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William A. Starna [Indians of New Netherland](#)



Indians of New Netherland

Before the arrival of interlopers from western Europe's Low Countries in the early 17th century, what would be called New Netherland was home to an unknown but large number of American Indians. Along the south coast of New England and eastern Long Island resided Native groups speaking Quiripi, Mohegan-Pequot, Narragansett, Unquachog, Montauk, and other Southern New England Algonquian languages. The many communities of Munsees, who spoke the dialects of another Algonquian language — Munsee — occupied western Long Island and Manhattan, and the areas west into New Jersey, northeastern Pennsylvania, and the Delaware Valley, and then into the Hudson Valley to Catskill. Farther north above Albany and in the Housatonic Valley were the Mahicans, also Algonquian-speakers. Finally, west of Albany could be found the towns of the Iroquoian-speaking Mohawks.

There is general agreement regarding the settlement patterns and subsistence practices for the region's late pre-contact and early contact Algonquian-speakers. Archaeological data and the firsthand accounts of Europeans point to these Indians being relatively mobile, their dispersed hamlets and camps — villages, palisaded or otherwise, are unknown — suggesting seasonal occupations and adaptive flexibility. In great part, the Natives situated themselves near arable lands and fishing areas along the Hudson and Delaware Rivers and their tributaries; the coast, inlets, and bays of southern New England, Long Island, and New Jersey; and also on Manhattan, then called *Mannahatta*, 'the place where we get bows'. The Indians practiced a mixed economy based on hunting, fishing, foraging for wild plant resources, and the planting of corn, beans, and squashes. Unfortunately, it is impossible to assess the importance of any of these food-producing activities relative to others, or how they may have been carried out in terms of method or seasonal emphasis.

House forms common to the Algonquian-speakers included the ubiquitous wigwam (with various but related names), a domed or oval structure formed of bent and lashed poles and covered with reed or cattail mats or sheets of bark. Somewhat later, rectangular half-pole framed and bark dwellings are reported.

Munsee and Mahican social organization is poorly known, although descent in extended families and lineages trended toward the mother's line or the matrilineage. There is little evidence for the presence of clans. Marriages appear to have been relatively informal, arranged between families and involving the exchange of gifts. There are some reports of polygyny, where men had more than one wife.

Leadership among the Munsees and Mahicans consisted of headmen — "sachem" in English or "sackamacher" in Dutch, both words derived from a Native-language term meaning leader/chief, who held their positions through merit or achievement. Decision-making, routinely arrived at in councils of one form or another, was through consensus.

The Iroquoian-speaking Mohawks, located west of Albany and the Schoharie Valley, lived in densely populated towns on hills and terraces along the Mohawk River, many of which in the 17th century were palisaded. Extensive fields of corn, beans, and squashes planted on the river's floodplains signal the Indians' heavy investment in labor-intensive farming to which was added hunting, fishing, and the gathering of wild foods.

Iroquoian-speakers throughout the region lived in large, bark-covered houses — longhouses — routinely more than 100 feet in length, 20 feet wide, and nearly equally high. Occupying these dwellings were related families arranged in matrilineages, descent groups traced through women on the maternal side of a family which, in turn, made up the membership of the three clans found among the Mohawks — Turtle, Wolf, and Bear. From the lineages came headmen — again, sachems and sackamachers — warriors, and clan elders, male and female, whose councils governed each of the several Mohawk towns that existed early in the 17th century. By the 1620s, the Mohawks and the four other Iroquois nations had formed a political



PREVIOUS PAGE (TOP):
Pearl Street and Coenties Slip [Park Row to
Prince Street]. 1890–1934. X2012.61.21.25
PREVIOUS PAGE (BOTTOM) AND ABOVE:
Courtesy and © Eric W. Sanderson

ABOUT

William A. Starna

William A. Starna is Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at the State University of New York College at Oneonta. He has held visiting and adjunct appointments at Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario; the University at Albany; and Binghamton University; and has served as adjunct Curator of Ethnology at the New York State Museum. He was the National Endowment for the Humanities Distinguished Visiting Professor in the Humanities at Hartwick College in 2014. Professor Starna has worked with over 20 American Indian tribes on treaty rights, land claims, and the federal acknowledgment process, and for 25 years was a consultant with the Native American Rights Fund headquartered in Boulder, Colorado. Professor Starna is the author of numerous scholarly essays and several books.

