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Disease and Death in the Hudson River Valley

When the Dutch settled in the Hudson River Valley, and established fur trading posts, the Native American quality of life was severely diminished. Prior to living in disease-infested areas, the Wappingers and Mahicans enjoyed a simple lifestyle surrounded by nature. Previous to Western settlement, Native Americans lived with little exposure to disease and relied on herbs and holistic medicine to treat medical issues.

Unfortunately, upon the arrival of the Europeans, the Native American lifestyle drastically shifted from cooperation amongst each other, to the struggle to survive. One of the primary reasons the spread of disease wreaked considerable havoc on the native populations was their lack of immunity. Historian Jared Diamond suggests that the lack of domesticated animals and relative isolation of native communities left them especially vulnerable to Western illnesses.¹ The smallpox, typhus, diphtheria, measles, and mumps exported from Europe contributed to the decimation of the Native American population.² Witnessing their people falling victim to these foreign illnesses, Native Americans accused the Dutch of deliberately exposing them to diseases. During the 1770s, smallpox eradicated approximately 30 percent of Native Americans in the Northwest coast of the United States.³ Due to the lack of knowledge for treating disease, often Native Americans had no alternative but to allow the disease to run its course.

¹ Diamond, Jared. *Guns, Germs and the Steel*. Norton: New York, 1999.

² Eric Roth, "Relations Between the Huguenots of New Paltz, N.Y. and the Esopus Indians," March 15, 1999.

³ "Smallpox Epidemic Ravages Native Americans on the Northwest Coast of North America in the 1770s," April 4, 2010, <http://www.historylink.org/>.

In April 1829, Hudson's Bay Company employee John Work witnessed the devastating effects of the disease. After seeing the overwhelming majority of indigenous people infected, he said "immense numbers of them were swept off by a dreadful visitation of the smallpox, that from the appearance of some individuals that bear marks of the disease, may have happened fifty or sixty years ago."⁴ The Native American population continued to decline until the beginning of the twentieth century when the tribes slowly built immunity to the disease and developed more advanced methods to treat infected individuals.

Consequently, it is evident that the Native American population significantly decreased and was ill prepared for the arrival of European diseases. Tensions increased as both sides blamed each other for the destruction. Historians can gain an immense amount of information from this past event, and acknowledge the fact that disparate cultures living alongside each other can potentially cause more harm than benefit.

⁴ Robert Boyd, *The Coming of the Spirit of Pestilence*, University of Washington Press: Seattle, WA, 1999.