

Indigenous Peoples and Colonial Relationships in New York and New Jersey

By

Russell K. Dutcher, III, MA, American Historical Association

(Treasury Administration Employee)

During the early 17th century, the colonization of the Upper and Lower New York Hudson Valley regions, which included New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Delaware led to the establishment of the colony of New Netherland. Initially, stable political relationships were formed between the Dutch and Native populations, regarding mutually beneficial economic enterprises.

The establishment of permanent settlements on the continent of North America after the exploration of the coastal regions of New York and New Jersey by Henry Hudson in 1609, led to increased interactions among the Dutch explorers and the Native peoples. These meetings reinforced the need to develop a level of communication among both of these divergent racial and cultural groups. For the Dutch, it was initially difficult to gain a complete understanding of the various Native languages which were being utilized in these regions.

From 1614 to 1664, the Dutch would develop various pseudo-legal agreements among the Indigenous peoples to establish a mutually beneficial and stable economic environment which in theory, would allow for the expansion of the Dutch colonial empire in the New World. An interesting portrayal of the earliest perception by the Dutch of the Native peoples is contained in the *Laws and Ordinances of New Netherland, 1638-1674*, which references many of the early laws and regulations created by the New Netherland Council and attests to the regulation of land transactions regarding the fact that they [the colonists] “*shall be obliged to satisfy the Indians for the land they shall settle upon.*”

Many scholars offer the opinion that, unlike their English and French counterparts, the Dutch recognized the Indigenous people’s prior ownership of the land in a European sense. Dutch law which extended to both New York and New Jersey dictated the “legal necessity as well as the expediency of buying it before appropriating it [from the Native population].”

However, this economic stability would begin to deteriorate with the arrival of additional English and French settlers during the 1650s along with the continuing inter-tribal conflicts that took place among northern and southern Native tribes which include the Iroquois, Algonquins, Mahicans, Delawares (Lenape), and Mohawks, further complicating and disrupting the economy of New Netherland.

In the eyes of the Indigenous population, the exchange of money was not a binding agreement regarding the purchase of land, but a land use release. The Native people’s perception was that the land was to be used by all, with the payments made, constituting temporary land use or usury fees.

After the creation of the Royal Colonies of New York and New Jersey, the Indigenous peoples held fast to their beliefs and continued to survive in these areas until the mid-18th Century, at which time in 1757, the *New Jersey Association for Helping the Indians*, wrote a legally accepted constitution to expel Munsee Lenape natives to the Washington Valley. Led by the Reverend John Brainerd, the colonists through the use of force, relocated 200 people to Indian Mills, then known as the Brotherton Reservation.

In 1777, Brainerd left the reservation, abandoning the Lenape and making circumstances increasingly difficult for them during the American Revolution. In 1780, Munsee Lenape community leaders of the Brotherton reservation wrote a community treaty to oppose selling any additional land to the expanding white population. In 1796, the Oneidas of Stockbridge invited many of the Lenape families to join them on their reservation in New York.

The legacy of the Lenape lies in their initial rejection of the proposal and in 1798, leading members of this Native community, to state their refusal to leave their homes in New Jersey. Three years later, in 1801, under pressure from the State of New Jersey, along with the continued encroachment of the white population, many Lenape families relocated to the Oneida reservation at New Stockbridge, New York. The remaining families later assimilated with and married into many of the colonial families in the region.