

Setting the Table: How Delaware Came to Be VS-5, 2/20/2024

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One billion years ago, Delaware was not identifiable on any geologic maps, because even the continents were not fully formed. However, by 540 million years BP (before present), the major land mass (Larussia) that would comprise virtually all the northern hemisphere continents¹, and Delmarva appeared as a small bump on the eastern side of North America. As the dinosaurs arose during the Cretaceous Period (146 million years ago), Delaware was still underwater, a fact that continued until 130 million years ago. At that point, the land that would become Delaware emerged from the water, but not permanently. The Big Shift that started the Tertiary Period 66.5 million years ago (caused by the huge meteorite that struck Mexico), caused the Earth to shift magnetic poles, rotate its axis 180 degrees, and cool rapidly to produce polar and subpolar ice sheets. This led to the Ice Ages, during which alternating warming and cooling periods occurred. Skipping ahead to the Quaternary Period ~2.6 million years ago, ice sheets and glaciers had advanced to Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey, and even parts of northern Delaware. From then until the Holocene Epoch (11,600 years ago) melting ice in the Catskill Mountains of New York eventually led to a constantly-flowing Delaware River that coursed 419 miles to the mouth of the Delaware Bay². At one point, the continental shelf extended 40 miles from its present location based on geologic evidence. Now, that shelf is underwater for 40 miles before you reach our current shorelines.

With this complicated geologic background, Delaware found itself midway between the southern and northern regions of our U.S. east coast. The importance of this transitional location in our diverse biological heritage can be seen in a reference to be added to this website⁴.

References

1. 2011. The Geological History of Indiana. Indiana University, Bloomington, IN.
2. 2021. The Geological Survey of Delaware, University of Delaware, Newark, DE.
3. 2001. *Delorme Atlas and Gazetteer of Delaware and Maryland*, p. 62, Yarmouth, ME.
4. The Geologic and Biologic History of Delaware, 2024 <https://www.sbhhistory.org>.