

A Conestoga Harvest

Four activities to engage middle grade learners in critical thinking and hands-on fun!

Objective: Students will be able to identify the cultural contributions of 17th and 18th century Indigenous people in agriculture, food, work, and crafts, by reading stories and interacting with artifacts.

Standard: 8.2.6

- A. Identify and explain the political and cultural contributions of individuals and groups to Pennsylvania history from Beginnings to 1824.
- B. Identify and explain primary documents, material artifacts and historic sites important in Pennsylvania history from Beginnings to 1824.
- C. Identify and explain how continuity and change have influenced Pennsylvania history from the Beginnings to 1824.

Essential Questions:

What food did the Conestoga¹ people eat?

How did the Conestoga grow, store, and prepare food?

How are land, people, and culture connected through food?

Historical Background Resources:

- "Learn Our History." The Conestoga-Susquehannock tribe, 2025, <https://www.conestogasusquehannocktribe.com/history>
- "Native Peoples' Stories Video Project." Susquehannock Native Landscape, Susquehanna National Heritage Area, 2023, <https://susqnha.org/discover-river-history/susquehannock-native-landscape/>
- "River Roots: Forgotten Fruit: Pawpaw." River Roots Blog, Susquehanna National Heritage Area, 2022, <https://susqnha.org/riverroots-forgotten-fruit-pawpaw/>
- "Ancient Native American eel weirs slumber beneath the waters of the Susquehanna." Uncharted Lancaster, 2022, <https://unchartedlancaster.com/2022/12/08/ancient-native-american-stone-eel-weirs-slumber-beneath-the-waters-of-the-susquehanna/>
- "Lenape Fishing." Official Site of the Delaware Tribe of Indians, 2013, <https://delawaretribe.org/blog/2013/06/27/lenape-fishing/>
- "Pots from the Past: A Look at some Native American Pottery Types of the Early Contact Period." This Week in Pennsylvania Archaeology, 2020, <http://twipa.blogspot.com/2020/12/pots-from-past-look-at-some-native.html>

¹ Note on language: The name *Conestoga* has Iroquoian language roots and is the peoples' name for themselves. The term *Susquehannock* is an Algonquin Lenape word adopted by Europeans.

Introduction

To introduce the historical background of the Susquehannock-Conestoga people, show a map of historic Susquehannock-Conestoga land around the Susquehanna River and review a timeline of Conestoga life in the area. Consider showing the image of the painting “[Native Lands](#)” by Lancaster County artist Carol Oldenburg. Students will study the image and write down or tell a classmate three ways the food and culture are represented in the image. Possible answers include: planting or harvesting corn, cooking over fires, fishing in the river, etc.

Dig deeper: Students discuss what practices are familiar to them and which practices may seem different or new.



Carol Oldenburg, “Native Lands,” Oil on Canvas, 2021

Activity 1: Reading and Discussion Questions

Materials:

- “Conestoga Foodways” Reading (printable page at the end of this document)
- Discussion Questions

Procedure:

- Students read the “Conestoga Foodways” text in groups, in a Jigsaw formation, or out loud as a whole class.
- Students discuss in groups, or individually write an answer to a discussion question.

Expanded Context:

The Conestoga ate food native to the Susquehanna River and Chesapeake Bay. The Conestoga lived in semi-permanent cities or villages. Palisaded cities of longhouses housing hundreds to thousands of people were built to last 15-20 years, or until the soil and wildlife were depleted in the area and the longhouses deteriorated. Food cultivation and preparation involved the contributions of every member of the family. Natural resources like clay were important for food cultivation and preparation. Conestoga pottery, known in archeology as Susquehannock pots, were functional pieces that showcased beauty and skilled craftsmanship in everyday life. Metal pots introduced by traders were first repurposed to make other items like jewelry or spear heads. As the craft of pottery waned in the turbulent post-colonization upheaval of displacement and devastation, metal pots became more common in Conestoga cooking.

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The Conestoga or Susquehannock people lived along the Susquehanna River in modern-day central Pennsylvania. They lived on the trade paths between many different groups of people, Indigenous and European. They lived in large towns of longhouses made of wood and bark. Extended families lived together in one longhouse. They relied on the land and trade for food, shelter, clothing, and tools. If the people needed more food or resources they moved down the river and built a new town.

The Conestoga people were farmers. They cleared the land and planted vegetables like corn, beans, and squash. These crops are called “The Three Sisters,” because when they are planted together each one helps the others grow. The people harvested nuts, roots, cattails, and fruits like strawberries and pawpaw. Pawpaw is a native fruit that grows on trees like an apple. It is very soft inside and has a mild tropical flavor similar to a blend of banana and mango.