Biography of Skiwias, Mahican Headman

Endnotes

Starna, William A. "American Indian Villages to Dutch Farms: The Settling of Settled Lands in the Hudson Valley," In *Dutch New York: The Roots of Hudson Valley Culture*, edited by Roger Panetta, 73–90. New York: Fordham University Press, 2009.

Starna, William A. *From Homeland to New Land: A History of the Mahican Indians, 1600–1830*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013.

alliance known as the Confederacy or League of the Iroquois, which would play a pivotal role in colonial–Indian affairs through to the Revolution.

Religious expression among the Algonquians and Iroquoians was structured around localized forms of diverse and dynamic relationships to persons and powers in their environment. In general, the focus for Algonquians was on Manitou, a word used to convey power — natural and supernatural, positive or negative — or the cultivation of power usually through tutelary or guardian spirits. Iroquoian religious culture followed from an elaborate cosmology; the epic of the Peacemaker (Deganawidah) and the formation of the League; and the revelations of the Seneca prophet Handsome Lake, all amid seasonal ceremonies and medicine societies.

The generally untroubled first years of contact between native people and the Dutch were soon altered by two transformative events — the trade in furs and the introduction of European diseases. The fur trade was spurred by current fashion in Europe requiring a steady flow of beaver pelts to be used in the hat-making industry. According to early accounts, there was believed to be an unlimited supply of this fur-bearing animal in the region, one that could be exploited by Dutch and Indian alike. For native people, the abrupt shift in their economies as they turned to trapping and trading pelts to the Dutch for European goods, signaled significant, even inevitable, culture change.

The first European contagion struck coastal areas in 1616, the interior in 1633. These and recurrent epidemics exposed Indians to cycles of population decline, in some places approaching mortality rates of 60 to 90%. Such losses were accompanied by steep drops in fertility and disordered social, political, and economic systems, all of which had a profound effect on native communities.

Skiwias, called Aepjen ("little monkey") by the Dutch, was a Mahican headman — a sachem (English) or sackamacher (Dutch), both words derived from a Native-language word meaning leader/chief — active in New Netherland from the mid-1640s to the 1660s. There is nothing known of his life before he participated in a 1645 treaty between Dutch authorities and several Munsee groups from the Hudson Valley. His name next appears among documents tied to the sale of lands across the Hudson River from Fort Orange, farther down the east side at about Claverack and Hudson, and also on the west side close-by Catskill, where he acted as a broker and witness to the sales. A few years later he was unflatteringly named in a lawsuit brought by Brant Aerts van Slichtenhorst, former director of the patroonship of Rensselaerswijck, concerning this and other land transactions.

From all indications, Skiwias was trusted by his Dutch clients and also by some of his own people in these and other proceedings. However, his participation in the sale of what were said to be Mahican lands was probably more to his benefit than for the Indians he represented. His role as the "go-to" person for the Dutch, who wanted to acquire Indian land, seems well placed. Skiwias was very much the entrepreneur and opportunist, and probably much less the political figure some thought him to be.

Indians of New Netherland

LESSON 2

Introducing the Topic

Before any European explorers arrived on the land that would become New Netherland in the 17th century, it was home to numerous Native American groups who spoke many different dialects of several native languages. Some of these groups spoke Northern Iroquoian languages such as Mohawk, and some spoke Eastern Algonquian languages, such as Munsee (the Natives later known as Lenape fall into this group) and Mahican. They built homes called wigwams (Algonquian) and longhouses (Iroquoian) using materials available in their surroundings — poles made from trees that were cut, shaped, and covered with tree bark or mats made from reeds or cattails. The native people situated themselves near farmable land and fishing areas along the Hudson and Delaware Rivers including Manhattan, then called *Mannahatta*, ‘the place where we get bows’. The Indians practiced a mixed economy based on hunting, fishing, foraging for wild plant resources, and the planting of corn, beans, and squashes. There was believed to be an unlimited supply of beaver in the region that could be exploited by Dutch and Indian alike. The generally untroubled first years of contact between native people and the Dutch were soon altered by two transformative events—the fur trade and the introduction of European diseases in 1616.

