

Mahican Lesson Plans for Students and Teachers
Mahican Archaeology: Why is the past important?



(left) Hartgen Archaeology 2003 Dig at Van Alen Homestead.



(right) Mahican points, scrapers and implements from CCHS collection

Author/Creator: Shannon Ragone and Nancy Rothman

Audience(s): 4th Grade

Mission: To teach students from home about why the past is important through Mahican material culture and archaeological finds in the Columbia County Historical Society collection

Learning Objectives:

- Students will observe, analyze, and define the importance of their past and past peoples
- Identify local history of the Mahican Nation in Columbia County
- Evaluate and describe Mahican material culture and compare to their own material culture

Background:

We learn about the people who lived before us by examining what remains of their culture. We look for evidence of their shared customs, beliefs, values, behaviors, and artifacts. Artifacts are human-made objects. One of a few ways we learn about a people's culture is through their visible signs and objects, this is called material culture. We can find these objects and learn about material culture through performing Archaeology. Archaeology is the study of past people through their remains and objects left behind. To find these objects, archaeologists dig into the ground to find physical human remains and artifacts that have gotten buried over time.

From 1972 to 2003, Columbia County Historical Society hired Archaeologists to conduct four separate excavations at the Luykas Van Alen property. An excavation is the site where archaeologists determine to dig and look for artifacts. Columbia County Historical Society felt this was an important task because the finding of artifacts on this historic site can help us better understand who lived on that land before us, what their culture was like, and how they interacted with their environment. We can then preserve our physical findings for present and future learning.

From these four excavations and a donated collection of artifacts found along Kinderhook Creek, Columbia County Historical society has more than one-thousand Mahican artifacts in our collection. These artifacts have been identified and analyzed through research so we can learn about the culture of the people who made them and how old the objects are. Through this research, we learned that the Mahican artifacts consisted of projectile and spear points, scrapers, hammerstones, celts, gouges, pestles, mullers, ulus, knives, blades, and drills. Even without researching, some artifacts may seem familiar to articles we use today. Projectile and spear points are used for hunting. Pestles are used for cooking. Knives and blades for cutting food and objects. Hammerstones and drills are tools used to create or break apart other objects. Most of the artifacts in the CCHS collection are dated between the Early Archaic Period and the Late Woodland period. These periods represent a time long before European colonization and after the Mahicans and colonists began interacting. From these artifacts, we have learned that the Mahicans lived in the Luykas Van Alen property for over 4,000 years, much longer than the 200 year occupation of the Van Alens!

From the artifacts found at Van Alen, we know that objects tell us important things about past people and their culture. We encourage you to become archaeologists at home, and examine your own objects in a similar way archaeologists examine artifacts!

Materials:

- Pick one or a few objects in your home that are meaningful to you.
- A writing implement and paper, or a device to type on.

Step by Step Process:

- Pick an object or a few objects (they may be a group of objects that belong together) that are meaningful to you
- Try and make believe that you do not know anything about your object!
- Write down your observations with sight: What color is it? What shape is it? How big or small is it? What other objects does it look like?
- Write down what you experience through touching or picking up the object: What does it feel like? Does it feel warm or cold? Do you think it is supposed to be held in your hand? Why or why not? Does it make a sound?
- Since we learn about objects through our senses like sight or touch, from what you have written down so far, what do you think is this object's purpose? What is it used for? What do you think the object may tell you about the person or people it belongs to?

Further References/Resources/Information:

- <https://www.cchsnyc.org/van-alen-archaeology.html> - Our Exhibit on Van Alen archaeological finds
- <http://www.nativetech.org/metal/index.html> - Details about Native tools and technology

Glossary: Archaeology, Archaic Period, Artifact, Mahican, Woodland Period