They also hunted animals to eat. Hunters used long arrows and spears with stone points to kill large animals like deer, elk, and wild turkeys. They also caught small animals like rabbits, squirrels, and birds. Each part of the animal was important. The Conestoga used the bones to make tools. They used the skin and fur of animals to trade with other groups or make clothing for themselves.

People ate fish and eels from the river too. They built weirs along the Susquehanna River. Weirs are large funnel-shaped dams made of stones across the riverbed. The stones guided fish swimming in the river into a narrow passage. Then, fishers could easily catch fish with spears or nets woven from plant fiber. They also dug for oysters in the muddy banks of the river. They ate the meat and used the shells for beads.

The Conestoga used canoes to travel across the river or carry supplies from one community to the next. These canoes were made from big tree trunks. The Conestoga made canoes by burning logs and hollowing out the insides with stone axes. It took a long time! The people talked, told stories, and ate food with their neighbors while they worked together.

In the spring, summer, and fall, the Conestoga ate fresh meat and vegetables, but they also saved food for winter. They dried squash and grain in the sun, and smoked meat by hanging it above a fire. They hung some food from the ceiling of their longhouses, while they put some food in big storage pots underground.

Skilled potters created beautiful pots from clay and crushed pieces of shell. These clay pots had a round bottom so they could sit in the coals or be hung by a rope over a fire. They were decorated with patterned designs made by the artist. Conestoga people cooked food for their families in clay pots or on flat slate stones heated on a fire. People ate from wooden dishes, shells, and gourds. They ate and enjoyed the food together with their family.

Discussion Questions

How does food shape people's identity? OR What does food reveal about people's culture or what they value?

Possible Themes or Answers: The ingredients show where someone lives; how they cook it might exemplify lifestyle patterns; what people eat might reflect their religion (kosher or halal); what they value in nature; or highlight a special ritual like a dish only eaten on a holiday.

Activity 2: Artifact Inquiry

Materials:

- Image of a Washington Boro Pot from the Mennonite Life Permanent Collection
- Inquiry questions

Procedure:

- Students study the pot for 1 minute without commenting
- Teacher asks inquiry questions one at a time, and students respond in class or group discussion

This pot was removed from an archeological site in Washington Boro, Lancaster County, PA. and was part of a collection of Susquehannock pottery of collector Gerald B. Fenstermaker. It is estimated to be from the mid-to-late 17th century.

Inquiry Questions:

- What do you notice?
- What might this object be used for?
- What is the object made of?
- Does this object look like something we use today?
- Describe the object's physical characteristics.
- What is unique?
- How was it made?
- Who used it?
- How else could it be used?
- Why is it important to our story?



Washington Boro Pottery (Mennonite Life Permanent Collection)

Activity 3: Clay Pot Project

Materials:

- Air dry clay
- Popsicle sticks
- Tooth picks
- String or Twine
- Glue
- Water
- Parchment paper

Procedure:

- Roll a small amount of clay into a ball with your hands. You may need a little water to keep the clay from drying out.
- Stick your thumb halfway into the ball of clay and pinch the clay between your thumb and forefinger in a circular motion.
- Continue to pinch around the side of your pot until the pot is the desired size.
- Wrap string around one inch of a popsicle stick and secure it to the stick with a small amount of glue on the ends.
- Press the string-wrapped stick into the sides and bottom of the pot to create a cross-hatched texture.
- Use a toothpick to carve geometric designs around the upper edge or collar of the pot.
- Set the pot on parchment paper to dry.

Activity 4: Planting Beans

Materials:

- Beans seeds, such as scarlet runner beans or pole beans
- Water
- Paper towels
- Small cups
- Potting soil

Procedure:

- Soak bean seeds in water overnight.
- Fold a paper towel into thirds and use it to line the sides of the cup. Scrunch a second paper towel to fill the middle of the cup.
- Dampen the paper towels with water.
- Slide a few bean seeds between the paper towel and the sides of the cup.
- Put the cup in a sunny spot and keep the paper towel damp.
- Transfer to soil when roots begin to grow.

Dig deeper: Students read [“The Legend of the Three Sisters”](#) published by Friends of Ganondagan. Encourage students to research native bean varieties in your geographic area. Examine the ways beans grow with corn and squash in an Indigenous Three Sisters Garden and how they each help the others grow. Explore the nutritional benefits of beans or cook a Three Sisters Stew with beans.

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