New York City

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At the northern tip of Manhattan, where the waters of the Hudson divide to form the Harlem River and, running eastward, separate the island from the Bronx before joining up with the East River and flowing into New York Bay—it is here, well off the traditional tourist circuit, that Inwood Hill Park lies. A little-known spot, it has a certain bearing on the city's topography, and it is symbolic of the intertwining of past and present at the heart of New York's history.

Lapping the soft stern of Manhattan, this particular section of the Harlem River is actually artificial. Originally it flowed more to the north, around Marble Hill, and formed a winding bend, further bedeviling efforts at navigation among the maze of straits, bays, islands, promontories, and secondary branches that unravel their way east and southeast of Manhattan. In 1895 a decision was made to open a new waterway in that section of the river: the original bed was filled and a softer bend was created a few miles to the south. So, on paper at least, Marble Hill passed over to the Bronx, but such was the outcry among its inhabitants that the jurisdiction of this tiny stretch of hilly terrain was soon returned to Manhattan. Yet another strange and fascinating chapter in the local history of the metropolis.

But the reason I’ve ventured all the way up here to these river banks is another. Set somewhere in a rock along one of the paths weaving their way through the park, there should be a plaque reminding visitors that one of the island's biggest native villages once stood nearby: Shorakkopoch, inhabited by the Weckweesgeek Indians (or, according to some, by the Reckgawancs), a subtribe of the Wappingers. The plaque should also remind onlookers that it was precisely here, in 1626, that the colonial governor of Nieuw Amsterdam, Peter Minuit, was supposed to have purchased the entire island of Manhattan from this tribe for the equivalent of sixty guilders (twenty-four dollars) in beads and trinkets.

I say “supposed” because some measure of doubt persists. Indeed, another version of the event assuredly recounts that the meeting took place between the Dutch and the native Manate Indians, a subtribe of the Matouacs, this time at
the opposite end of Manhattan, near Battery Park and the present-day site of the U.S. Custom House—in other words, just a few blocks away from Wall Street. And I must admit that this second version carries greater conviction: first, because it is more plausible (in 1626 the northern area of Manhattan was practically terra incognita), and second, because it is more suggestive (where else could such a bargain have been more appropriately struck if not in the area that, two and a half centuries later, would become the “business district”?). However, I still prefer to imagine the episode having taken place here, among the last remaining woods of Manhattan’s primeval forests—somewhere in the watery, leafy silence of these paths and hills (Minuit forging along the path at the head of his men in baggy puffed trousers and broad-brimmed hats; the Weckweesgeeks lined up in front of the village with their canoes ditched along the shore just a few yards off)—and not amidst the frenetic cacophony of narrow canyons downtown.

Whatever the truth of the matter, it is from here, from this past, that we must first set off to discover Manhattan: by piecing together its history through an understanding of names.

So, the Weckweesgeeks or the Reckgawancs (or the Manates, if the other version is to be believed . . .)—the opening phase of Manhattan’s history is far from simple. The tribes and subtribes are numerous, the relationships complex, the trails beset with traps, the settlements clouded in mist, and any single interpretation is necessarily subject to revision. (There is even an all-American version that claims that Manhattan was “sold” by Chief Tammany, whose name is thought by some to loom behind “Tammany Hall,” the palm-greasing political machine of the Democratic Party in New York; but the truth is that the chief’s real name was Tammanend, and he “sold” Philadelphia to the English in 1682.)