Essential Questions

How did Native Americans provide for their needs? How did they interact with the new settlers on *Mannahatta*?

Vocabulary List

- Dialect
- Explore
- Longhouse
- Native
- Wigwam

Introducing the Sources

**Native American stone axe head.
17th century. 81.96.2**

- A wooden handle might once have been attached

In this lesson, newly digitized artifacts from the collection of the Museum of the City of New York will help students discover where Native Americans lived, what tools they used, and how they interacted with the new settlers.



OBJECT BASED QUESTIONS

- What kinds of tools did Native Americans use?
What materials did they use to make them?



Novi Belgii Novaeque Angliae nec non partis Virginiae tabula multis in locis emendata. 1623. 38.260.86

- Native American villages are at the far left and a Native American figure is to the right of the inset picture of New Amsterdam.

DOCUMENT BASED QUESTIONS

- What do you notice about these villages?
- How would you describe the houses?
- What do you see surrounding the town? What do you think it is for?

Nova Amsteldam. ca. 1670. 38.512

- This image shows a view of New Amsterdam from south of the town, in New York Harbor.
- There are numerous large European sailing ships, powered by the wind, and smaller European sailing boats or row boats.
- There are also several canoes being paddled by Native Americans.



DOCUMENT BASED QUESTIONS

- What are the ships used are for?
- Look closely at the boats in the water. What types of boats do you see?
- What is the same about these types of transportation? What is different?

**Pearl Street and Coenties Slip.
1890–1934. X2012.61.21.25**

- This print was made around the turn of the 20th century, but it depicts a scene from 1660. The building at the center is the *Stadt Huys*, New Amsterdam's City Hall.
- The buildings are designed like Dutch buildings in Amsterdam, with stepped gables at the ends of the roof.
- The group includes European settlers, both men and women, and Native Americans. The man with the wooden leg is Petrus Stuyvesant who was the Director-General from 1647–1664.



DOCUMENT BASED QUESTIONS

- What do you notice about the buildings? How do they compare to the Native American village on the *Novi Belgii* map?
- What do you notice about the people?
- What do you think is happening in this image? What could the Dutch settlers and the Native Americans want from each other?

Further Reading: Skiwias, Mahican Headman

Have students read William Starna's biography of Skiwias, Mahican Headman (or read it out loud to younger students). How does the story relate to the images and artifacts included in this section?

- Skiwias was a Mahican leader, called a sackamacher by the Dutch, or a sachem by the English. He acted as a go-between, helping to arrange treaties and sales of land between the Dutch and several Munsee and Mahican groups.
- He might have lived in a village like the one we see on the *Novi Belgii* map, built with the help of stone axes. He probably ate food hunted with a bow and might have hunted that way himself.

Activity

Book a trip to the Museum of the City of New York for the hands-on, interactive History Lab program, *Mannahatta*. Drawing on the Wildlife Conservation Society's *Mannahatta Project*, which meticulously reconstructed the natural landscape of Manhattan in 1609, the students will use maps, images, and Native American objects to explore the relationship between the Lenape people and their surrounding habitat. Students will then create a storyboard tracing how the Lenape used the island's natural resources in their daily lives.

To learn more about arranging a fieldtrip for your students, visit <http://www.mcny.org/education>.

Contemporary Connections

Show students the New York City flag. What symbols can be seen on the seal in the center of the flag?

- A Dutchman, a Native American, a windmill, beavers, and barrels of flour

Why are these symbols important to New York City today? How do they celebrate New York City's Dutch heritage?

- The beavers represent New Amsterdam in the international fur trade.
- The barrels represent the entrepreneurial spirit of the colony.
- The windmill, familiar to the Dutch and part of the Netherland landscape, was an important feature of New Amsterdam, harnessing the power of the wind to grind grain. The grain helped to sustain the colony as food and as an item for trade.
- The New York City seal that we use today was first introduced in 1915. Invite students to draft a list of objects, people, or places they consider to be of historical importance. Ask students to illustrate and propose a new flag bearing their choices.