brownsburg region were inhabited for thousands of years, and five date to the Archaic period. In fact, three were first occupied around 8000 B.C. at the beginning of the period. Large scatters of debris (chips) from tool making have been located on small stream terraces, and these date to the end of the period.³

By the end of the ice age, the climate in the eastern United States became more seasonally diversified. Grasslands were invaded by forests, and the numbers of smaller mammals increased. During the early and middle portions of this period (around 7500–4000 B.C.), the boreal forests (fir, spruce, and pine) were replaced by deciduous forests (chestnut, oak, hickory). For Native peoples there was a shift from hunting to more generalized foraging.

Meandering rivers in the Shenandoah Valley created broad, open floodplains which allowed for the growth of edible plants. Large base camps, home to several hundred people, were located on terraces overlooking rivers. Because of the development of food storage techniques, as well as more predictable food sources, Native Americans of the Late Archaic period developed a more sedentary lifestyle. Increases in population from 3000–1500 B.C. are believed by archaeologists to have led to the beginnings of social rank and territorialism; throughout the Shenandoah and James valleys, Native peoples began establishing group boundaries which would carry through to the time of European contact.

Woodland Period

The Woodland period, beginning at approximately 1500 B.C., marked the introduction of clay pottery and ended just before contact with early European explorers and settlers. By the end of the period, pottery composition and design were regionalized and could indicate tribal affiliations.

One of the most outstanding features of the Woodland period is the burial mound. Early in the period, mounds contained only a few burials, probably the remains of people of high rank. Later mounds were accretional, meaning that they began at ground level and burials were added periodically until the mound contained as many as 2,500 burials. One of the best known accretional mounds in western Virginia, the Valentine Mound, is located in the Middlebrook-Brownsburg region near the confluence of Hays and Walkers creeks. In 1901, Edward P. Valentine of the Valentine Museum in Richmond excavated this mound, identifying 80 human skulls, over 400 human skeletons, beads, pendants, pottery, and dog skeletons.⁴ As a consequence of these and later excavations and the cultivation of the mound, only a faint rise is now visible on the floodplain. More recent archaeological studies associated with the realignment of Route 602 resulted in the location of a probable village site associated with the mound, as well as several outlying campsites.⁵

The bow and arrow was introduced into the eastern United States during the middle of this period (A.D. 700), and the true 'arrowheads' (triangular points) are common in local artifact collections. Agricultural tools such as hoes and axes were made of greenstone, and grinding stones were widely used. By A.D. 1000, corn, beans, and squash were introduced into the region, and agriculture became a way of life, although hunting and gathering was not entirely abandoned.

The sedentary lifestyle resulted in the establishment of major settlements near rivers, surrounded by smaller hamlets along streams and springs. Woodland period sites are often located on levees or terraces above floodplains. By the end of the period, the central settlement was palisaded or encircled by a high fence of posts set closely together and chinked with brush. Cultivated fields were located outside the stockade, and harvested crops were kept inside in storage pits similar to root cellars. Village sites were periodically moved due to soil depletion and lack of game.

The Little Ice Age, which began around A.D. 1300, must have affected the ability of the Native peoples to grow the necessary corn to feed their growing populations. Late in the period, a cooling trend led to the expansion of grasslands and the reappearance of small herds of bison. By the end of the period groups of Iroquois from the Northeast were traveling to the Valley to hunt for meat, hides, and furs. Trade networks along the Appalachians connected indigenous peoples throughout the eastern United States, and when the Spanish settled the Southeast in the 16th century, and the English in the 17th century, their trade goods were moved along these routes. In addition to glass beads, copper, and other objects, these routes conducted diseases against which the Natives had no immunity. All of these factors led to a depopulation of the settled peoples of the Shenandoah Valley by the time of European settlement.⁶

Historic Resources

A total of 245 standing structures (houses, farming complexes, mills, churches, stores, and schools) and 11 cemeteries are on record with the Virginia Department of Historic Resources (VDHR) for the Middlebrook-Brownsburg study area.⁷ The bulk of the information comes from the work of architectural historians Ann McCleary and Pamela Simpson, who researched Augusta and Rockbridge counties, respectively, in the 1980s. Seven structures in the Route 252 Corridor are individually listed on the Virginia Landmarks Register and the National Register of Historic Places, as are two cemeteries. Four schoolhouses are included in a thematic nomination for Augusta County Public Schools. The village of Middlebrook, which reached the height of its prosperity in the 1880s, is designated as a historic district, the only one in rural Augusta County. Brownsburg in northern Rockbridge County has also been designated a historic district, as has the Wade's Mill Complex near Raphine. A list of nationally registered and surveyed historic properties is included in Appendix I.

The Frontier: Taking Up Land, 1730–1760

In 1701, the Colonial Virginia Council devised a policy whereby settlers would receive land in exchange for strengthening the British presence on the frontier. The Virginia colony envisioned the Shenandoah Valley as a buffer against attacks by dispossessed Native peoples, including those of the Iroquois Confederacy to the north, as well as refugees from the tribes that only 100 years earlier had populated the Piedmont.