What is certain is that this island, with its mild climate, its abundantly fertile soil, and its nourishing profusion of natural fruits, was inhabited by certain tribes and subtribes belonging to the great Algonquin family. Members of these tribes called themselves Lenapes (“native men”), but the Europeans called them “Delawares” after the bay to the north of Jamestown, which took its name from the first governor of Virginia, Sir Thomas West, the third Duke de la Warr. The island was also inhabited by Wappinger, Matouac, and Mohican tribes and subtribes (again, belonging to the Algonquin family), as well as by certain tribes and subtribes (like the Mohawks) of the great rival family, the Iroquois of the Five Nations. Thus it was that the first European explorers of Manhattan island (Giovanni da Verrazzano, Henry Hudson, and the fur merchants of the
Dutch East India Company) came face to face with the Weckweesgeeks and the Manates, as well as the Canarsies, the Matinecocs, the Rockaways, the Nechtancs, the Tenkenas, the Paperimemins, and plenty of others besides—about twenty villages in all, linked together by trails. The most important of these was the so-called Weckweesgeek Trail that cut its way through Manhattan from top to bottom, a kind of latter-day Broadway running east (and not west) of what is today Central Park. (Evan T. Pritchard’s Native New Yorkers [2002] is a fascinating account of this complex history.)

The Lenape and other Algonquin Indians were hunters and fishermen. They lived in longhouses capable of hosting several families, and they built highly maneuverable canoes out of tree trunks; they cultivated corn, beans, pumpkins, and tobacco, cooked hominy and succotash in terracotta pots, and ate out of wooden plates decorated with animal designs. They were also great oyster lovers: discarded shells littered their settlements and adorned the banks of the two rivers. Their matriarchal form of social organization related to a “primitive communism” that gave short shrift to any ideas of private ownership of the earth (the Great Mother) or animals, both of which were possessed on a collective basis and were there to be enjoyed by present and future generations. Hence the wide-eyed indifference with which the natives greeted unfavorable “transfers of property” and, afterward, their obstinate refusal to recognize and uphold such transactions. The very idea of buying land and animals was something completely outside their conceptual mindset—an instance of sheer folly. The treaties were perceived by the natives as agreements of mutual enjoyment: hence, the instances of “trespassing” and “larceny” that so outraged Europeans and sparked a viciously spiraling routine of reprisal, revenge, punishment, and plunder.

Relations between Europeans and natives on the island were not, then, exactly idyllic, especially when William Kieft, the hawkish governor of the Nieuw Amsterdam settlement (and author of a horrific massacre in 1643), was in power. But today this is of less concern to us than the question of what actually remains of the native communities in New York. Very little, to tell the truth: a few arrow- and spearheads in stone (called “Clovis heads”) that turned up mainly on Staten Island and around Canarsie and Queens; shell deposits along the riverbanks; the very fine National Museum of the American Indian at One Bowling Green; and, more than anything else, certain names. For example, Rockaway (“Sandy Land”) and Jamaica (“Home of the Beavers”), which are now neighborhoods in Queens; or Canarsie (“At the Fenced-in Place”) and Nayack (“headland”), present-day neighborhoods of Brooklyn. Or, less directly perhaps, the name given by the Dutch to a road that, on the southernmost tip of the island, wound its way...
alongside the East River: smothered in mother-of-pearl oyster shells, Pearle Street now goes under the name of Pearl Street. 

And then, obviously, there is Mana-hatta, Manhattan, whose meaning and origins are still subject to debate: “a place for general inebriation”? “the place for gathering bow wood”? “the hilly island”? “small island”? “rocky island” (or “rocky founded island,” as Walt Whitman translated it)? from the name of the Manates (= “island inhabitants”)? In Washington Irving’s 1809 work *Diedrich Knickerbocker’s History of New York*, a comic-opera blend of history and fantasy, America’s first professional author treated his readers to an amusing explanation of the name. It derived, he wrote, from the native women’s custom of putting on men’s headgear: “Man Hat On”! Meanings and origins are, then, plagued by uncertainty. Nonetheless, the sheer musicality of the name possesses a mythical force and conjures up images of a controversial past shrouded in mystery. And a feeling of guilt that has yet to be fully dealt with.

