

Megan Mahoney
Hudson River Valley Institute Internship
Professor J. Schaaf
March 5, 2010
Chapter Entry #3

Native American Contact with European Settlers

While Europeans claimed to have discovered North America, indigenous people had inhabited the region for thousands of years prior to the coming of the western explorers. In the Hudson Valley, it was primarily the Dutch who first interacted with the Native population. The Dutch settlement's foremost goal was to establish fur trading posts and make a profit. As settlers adjusted to their new environment, more ships carried additional settlers across the Atlantic Ocean to experience the New World. Initially, many Native Americans aided the newcomers and taught them invaluable farming and hunting techniques. However, settlers took advantage of Native Americans' hospitality, eventually overtaking their land, and quickly depleting their food supply. A belief in racial superiority among the Dutch was also a driving factor behind the often aggressive colonization of the Hudson Valley.

When Henry Hudson's ship, *Half Moon*, sailed the Hudson River, Native Americans had been accustomed to the appearance of white men for at least eighty-five years. Starting in 1524 with the Italian Giovanni da Verrazano, the region had sporadic encounters with white men.¹ According to European accounts, white sailors would occasionally behave violently and take Native Americans' property. These intermittent conflicts exacerbated relations between the Native Americans and white settlers, establishing a hostile climate for cooperation and amity. To crew members of the *Half Moon*, "the Native Americans were "Wilden," that is, wild men, neither tame nor domesticated, living in a state of nature; to his English hands they were

¹ Tom Lewis, *Hudson: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005) 41.

“savages,” also wild and undomesticated, but with a hint of the fang and claw.² These views consequently influenced all contact with the Native Americans.

Native Americans also developed hostile impressions of Europeans, and united with their tribes out of fear and uncertainty of the foreigners’ power. As white settlers arrived in the Hudson River Valley, Native Americans developed stories of the Europeans’ origins, and passed them down orally from generation to generation, and to tribes throughout the valley. Prior to European exploration and their arrival in North America, Native Americans had never encountered a white-skinned person, and were extremely wary of the fair complexion. Their beliefs of the Europeans’ origins were largely centered on religious and spiritual aspects of their culture. Upon European appearance, the Native Americans “they beheld... people, yet of quite a different color than they [the natives] are of; that they were also dressed in a different manner from them...he must be the great Mannio (supreme being) [the natives] think, but why should he have a white skin?”³ The unfamiliarity the Native Americans experienced led many to believe Europeans were great spiritual beings. Some even thought Henry Hudson, the leader of the group, was the Great Mannio, the supreme being of their religion. Due to their distorted views, Native Americans felt inclined to assist the Europeans, since they appeared to be higher spiritual beings. However, their oppressive behaviors quickly eradicated their alleged moral superiority.

Consequently, it is evident that assumptions were quickly formed about both Europeans and Native Americans, and led to animosity. Racial discrimination also prevented cooperation, as the idea of European superiority over the “savages” dominated the living experience in the 17th and 18th centuries.

² Lewis, 42.

³ Lewis, 41.