

# History

## TURTLE ISLAND & NATIVE AMERICANS

Two major groups of Native Americans lived in this region when Europeans first arrived – the Algonquians and the Iroquois. Algonquian is a linguistic term denoting tribes that spoke dialects of the same language family. Algonquian-speaking tribes occupied the Hudson Valley, Long Island, Manhattan Island, New Jersey, the Delaware River Valley and central Pennsylvania. They were made up of the Lenni Lenape (called the Delaware by the British), Shawnee, Mohegan (or Mohican) and Munsee.

The Lenape – whose name means the ‘Real People’ or ‘Ancient Ones’ – were regarded by other tribes as the oldest northeastern Algonquian culture. Like all Algonquian peoples, they lived in small groups or bands and moved with the seasons; they mixed hunting-and-gathering and agriculture; and they lived in temporary shelters. From shell mounds, it’s clear they relied on the abundance of the sea, and they grew the ‘three sisters’: corn, beans, and squash. The Lenape had no written language, but they gave us the creation myth of North America as ‘Turtle Island.’ As the story goes, at first there was only water, and then the turtle raised its back and the earth dried. A tree grew in the middle; from the roots sprouted the first man, and the first woman sprouted from the tip of the tree as it bent over and touched the earth.

The Iroquois were a military and political confederacy of different Native American tribes that occupied most of upstate New York and parts of northern Pennsylvania. They included the Cayuga, Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga and Seneca peoples, who together formed the powerful Iroquois League (or Iroquois Confederacy) in the 1500s, either just before or soon after first contact with Europeans. The Susquehannock people were also Iroquois and were named after the Susquehanna River where they lived. The Iroquois were strong-willed, empire-minded, expansionist tribes who had more highly developed agriculture and made war on their southern Algonquian neighbors.

It’s impossible to know how many Native Americans lived in the region prior to European contact. Some estimate that New Jersey had no more than 20,000 people, and Manhattan may have been home to 1000. Nearly all initial European encounter stories describe tribes as agreeable and peaceful and willing to trade. Native American tribes, but particularly the Iroquois, developed complex trading partnerships with Europeans, and they got caught up in the European feuds for New World dominance. But inevitably, whether Native Americans were treated with disdain or respect, whether it was done through treaty or war, the end result never varied: native tribes were displaced and disenfranchised and forced to leave or be killed.

*Journey into Mohawk Country* by George O’Connor (2006) turns the translated journal of a 23-year-old Dutch trader in New York in 1634 into a graphic novel, slyly bringing to colorful life the world between the lines.

## TIMELINE

1500s

Iroquois League is formed, eventually comprised of six nations in upstate New York. The Iroquois call themselves Haudenosaunee (People of the Longhouse), having lived around the Finger Lakes at least since 1000 AD.

1524

Italian navigator Giovanni da Verrazano sails into New York Bay, the first European to do so. He anchors at Sandy Hook, and today the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, connecting Brooklyn and Staten Island, honors his feat.

1609

In September, English explorer Henry Hudson arrives in New York Bay in the *Half Moon* and sails as far up the Hudson River as he can. He exchanges knives for tobacco with the natives, who are, he says, ‘very civil.’

The displacement of Native American tribes was a slow, torturous process. It occurred incrementally throughout the late 1600s and 1700s, as European settlements grew into colonies and cities, and then into a new nation. By the early 1800s, every single remaining organized tribe had been relocated west, many to Oklahoma.

## NO CHINA, JUST BEAVER PELTS

In 1524, about 32 years after Christopher Columbus ran headlong into the North American continent, Italian navigator Giovanni da Verrazano, representing France, was the first European to sail the Atlantic coast and enter New York Bay. There wasn't much follow-up, so this event has largely taken a backseat to the arrival of English explorer Henry Hudson, who sailed into New York Bay in 1609 and claimed the area for the Dutch.

Hudson was looking for the fabled 'Northwest Passage' – a western sea route to the bejeweled Orient that would revolutionize European trade and the balance of power. No luck, but Hudson did report on the excellent harbor, the abundance of fur animals and the enterprising nature of the locals. The Dutch were ecstatic, and by 1624, the Dutch West India Company had established several settlements to exploit the fur trade, at Fort Orange (present-day Albany, NY) and at places in New Jersey like modern-day Jersey City and Camden. In 1626, the Dutch purchased Manhattan Island from the Algonquians and named it New Amsterdam.

Manhattan Island was clearly the most strategic location on the best harbor. New Amsterdam was a company town whose sole purpose was commerce, attracting traders from all over the known world and resulting in an extremely diverse, libertine society whose only unbreakable law was free trade (see p34). The influence of this Dutch settlement has since been largely overwritten by the English, who followed, but at least initially, the British made few changes to the settlement's essential character.

Other nations also arrived, such as Swedish and Finnish traders who established New Sweden along the Delaware River in 1638 (near present-day Philadelphia), though the Dutch annexed this colony in 1655. The English also expanded into the region, and in 1664, they strong-armed the Dutch into turning over New Amsterdam to them. They renamed the island New York after the Duke of York, brother of King Charles II.

The English also acquired New Jersey, and in 1681, King Charles II gave English Quaker William Penn a charter to own land west of the Delaware River (to pay off a debt). William Penn founded his Pennsylvania colony as a 'holy experiment' in religious freedom and liberal government. Rather optimistically, he named his capital Philadelphia (Greek for 'Brotherly Love'). He established a fairly progressive code of laws that guaranteed religious tolerance, trial by jury and protection of property.

A masterful piece of narrative history, *The Island at the Center of the World* (2004) by Russell Shorto evokes the cantankerous, unruly 17th-century Dutch colony of New Amsterdam, without which America wouldn't have been the same.

Don't lug this tome to the beach, but for the definitive story of Manhattan, read *Gotham* (2000) by Edwin Burrows and Mike Wallace. New York City's story is indeed a 'saga of the nation.'

### 1626

A famous real estate swindle involves the Dutch 'buying' Manhattan Island from Algonquian tribes for 60 guilder's worth of household goods. Though a symbol of Native American disenfranchisement, the Algonquians don't actually leave.

### 1664

A British naval fleet parks off New Amsterdam, threatening war with the Dutch settlement. Peg-legged Dutch director Peter Stuyvesant, without any defenses, is forced to surrender the Manhattan colony to England.

### 1682

Quaker William Penn visits his Pennsylvania colony, befriends the Lenape and institutes freedom of religion, trial by jury and free elections. He successfully markets his 'holy experiment' to other persecuted religious minorities.