Very little otherwise remains of the Native American presence in New York: the odd archaeological find coming to light during excavation work for a new skyscraper; long stretches of roads like the Bowery or Broadway actually retracing ancient trails atop the summit of hills (later leveled out in the wake of property speculation), over water meadows and marshlands. Or—perhaps—a sudden revelation while investigating the city’s social history: take, for example, two photographs by Danish immigrant Jacob Riis. Working as a journalist for the central police station in the immigrant neighborhood of the Lower East Side at the end of the nineteenth century, Riis was the inspiration behind the very first socially oriented investigations and laid down the roots of American social photography with his extraordinary documentation of urban poverty. The first of the two photographs is titled *Old Mrs Benoir, an Indian woman, in her attic on Hudson Street*. We get a glimpse of a tiny room, a skylight, a pallet, the odd piece of furniture, two trunks, a mirror, and a wood-burning stove; and, sitting astride a chair, a plump old woman, hair tied up with a handkerchief, intent on her crochet work: drawing on her white pipe, she concentrates hard on her task, a lorgnette slipping down to the tip of her nose. The title of the second photograph is *Aquila Montana and her Iroquois Indian family*. It features an elderly man and two women with splendidly sculpted faces, seated around a table to the side of a sash window with a half-drawn blind; the table is strewn with piecework and, beside a trunk, a young man sits devotedly playing a violin, his chair tilted slightly backward. Strange, uncustomary views of urbanized Native Americans.

Native New Yorkers. It is almost impossible not to think of *Apologies to the Iroquois* (1962) by Edmund Wilson (an attentive observer of culture and society, and one of the founding fathers of American literary criti-
—a book that describes the contribution made by this other native family to the building of New York, of its bridges, office complexes, and skyscrapers: the George Washington Bridge, the Triborough Bridge, the Henry Hudson Bridge, the Waldorf-Astoria, the Knickerbocker Village, the Rockefeller Center, the Empire State Building (who can forget Lewis Hine's celebrated photograph of workers eating astride an iron girder suspended in midair during work on the new skyscraper? I wonder how many of them were Iroquois . . . ). Neither is it possible not to think of the powwows that were still taking place during the 1950s right here in Inwood Hill Park, or of the tiny Iroquois community in Gowanus, Brooklyn, which used to meet up near Nevins Bar & Grill (nicknamed "Indianopolis") between the 1920s and 1960s. (Joseph Mitchell writes of this in his fine tale-cum-reportage, The Mohawks in High Steel, now collected in Up in the Old Hotel.) And I personally can never forget what poet-activist Bimbo Rivas, a dear departed friend of mine, once told me. On arriving from Puerto Rico, his family settled on the Lower East Side, a neighborhood of German, Irish, Chinese, Italian, and Jewish immigrants. Still living there, among the sweatshops and tenements, were some native families: “one of my friends was an American Indian. It was called the Eagle Family: Dancing Eagle, Swift Eagle. And they used to do the Indian ceremonies in the back yard, I mean they would have their powwows in there. We were right there, next to their culture all the time, you know. . . .”

Then it was the turn of the Dutch fur merchants, the East India Company, and, later, the West India Company. The island became Nieuw Nederland, and Nieuw Amsterdam came into being. Judging from the maps and prints of the era, it must have been a small farm-trading village that strove to resemble its namesake city as best it could: the narrow, winding streets, the characteristic houses with sloping roofs, garret windows, and high entrance steps, the numerous taverns where beer, rum, and genêvre were imbibed, the star-shaped fort, the windmills, and even two canals (Heere Gracht and Begun Gracht) that wound their way from the East River to what is today Broad Street. The Heerewegh ("the long, main street") announced the arrival of Broadway, and beyond Het Cingle ("the wall") stood broad expanses of farms and fields, orchards and meadows, hills, rivulets, and small lakes.

