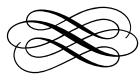


Kindred Spirits



AFFIRMING OUR INTERDEPENDENCE

Natives of New York

Manhattan clearly illustrates the ideological war between European and Algonquin belief-systems, and who won. The square dominates—the circle is almost extinct.

—Evan T. Pritchard,
Native New Yorkers

The Hudson Landing

To the Lenape people fishing in their canoes, the appearance of the sails of Henry Hudson's ship, the Half Moon, on the horizon—mistaken at first for the wings of a great white waterfowl, and then, as the ship drew closer to shore, for a large house or temple borne across the water—seemed to be a momentous and holy event, arising from beyond the Deep Waters and out of the East, the direction of the rising sun. Some of their ancient prophets and wise men had prophesied the coming of the Creator; the Great Chief of the Spiritual World, in such a way; their vision of his visitation was so vivid and sure that they had composed a Song a year before, in expectation of his coming, and had made a drum out of the shell of a great sea turtle to accompany the singing and dancing to be performed in his honor.

Surely this was the Great Chief, standing in the small boat being rowed to shore, dressed in a red coat with white ruffles and looking like some supernal being who never had to deal directly with the earth—while holding to his eye a tubular metallic instrument that seemed to focus his vision and concentrate his powers. He had white skin, like that of a pure spirit; a red coat, the color of life blood; and blue eyes, like none they had ever seen before. A trail of white beaver skins was laid before him, for traversing the beach to the big tent where the wise men and counselors of this band of Lenape awaited the awesome responsibility devolved upon them by his almighty presence. All the people stood along the path that he walked, singing songs in his praise as he passed.

This display of honor and worship seems to have had a deep effect on Hudson, a famously autocratic captain who had inspired mutinies among his crews. He managed to communicate to his hosts, circled around him in their meeting tent and dressed in elkskins, moccasins, feathered mantles, and copper ornaments, that he was in reality not the Creator but their brother from across the sea. He had been with them

in times past, they had been separated by unfortunate events over the ages, but they were now reunited, and he hoped they would never be separated again; furthermore, he said, when his kinsmen across the sea were told that their lost red brethren had been found, they would be overjoyed.

Then he gave the Lenape dignitaries gifts, such as hoes and axes, knives and beads. And some dozen of their most venerated ones filled a long canoe and rowed out to the anchored ship, bringing gifts in return, of maize, dried currants, green tobacco—and ornate clay pipes in which to smoke that powerful herb. They stayed until dusk, making music and enjoying the captain's hospitality, before returning to their canoe. "At night they went on land again," wrote Robert Juet, one of the crew members, in his journal, "so wee rode very quiet, but durst not trust them."

What actually accounted for the events of the next day, so quickly contradicting the spirit of this initial celebration of brotherhood, could perhaps be detected in those suspicious words from the written record, but will never be known for certain.

The morning mists of a humid summer hung over the harbor into which the Half Moon was steered, and Hudson sent out five men in the landing boat to scout ahead and sound the waters. They may have explored the coast of today's Staten Island and encountered some of the native Weehawken people, and it's also possible they found their way to what we now know as Brooklyn and met a band of Canarsies, who intermittently occupied those shell-strewn eastern shores and were reputed to be more aggressive.

None of the newcomers knew the differences among the bands of Lenape, nor even what they called themselves or their lands, but when the fog finally lifted the second morning, the four survivors in the landing boat returned to the Half Moon and reported that, after exploring the length of the bay, they had been attacked by natives who chased them in two long canoes. The sailors had shot and killed three of the natives, while barely managing to escape. But their leader, John Coleman, had been pierced through the neck with an arrow, and bled to death in agony overnight as the other four crew members, two of them wounded themselves, suffered helplessly beside him.

Hudson commanded the ship to set sail at once, and they crossed the bay to the mouth of its broadest tributary, steering north past increasingly high hills on either

shore, along the western edge of what we know now as Manhattan. The red sun had set behind the granitic cliffs to the west and they had sailed some ten miles up the river before they finally came upon a likely place of shelter—the mouth of another, much smaller river to the east, turbulent even here with tidal currents. Beyond overarching boughs of ancient willows and oaks was a misted cove, alive with the croaking of frogs and the murmuring of doves and owls, where they could anchor for the night, tend to their wounded, and, if luck was with them, meet with marauders only in their sleep.

