

Henry Hudson and Native American Relations

When Henry Hudson neared the coast of what is now Staten Island, the local Native Americans were intrigued by Hudson's ship, or as the Indians described it, "a large house of various colors."¹ Hudson's dealing with the Native Americans, during his voyage up the Hudson, involved a mixture of commerce, curiosity, and violence. Hudson met with the indigenous people on the coast and traded European steel knives, hatchets, and beads for Native American corn, bread, and oysters. Here, in the proximity of New York City, the relationship between future colonists and Native Americans was established by Hudson and his crew.

Henry Hudson's journal dated September 4th, 1609 reads, "Today the people of the country came around, seeming glad we had come."² Initial meetings with the Native Americans went well. Hudson even rowed ashore to visit with the Natives. The Indians described Hudson as dressed in a "red coat all glittering with gold lace."³ Hudson described the Natives as wearing deer skins and skins of other native animals for clothing. The fur trade, by this time in Europe, had brought the Dutch and French substantial wealth.

However, Hudson, along with Juet, did not completely trust the Indians. Regarding the Indians, Hudson wrote, "They appear to be a friendly people, but have a

¹ Heckewelder, John, *History, Manners, and Customs of the Indian Nations*. (Westminster, MD: Heritage Books, 1991), 71-75 quoted in Russell Shorto, *Island at the Center of the World: The Epic Story of Dutch Manhattan, the Forgotten Colony that Shaped America*, (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 32.

² Henry Hudson in Donald S. Johnson, *Charting the Sea of Darkness: The Four Voyages of Henry Hudson*, (New York: Kodansha International, 1995), 20.

³ Heckewelder, 71-75 quoted in Shorto, 32.

great propensity to steal, and are exceeding adroit in carrying away whatever they take a fancy to.”⁴ It was with this assessment that the troubles between the European explorers and Native Americans began. As Hudson explored costal New Jersey, Brooklyn, and Staten Island, violence broke out between Hudson’s crew and the Indians. Robert Juet claimed that it was the Indians who instigated the attack.⁵

As Hudson and the *Half Moon* traveled further up the river, more encounters with the natives ensued. Hudson sent a small boat ahead to sound the river only to be attacked by Indians. When the boat returned, one of Hudson’s crew members had been killed by an arrow shot through his throat.⁶ In order to prevent further hostilities, Hudson arranged a meeting with the Indians where the Native American leader broke an arrow and threw it into a fire, symbolizing peace between the explorers and Indians.⁷

Hudson, like other Europeans, used alcohol as a bargaining chip in his endeavors to find profits for his Dutch employers. As Hudson and his crew sailed up river they noticed a native canoe, laden with goods, approaching the *Half Moon*. After some preliminary discussions, Hudson’s crew members soon began to ply the Indians with alcohol, in order to obtain the more valuable furs the natives had brought with them. One of the Indians became so intoxicated that Hudson’s crew had him stay the night on the *Half Moon*. The next day his companion returned and was much relieved at the sight of his friend standing on the ship’s railing waving to him as he rowed towards the *Half Moon*.⁸

⁴ Hudson in Johnson, 116.

⁵ Robert Juet cited I.N.P. Stokes ed *Iconography of Manhattan Island, 1498-1909*. ((New York: Robert H. Dodd, 1915-1928), Vol. 2, 44 quoted Shorto, 33.

⁶ Johnson, 117.

⁷ *Ibid*, 117.

⁸ For story see Johnson, 116-117.

Hudson's relations with the Native Americans provided the foundation for European interactions with them. Both the Dutch and English would, in a sense, inherit Hudson's legacy with the Indian tribes. Alternating between cooperation and violence, Hudson's first dealings with the Native Americans set a pattern for the European colonists to follow. The Indians played a vital role in the fur trade that eventually gained the Dutch even more wealth.⁹ In the end, the Native Americans suffered because of this.

The influx of Europeans, both English and Dutch, eventually destroyed the Native American civilization Henry Hudson had seen on his voyage up the river that would bear his name.

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⁹ Shorto, 34.

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