

Native Americans, the Dutch, and Mistress Anne Hutchinson

By

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When Henry Hudson, an Englishman of dark and moody character, arrived on his ship the *Half Moon* in 1609 and sailed up the river that would take his name, he claimed the land that would later be called New York for the Netherlands. Hudson was looking for the elusive Northwest Passage to India. His initial contact with the Indians did not go well, when John Colman, one of his crew, perished after taking an arrow to the neck. Hudson would be dead in the next 2 years.

The first evidence of humans in this area seems to date from 5000 BC. Primarily hunters and gatherers, hunting deer, rabbits, bear, elk, birds and collecting nuts, seeds, and berries. As time passed, these semi-nomadic tribes began to raise corn, beans, and squash while also harvesting shellfish of clams, oysters, and mussels from the nearby seashore.

When Hudson arrived, a variety of tribes spoke the Lenni Lenape tongue with odd sounding names like Wickquasageck and Rechgawawank (Manhattans). The indigenous people, contrary to popular belief, did not refer to themselves as Siwanoy, although the Europeans called them by that name.

These tribes all shared some general cultural characteristics. The village was the most important unit and tribal allegiance was extremely loose. These people spoke the Lenni Lenape language but different tribal groups had their own dialects. Communication with each other was difficult. These societies known to Europeans as Algonquians often lived in wigwams, made dug-out canoes, and used slash-burn methods to clear the land. Men did the hunting and fishing and the women did the planting and farming. Cooperation for survival was essential with each person in the family having an important job to perform.

Contrary to popular belief and according to recent works in genetics, archeology, anthropology, and linguistics, the Native Americans who occupied the Dutch land that Anne Hutchinson would eventually occupy were biologically, genetically, intellectually all but identical to the Dutch, English, and other who they came into contact with. Russell Shorto, the foremost historian on New Netherlands, states it even more clearly, "The Indians were as skilled, as duplicitous, and as capable of theological ruminations and technological cunning, as smart and pigheaded, and as curious and cruel as the Europeans who met them."

Two competing cultures with different values and goals, would make conflict between the Dutch and the indigenous tribes of this area inevitable. The area known today as Westchester and the Bronx were uninhabited, a frontier as dangerous and wild as any place in the 19th century West. The first person to live in the area north of Manhattan was Jonas Bronck. Bronck, a wealthy Dane, in 1639 purchased land between the Harlem and Bronx Rivers. The Bronx gets its name from Jonas.

Two years after Bronck's arrival, the inevitable clash of cultures between Native Americans and Europeans became a reality. A young Wickquasageck brave killed an aged wheelwright named Claes Swits. The Indian's uncle had been killed 15 years before and the young man was angry that his uncle's death remained unavenged. According to custom, it was his duty to avenge his departed uncle. The fact

that Swits had not killed his uncle was immaterial. The aged wheelwright had to die simply because he belonged to the tribe, the Dutch, who committed the first murder.

The appointment of the William Kieft in 1638 as Director General of the Dutch West India Company would escalate these cultural divisions into an unmitigated military disaster both for the Lenape tribes and the Europeans who settled on the Dutch territory know as New Netherlands. A group of Wickquasageck and Tappan Indians had come to Kieft seeking sanctuary from Mohawks farther north, to whom they were behind on tribute payments and had attacked them in their villages. On February 25, 1643 Kieft ordered an attack on these defenseless Indians who had been guaranteed safe passage in nearby Pavonia, today Jersey City.

An eye witness account described the inconceivable brutality of the massacre:

“Infants were torn from their mother’s breast, and hacked to pieces in the presence of their parents, and the pieces were thrown into the fire and in the water, and other sucklings, being bound to small boards, were cut, stuck, and pierced that it would break a heart of stone. Some were thrown into the river, and when the fathers and mothers endeavored to save them, the soldiers would not let them come on land but made both parents and children drown...”

129 Dutch soldiers descended on this camps and killed 120 Native Americans, most of whom were women and children. This attack united the Lenape tribes in the surrounding areas, to an extent as never seen before. The ensuing conflict known as Kieft’s war, 1643 to 1645, had tragic consequences.

In the fall of 1643, a force of 1,500 invaded the province and massacred any colonist they encountered. These attacks almost destroyed the Dutch settlement at New Amsterdam and surrounding areas. New Amsterdam became crowded with destitute refugees. Many left on ships bound for Holland. Two long, brutal years of war ensued. Finally the colonists. Upset about the needless war that Kieft had instigated, began to resist his rule.

Sadly, back in the summer of 1642, the political dissident, Anne Hutchinson arranged with Governor Kieft to purchase and settle in land that 14 years later would be part of the town of Eastchester. (Today the area that she settled is in the northeast Bronx on, or possibly near Co-op City.) The exact site of Anne Hutchinson’ settlement is not known. Kieft had placed Anne Hutchinson in a dangerous no man’s land at what was the center of Indian trouble.

Less than a year after Anne Hutchinson had arrived, Anne, six of her children, and nine of her party perished in an Indian attack at the start of Kieft’s war.

First in a series of articles on the colonial and revolutionary history of Eastchester. The next series of articles will focus on Anne Hutchinson and our Puritan legacy.

Please contact us at historian@eastchesterhistoricalsociety.org about any comments or questions you might have about this column.