Native Manhattan

Henry Hudson was an English sea captain hired by the Dutch East India Company of Amsterdam to find a "northwest passage" across America, a long-sought shortcut for trade with the Far East. His major accomplishment, unexpectedly, was to explore the land and waters of what would become New York the city and the state, and to travel the farthest navigable length of the river that flowed down from the north into the great bay. The river had been called *Mohicanituk* ("the river that flows both ways") by the natives of its broad valley for as long as anyone could remember, but Hudson, having "discovered" it for his expansive European employers, renamed it, clumsily, "The River of Mountains." Later it was renamed again by the British—the Hudson River.

An ethic of hard work and material gain left little room for the simpler and less acquisitive lifestyle of the native Americans, whose legacy to their displacers was a natural environment that was well preserved from attentive care and respectful use.

The history is familiar to most of us. The Dutch colonizers of "New Netherlands" followed Hudson's expedition, quickly establishing a foothold for their mercantile empire and pushing the original inhabitants to the north and west by various means, both shrewd and violent, as their American colony expanded. The settlers imposed an ethic of hard work and material gain that left little room for the simpler and less acquisitive lifestyle of the native Americans, whose legacy to their displacers was a natural environment that was well preserved from attentive care and respectful use.

Still, the literate Dutch opened the way for the establishment of a continental and international liberality at the heart of the New Netherlands colony—*Manhattan* (in the Munsee language, "rocky island"), which retained that tradition in perpetuity—as well as a free press and printing culture that

produced half the bound books of the day. Although the city took root at the expense of the native population—excesses on the Dutch side prompted escalating retaliations that hastened the natives' removal—the cosmopolitan populace preferred the relatively tolerant Dutch lifestyle to the oppressively militant and traditionalist British culture that eventually supplanted it.

In 1664, the British took over New Netherlands from Peter Stuyvesant and renamed both city and state "New York" (for their Duke of York, who became King James II). Their army and navy were based there, and they occupied the island of Manhattan for most of the years leading up to the Revolutionary War, until they were finally routed from the thirteen newly independent states in 1781.

The new Americans developed Manhattan and the country around it—the "Empire State"—into such an engine of prosperity and wealth that in the course of the nineteenth century the natural landscape of the island was almost wholly overwhelmed by ironwork and concrete. By 1811, John Jacob Astor, millionaire dealer of beaver pelts, and DeWitt Clinton, wealthy mayor of the city and later governor of the state, had implemented a plan to flatten and pave over the entirety of lower Manhattan and section it into a grid pattern of rectangular blocks, to facilitate the burgeoning growth of new buildings. Hills were removed, springs were filled in, and rivers covered over;

a totally artificial environment was constructed over ground both excavated and desecrated as the modern metropolis of hard-edged steel emerged.

The original inhabitants of Manhattan at the time of the Hudson expedition numbered over 15,000; there were over 50,000 in the region that included Long Island and the lower Hudson River Valley. Within ten years of Hudson's happy gathering with the tribal sachems, 90 percent of the native Lenape had been decimated by European-imported diseases—measles, smallpox, typhus, cholera—to which they lacked any immunity. The survivors were forced to the westernmost reaches of the state, where eventually, in the 1790s, starved out and their villages burned, they were pushed even farther west and north, under orders of President Washington.

Evan T. Pritchard's *Native New Yorkers* (Council Oak Books, 2002)

chronicles this history in far greater, though nonlinear, detail. The loose structure of the book and its sometimes circuitous narrative can be disconcerting at first, but is not surprising coming from a spokesperson for an alternative consciousness and way of life, who begins his fourth chapter with a study of the curvilinear orientation of the native mind as opposed to the rectilinear mindset of the occupying Europeans.