The Dutch lasted about fifty years (from 1610 to 1664), and their survival was always in the balance. The growing sense of disintegration was countered (sometimes autocratically) by governors like Kieft and Peter Stuyvesant who vainly sought to impose some semblance of order. Everything considered, much still remains of this Dutch past in New York. Not just the poems of Nieuw Amsterdam’s first poet, Jacob Steendam, who
lived on the very tip of the island ("See! Two streams my garden bind, / From the East and North they wind, / Rivers pouring in the sea, / Rich in fish, beyond degree. // Milk and butter; fruits to eat / No one can enumerate; / Ev’ry vegetable known; / Grain the best that e’er was grown"). Not just the stories and legends re-created with extravagant irony by Washington Irving in his *History* (or, in the case of the upper reaches of the Hudson, in the tales *Rip Van Winkle* and *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, where the slow, dreamy pace of pipe-smoking Dutch farmers and tavern raconteurs is contrasted with the greedy acquisitiveness and frenzy of the Yankees). And not just the densely contorted maze of streets in the southern part of Manhattan—so different from the regular geometries that characterize the rest of the city (again, with his usual perspicacity, Irving hazards an interesting explanation in his *History*: "The sage council . . . , not being able to determine upon any plan for the building of their city—the cows, in a laudable fit of patriotism, took it under their peculiar charge, and as they went to and from pasture, established paths through the bushes, on each side of which the good folks built their houses; which is one cause of the rambling and picturesque turns and labyrinths, which distinguish certain streets of New-York at this very day").

The chief surviving relics of the Dutch past are the often unimagined names and words of a genuine social, cultural, architectonic, and linguistic map that unfolds before one’s eyes during the journey of discovery in New York. First and foremost, and in no uncertain manner, comes Harlem, where, in 1637, the De Forest brothers settled and brought into being the first nucleus of what would become, over the course of the next twenty years, the village of Nieuw Haarlem (so called after its Dutch namesake). Then Brooklyn and the Bronx, the first taking its name from the village of Breuckelen, situated just to the south of Amsterdam, the second from a certain Mr. Bronck, a Swedish or Danish captain on the payroll of the Dutch who later became an important landowner. Not to forget Corlaer, van Cortland, Schuyler, and Brevoort, all names of farmers and landowners linked in some way to the West India Company, all having some bearing on the city’s geography. But the most familiar name of all remains that of Peter Stuyvesant. Immortalized in many a painting and book, the choleric wooden-legged governor owned at least half of the southern part of Manhattan and a generous slice of the present-day Lower East Side: buried in the tiny cemetery of the St. Mark’s-in-the-Bouwerie church, his name lives on today in a square and a block of buildings.

Neither must we forget Gansevoort, the name of an important family whose descendants include the mother of Herman Melville—and a name that is still on the map of Manhattan to define that maze of streets, alleys, storehouses, and sheds next to the Hudson called the “meat market.” And
what of Duyckingh? In its slightly modified form, it was also the name of
New York’s first great literary critic, Evert Duyckink, renowned for his
Cyclopedia of American Literature, his magnificent personal library, his pio-
neering role in discovering and encouraging new authors, and his
“soirées” at 20 Clinton Place, his home in Greenwich Village. (Living
outside the city, Melville would write in 1851: “I suppose the Knights of
the Round Table still assemble over their cigars and punch. . . . I should
like to hear again the old tinkle of glasses in your basement, and may do
so, before many months”). And lastly, there is that Knickerbocker fellow
who, thanks to Irving, would become synonymous with the archetypal
New Yorker and, metaphorically speaking, with the metropolis as a whole
in its continuum of past and present.

Yet there is more to all this than just the names of the most important
Dutch families. If you stroll down Cherry Street, remember that it was
once the site of David Provoost’s enormous cherry orchard. Or if you take
a trip to Coney Island and have a look around what is left of one of the
biggest amusement parks built between the late nineteenth and early
twentieth centuries, bear in mind that this peculiarly long, thin slice of
island-peninsula was so densely populated with rabbits in the seventeenth
century that the Dutch called it Conyné Eylant (the “island of rabbits”).
If you pop into one of New York’s most celebrated department stores,
Bloomingdale’s, don’t forget that the origin of the name goes back to a
lovely spot on the Upper West Side called “blooming dale” (Bloemendael
in Dutch). Again, if you gaze across the Harlem River at the northern-
most point of Manhattan (where our etymological journey began), the
place staring back at you from the other side of the river, immediately west
of Marble Hill, is called Spuyten Duyvil. This name is probably a corrup-
tion of the Dutch spuit den duyvil (“cheat the devil”), which speaks vol-
umes about the difficulties of navigation in that part of the river. And if,
when observing a detailed map of Manhattan and surrounding areas, you
are taken aback by the number of names indicated with the term kill,
quake not: it has nothing to do with bloodcurdling mysteries and every-
thing to do with the Dutch name (kil) for “strait” or “inlet.” If you ven-
ture as far as Red Hook (maybe in search of the disquieting events
recounted by H. P. Lovecraft in his The Horror at Red Hook), or if you hap-
pen to be at Corlear’s Hook or Sandy Hook, remember that hook derives
from the Dutch word used to indicate a curving strip of land that runs into
the sea: hoeck. When strolling along the Bowery, remember that it is
named after the road that linked up the main farms (bouwerie in Dutch)
located outside the urban settlement of Nieuw Amsterdam. And lastly,
when wandering around in the rarefied peace of Gramercy Park, the most
exclusive park in Manhattan (only those living in the wealthy abodes
directly overlooking the park possess a key giving them access), remember that there once used to be a Krom Moerasje here (tricks of the city’s history!), a “small crooked morass”—from which the English got Gramercy.

