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Unique Culture of the Hudson River Native Americans

The culture and lifestyle of the Native Americans that once lived in the Hudson River Valley shows an indisputable respect and utilization of nature. The Delaware, the Mahican, and the Wappinger tribes demonstrated their proficiency and adaptation to their environment through their use of tools, clothing, and food taken from various sources. Their devotion to nature also transcended over to their religious practices, and a strong sense of community was built upon these foundations of religion, culture, and tradition.

Population estimates of Native Americans indicate approximately six thousand to twelve thousand natives inhabited the Hudson River Valley prior to European settlement. These tribes lived along the Hudson River, also known as “Muheakantuck,” during the Woodland Period from 1500 B.C. to A.D. 1600.¹ Living in close proximity to the river allowed for access to transportation, ample food, and fertile soil. Natives burned, cleared, planted the land, and built a collection of wigwams. Diet was dictated by the seasons, indicating a reliance on weather conditions. Fall was primarily the hunting season, catching deer, bear, birds, and weasel. Alternatively, spring and summer took advantage of warmer conditions, and fishing became the principal food source. The Hudson River was and continues to be auspiciously filled with striped bass, sturgeon, and eels, providing the Native Americans with a variety of food. Fish were caught with stone-weighted seines, weirs, nets set on poles, hooks, and bow and arrow.

¹ Stephen P. Stanne, *The Hudson: An Illustrated Guide to the Living River* (Piscataway, NJ: Hudson Sloop Clearwater, Inc., 2007) 93.

The dugout canoe, hollowed-out from the trunk of a tree with the aid of scrapers, allowed for fishing and transportation along the Hudson River.

Native Americans' cooked meals in clay pots or baked in corn husks. Daily meals typically consisted of cornmeal mush, fish, or meat. Artifacts discovered in the Valley indicate the utilization of cooking utensils. Although primitive, Native American medicine attempted to combat a variety of illnesses that afflicted its people. Sweat baths were common, and the spiritually skilled *shaman* treated the sick with local herbs and plants. Native Americans were led by a chief or *sachem*, acting as both a mediator and religious leader. According to oral tradition, "family organization, birth and death rituals, political structure, and a symbiotic relationship with nature were all informed by a rich mythological tradition."² Ardent belief in the lesser gods, known as manitous, influenced Native American's daily lives since these spirits inhabited the earth, water, and the sky. The great god Manitou, was thought to confine defiant spirits in the Highlands until the Hudson broke through this antiquated "prison." A deeply spiritual people, Hudson River Valley Native Americans incorporated religion in every aspect of their daily life.

It is evident that the Native Americans had a well established culture that took advantage of the plentiful resources available in the Hudson River Valley. Their ability to adapt to the conditions and thrive indicates a remarkably resilient people who contributed a considerable amount to the region's significant history.

² Stanne, 95.