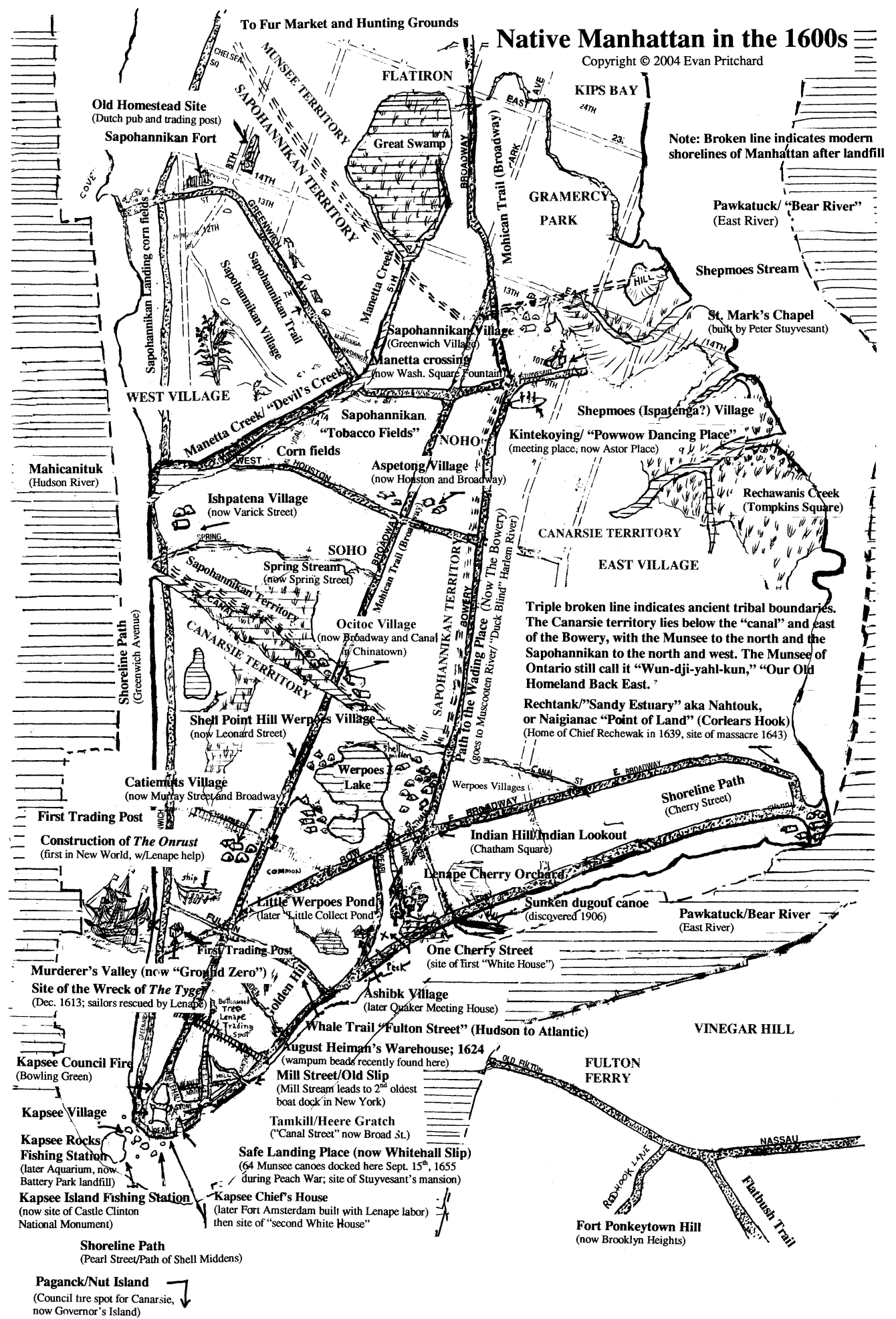
The importance of the “hoop,” or circle, like the “medicine wheel,” was taught by the native elders, according to Pritchard. They perceived nature to be full of circles—the sun and moon, the bird’s nest, the iris of the eye, the surrounding horizon—and when in council, the people sat in a circle so that everyone present had an equal chance to be heard. But the conquering civilization brought squares and boxes, beginning with the square Fort Amsterdam; the grid pattern of rectangles that it imposed on its central meeting grounds was made to order for keeping people in or keeping them out, and under control—after the fashion of the European social hierarchy.

