



Illinois and the Midwest in the Development of Algonquian Culture

A very old tradition of the Lenni Lennape, the people more popularly known as the Delaware Indians, is that their ancestors once lived by a great sea on the very western portion of the continent. Civilized scholars once assumed that this tradition merely confused the Mississippi River with a great sea.

J. Peter Denny, however, surveys the linguistic and archaeological evidence about the inhabitants of the southern part Columbia Plateau of the Pacific Northwest thousands of years ago who spoke an Algic language.

They probably enjoyed a stable, bountiful subsistence based on camas root and salmon, and they were apparently socially and culturally advanced, egalitarian and wealthy. But sometime between 3800 and 3400 years ago they began a migration from their homeland toward the east.

They probably followed the Snake and Missouri rivers as much as was practical. A southern group followed the Missouri to southern Illinois and then up the Ohio and Wabash rivers to eastern Illinois and western Indiana. A northern group settled at the southern end of Lake

Michigan on the Kankakee River. This migration took several centuries and left in its wake the western Algonquian cultures such as the Blackfoot and the Arapaho.

The culture the Proto-Algonquians brought to the Midwest dramatically surpassed anything that had previously been achieved in the region. It was in the Midwest that over the course of some thousand years Proto-Algonquian developed into the Menomini/Cheyenne, Cree, Miami, Illinois, Ojibway, Potawatami, Fox/Sauk/Kickapoo/Mascouten, and Shawnee languages as well as a Proto-Eastern Algonquian language.

About 3,000 years ago the Proto-Eastern Algonquians migrated eastwards to the Atlantic seaboard, and spread out over several centuries from the Maritimes to Virginia, gradually producing the various Eastern languages including Lenni-Lenape.

Source: J. Peter Denny. "The Algonquian Migration from Plateau to Midwest: Linguistics and Archaeology". Pp. 103-124 in *Papers of the Twenty-second Algonquian Conference*, William Cowan, ed., Ottawa: Carleton University, 1991.