Then there are other types of linguistic leftovers. For example, boss, which sounds quintessentially American, comes from the Dutch word baas, meaning “master” and, earlier still, “uncle.” Likewise, stoop, the word used to describe the high entrance steps that almost give the old New York houses the appearance of small castles. In the ghetto neighborhoods especially, stoops served many different functions: projected outward into the great theater of the street, these elevated platforms were ideal for observation, courting, a chat, or gossip. And here we must pause and think for a moment. *Stoop* actually comes from the Dutch *stoep*, and linguistic considerations aside, this fact also has important implications in terms of architecture and town planning. Indeed, the first builders in the city (including the celebrated Crijn Fredericsz, who landed in Nieuw Amsterdam in 1625) brought with them their customs of erecting buildings that were elevated (as protection against the havoc wreaked by North Sea floods) and flush to the street (to make up for the lack of space in a canal-dominated city like Amsterdam). The early village of New York thus assumed an identity that, three centuries later, it still retains—and charmingly so along certain streets and in certain neighborhoods.

But let’s get back to history. With very few blows being exchanged, the English took over from the Dutch in 1664. Disorganized, forsaken by all, and unsure of its capacity to resist and survive in the New World, Nieuw Amsterdam quietly agreed to become New York. Other immigrants had been filling its streets in the meantime: Huguenots and Sephardic Jews escaping from the clutches of Europe, slaves from Africa and the East Indies “imported” to build the new town. All of them left their mark. Peter Minuit was a Huguenot, as indeed was the merchant and landowner Stephen de Lancey, whose name is inextricably linked to Delancey Street. (Perhaps the strongest linguistic reminder of the passing French presence belongs, however, to the world of gastronomy: the *chaudron*, or cauldron, bastardized definitively as *chowder*, as all those familiar with the characteristic Manhattan clam chowder will no doubt recall.) The first Jewish congregation on American soil (“Shearith Israel”) dates back to 1654, and in 1730 New York’s first synagogue was built a stone’s throw from Wall Street. In 1712 and 1741, the first black slave revolts took place; the second of these, with the aid of some whites, culminated in a public execution just outside the perimeter wall, in the vicinity of present-day Wall Street and City Hall, and just a few yards away from the “African Cemetery” that came to light during excavations undertaken for the con-
struction of a new building in the area between Broadway and Duane Street. Even the celebrated Fraunces Tavern (now a historical landmark), on the corner of Pearl and Broad Streets, where George Washington established his headquarters during the American Revolution, is linked to the black history of New York: the host and owner of the tavern, Samuel Fraunces, once Washington’s aide, happened to be from the West Indies.

Other names—perhaps more obvious and less evocative than their native and Dutch counterparts—remain to signal the English presence in New York: Chelsea (site of a Dutch farm purchased in 1750 by a retired English captain, and baptized anew in memory of the district in London) and Queens (the first Dutch settlement, occupied by the English at the end of the seventeenth century, and so called after Catherine of Braganza, the wife of King Charles II). And then, of course, like Mana-hatta for the natives, New York, from the Duke of York, owner of the city at the time of English domination and the future King James II: more than anything else, the name reminds me of the Shambles, the medieval maze of alleyways and shops in the English city of York, which was perhaps the closest thing resembling the southern tip of Manhattan at the time.