Walking Manhattan

Insights like these are found throughout Pritchard’s book, a cumulatively powerful depiction of a way of life that still has critical lessons to teach, however isolated and pushed back to the geographical and cultural fringes it may be now. Pritchard is at his most effective in communicating the native consciousness via guided “walking tours” that uncover traces of the beautiful and complex civilization that existed here in harmony with the natural world for far longer than we have taken to destroy it—the world of the Lenape culture, which still lies under the concrete beneath our feet.

His walk through Greenwich Village is probably the most colorful and draws out the author’s encyclopedic knowledge of that past world. The “Tour of the Sapohannikan Trail” begins at Gansevoort and Hudson streets—a broad cobblestone plaza that few New Yorkers know firsthand, or are aware is the site of the old Sapohannikan fort (named after “the people of the tobacco field”), a native-built structure on the east-west trail across Manhattan that existed for hundreds of years before the Dutch arrived. Later it became a crossroads and a trading post, where the Dutch traded with the Lenape and cashed in early by building a large inn—still there now, after many reconstructions, as the Old Homestead Inn. Trading at the Sapohannikan fort continued only until 1661, as native populations dwindled.

The main trunk of the Sapohannikan Trail leads down Greenwich Avenue through the heart of the Village to the central fountain of Washington Square, where in ancient times the Lenape gathered on a community meeting ground to play games, play drums, hang out, and hear music—just as we do today. But



Evan Pritchard contributes this original, hand-drawn map of lower Manhattan, especially to accompany this column for New York Spirit. It can also be clipped out and carried as a useful guide to downtown buildings, parks, and landmarks, on any of the walking tours that he frequently leads there—or, of course, on any walking tour of one’s own. As he reminds us, the spirit of the indigenous ancestors lies just beneath the surface, and all it takes is a conscious awareness of their presence to invoke them.

at that time, *Manetta* Creek coursed through the grounds, arising from a swamp that existed uptown where the Flatiron Building now stands, and continuing on southwest of the meeting ground to the *Mohicanituk* River.

Pritchard explains how the entire sinuous length of the creek was the home, according to the Lenape, of a mythical serpentlike monster called *Manetta*, who terrorized the people and whose existence ensured constant discord and disruption among them—until it was finally vanquished by *Nanabush*, the archetypal hero of Lenape prehistory. Although the creek was filled in and buried during the great paving-over of the early 1800s, it still runs beneath Fifth Avenue and Washington Square, following its immemorial course. We learn from the book that its waters can still be seen bubbling up in the lobby of a Fifth Avenue apartment building, where a copper plaque identifies the underground stream as “Manetta Brook.”

The Sapohannikan Trail can be followed farther across Manhattan to its intersection with the much longer Mohican Trail, which follows roughly the same course from the southern to the northern end of the island as Broadway, its modern incarnation, does now, and continues beyond to a very distant end at the city of Montreal. Most of us wouldn't even consider a walking tour of the length of Manhattan today, but for the Lenape this was simply the way to travel north—on foot, not even by horse. It was the indigenous interstate. Three different tribal cultures shared Manhattan, and these were two of the trails that divided and united them all. Busy agricultural communities lined their routes, as did community cornfields and cherry orchards.

At the rounded northeast corner of Manhattan, a branch of the Mohican Trail leads to the Indian path to the “Wading Place,” where it was possible to ford the *Muscooten* River (now the Harlem River) at its shallowest point and continue north along what became the Boston Post Road. Less than a mile to the west, close to the confluence of the two rivers and looking down on it from a hillside above, is the site of *Nipnischen*, a major fort and council house of the *Weckweegeek* peoples, who lived in peace with the neighboring *Keskeskick* and *Paparinemin* peoples on the hills along the rivers north of Manhattan. (See the map printed in our February–March issue.)

The log-fortified council house where they would all gather for meetings looked down and across the *Muscooten* toward a tidal inlet that formed a sheltered cove, now known as Half Moon Cove in Manhattan's Inwood Hill Park, where, on an evening in the late summer of 1609, Captain Hudson steered his little ship for the night, seeking refuge from any lurking bands of murderous savages.

— *William Meyers*