Lastly, two names (among the many) that no longer refer to certain places in New York but which have become symbols of the city as a whole. In 1807 Washington Irving was the first to refer to the city as “Gotham” in the magazine Salmagundi: its origins derive from the English town of the same name near Nottingham, whose inhabitants had become legendary folk heroes for having foiled King James’s plans to tax them by pretending to be mad or stupid. (The implications of all this are complex and ambiguous, and indeed, “Gotham” has always maintained a certain aura of mystery about it, as anyone familiar with the lengthy saga of Batman and Robin will tell you.) Then, in the 1930s and 1940s, a new term with which we are all too familiar today became common coinage among those jazz musicians who saw New York as a kind of glittering Mecca or a land of promise: “the Big Apple” (whose slang origins came from afar and which, metaphorically speaking, ultimately came to stand for the metropolis itself) was used to indicate the big deals that could be struck in the city.

In the midst of all this—the wealth of things that have disappeared and the little (or much) that has survived (names, memories, signs)—one presence has survived down the centuries and millennia to the present day. A silent, stern witness to events, it can be touched with the hand. Erupting from the deep, dark heart of the earth, the black, shale rocks that sprout from the green knolls of Central Park, and the clear dolomitic rocks that rub shoulders in the primeval forests at the northernmost extremity of the island, have always been here: they preceded
and accompanied the recent history of natives, the Dutch, the Huguenots, the Africans, the Jews, the English, and the Americans. Manhattan shale and Inwood dolomite: a living testament to the past in the present.

I took a good look around Inwood Hill Park. I got off the subway at the end of the A line, at Broadway and 207th Street, strolled up Isham Street and crossed Seaman Avenue. Then I set off into the park. It is a thick and hilly wood, a forest of century-old trees, an intricate network of roads and trails, rising and falling then meeting before departing again, squirrels poking about the bushes and scattering up the trees. Yet it is in a sorrowful mess: the brush is littered with wizened branches, leaves, and fallen trees, bottles and wastepaper are scattered here and there, and not one of the street lamps has been left intact—some of them have even been torn out of the ground, and now lie there like cast-iron trunks uprooted during a storm. There are no signs to tell you where you are, and it’s easy to get lost and you just have to trust your luck in finding the odd passerby who can put you back on the right track.

But then, just there, right beneath the pale blue span of the Hudson River Bridge, you come to a point where the waters of the Hudson divide to form the side arm that later becomes the Harlem River, and the view is fascinating. Opposite, perched atop the artificially cut overhanging rock, stand the buildings of Marble Hill; to the left, the immense, grey, and solemn expanse of the Hudson; to the right, a broad cove dotted with seagulls. Behind me, clambering up the hillside, stand what to all appearances are the “Indian caves,” the hotly disputed site of Native American settlement prior to the establishment of the villages: oblique, jutting rocks offering shelter. And below, at the bottom of the descending path, a spacious green clearing.

And right there, in the middle of the path (one of the friends accompanying me on this expedition points it out), is the rock I was looking for, and the plaque that reads:

SHORAKKOPOCH

According to legend, on this site of the principal Manhattan Indian village, Peter Minuit in 1626, purchased Manhattan Island for trinkets and beads then worth about 60 guilders. This boulder also marks the spot where a tulip tree (Liriodendron Tulipifera) grew to a height of 165 feet and a girth of 20 feet. It was, until its death in 1938 at the age of 280 years, the
last living link with the Reckgawanc Indians
who lived here

Reading the plaque after two mazelike hours meandering about the hills of
Inwood Park, with its blocks of shale and dolomite, its oaks and nut trees,
makes an odd impression. No matter how doubtful the legend might be, you feel
as if you are in the native place of Manhattan. And the state of abandon into
which the park has been allowed to sink is a laconic comment on that transac-
tion (if it ever really came to pass, and on this spot) 350 years ago.