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From Homeland to New Land

The Iroquoians and Their World

EDITORS

José António Brandão

William A. Starna

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WILLIAM A. STARNA

From Homeland
to New Land:
A History of the
Mahican Indians,
1600–1830

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS LINCOLN & LONDON

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For Eileen

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INTRODUCTION

This is a story, one of the many that has been or could be told about the Mahicans, an Indian people who lived along the tidal waters they called Muhheakunnuk, today's Hudson River. It spans the years between 1600 and 1830, beginning just before the accepted first contact with European interlopers and ending with the removal of these Natives from New York State, their numbers having been augmented by Indians of Munsee and later other Delaware heritage.

No thought was given to writing a definitive history of the Mahicans, an impossible task no matter the intention. As Francis Jennings has put it, the goal for historians should be to open the field rather than attempt to close it.¹ The focus here is instead on the related themes of space—in the now common idiom, cultural landscapes—and movements through time, both of which are firmly rooted in historical context. Thus, the first objective is to situate the Mahicans in their homeland when it is most reasonably and securely possible, from about the middle decades of the seventeenth century into the eighteenth. The second is to trace the activities of Mahican communities as they sought to address their own needs and interests—economic, political, and otherwise; engage with Native friends and foes; and equally important, deal with the ever-encroaching and soon dominant European presence.

Arguably the most disruptive, tangled, yet transformative period of Mahican history took place in the years between 1630 and 1730. Then, two decades before the violence and disruptions

of the mid-eighteenth-century French and Indian War, came a general coalescence of the Mahicans at Stockbridge, Massachusetts, and at the end of the American Revolution, a move to New Stockbridge, in the heart of Oneida country. Denied any possibility of returning to their homeland, the final destination of these Natives, reached by about 1830, was Wisconsin.

It is no surprise that most of what is known of the Mahicans is derived from the records of colonizers. Absent any other mention, the first to approach their country was Henry Hudson and his crew aboard the *Halve Maen* in early fall 1609. Within a few short years the Dutch colony of New Netherland took shape, its farmsteads and homes centered chiefly around Manhattan in the south and the upper reaches of the Hudson River in the north. Fort Orange, at present-day Albany, was built in 1624, several years after Fort Nassau, a fur trading post on the river, had fallen into disrepair, the result of spring floods. Six years later the patroonship of Rennselaerswijck was created, the vast holdings of which would eventually encompass much of the heart of Mahican territory. In 1652 the growing settlement around Fort Orange became the Dutch village of Beverwijck. Until the English takeover in 1664, it is primarily Dutch administrative records, a handful of historical accounts, and the sundry correspondence and reports of the colony's citizens that provide glimpses of Mahican culture. These materials are only somewhat supplemented by scattered English and French sources. The rest, at least on the basis of what appears in some of the histories written over the past century or so, is mostly guesswork.

The takeover in 1664 extended England's claims of territorial and governmental jurisdiction from western New England to beyond Albany, placing its mostly Dutch settlers under the Crown's authority. It also signaled an escalation of the economic and political competition between England and New France and its Indian allies. Along with most other Indians in the region, the Mahicans were drawn into the struggle — maintaining or shifting their loyalties to the Europeans as they saw fit — which

was played out alongside age-old, and then newly engendered, Native conflicts that were invariably tied to their involvement in the fur trade. The documentary record over this period of time also grew, reflecting the actions of an imperialistic power having superseded the Dutch, who, unlike the English, showed little inclination to enlarge their colony of New Netherland or to command the Native people with whom they interacted. Nonetheless, while these materials allow for a moderately thorough tracking of Mahicans in their entanglements, near and far, with the Natives and Europeans who surrounded them, they offer little in the way of ethnological insight into their communities.

The multiple effects of land loss, wars, disease, and the inexorable intrusion of Europeans took their toll on the Mahicans. In the third decade of the eighteenth century they would form the Native population at the lately established “praying town” of Stockbridge and, moreover, carry the name Stockbridge Indians. With their move to central New York after the Revolution, they became known, more often than not, as the New Stockbridge Indians. But as before, there is little to be learned about their communities in terms of society and the routine of everyday life anytime in the eighteenth century. Instead, the story turns decidedly to the avarice and duplicity of the governments of colonial Massachusetts and then the state of New York, attended by missionary zeal and interference, land loss, and relocation, all amid the occasional internal dispute.

The documentary record that remains from just prior to and then through the turn of the nineteenth century until removal is one that reflects mainly the administrative, legislative, and land concerns of New York and the United States. To this can be added ecclesiastical matters that were often inseparable from government interests, usually with the consent, and at times the complicity, of a significant portion of the Native population. Still, the New Stockbridge Indians endeavored mightily to determine and control their own destiny by employing alternating strategies of accommodation, resistance, and self-generated politi-

cal initiatives. Nevertheless, they found themselves ensnared, along with many other Native communities, by the federal government's determination to remove Indians west of the advancing frontier, a design that dated from the earliest days of the Republic. The Indian Removal Act of May 28, 1830, by and large codified and served to fully enforce what had long been unofficial policy.

A brief discussion on terms used in this history. It has become fashion for many historians to use the term *Mohican* rather than *Mahican*—the earliest attested form being *Mahicans* (1614)—when referring to these Native people. The most frequently given reasons are that until 2002 the federally recognized tribe—Stockbridge-Munsee Community—was officially known as the Stockbridge-Munsee Community of Mohican Indians of Wisconsin, and furthermore, that Mohican is the more familiar term, although to whom remains unexamined.² There usually is added some form of the following caveat: that Mohican should not be confused with Mohegan, the name of the Indian people of eastern Connecticut, or with James Fenimore Cooper's fictional Mohicans. As for Cooper, it is doubtful that anyone would take his fictional composites of Native people seriously enough to believe that they might reflect historical reality. Even so, these often stated yet hardly demonstrated mix-ups would end if the linguistic designation *Mahican*, representing the Mahican language, was used in the same manner as Munsee or Unami. These latter two terms correspond to language groups formerly present in the lower Hudson Valley, western Long Island, New Jersey, eastern Pennsylvania, and northern Delaware. Contained within these language groups were numerous named groups of Indians speaking dialects of either Munsee or Unami.

None of the speakers of Munsee or Unami—while residing in their homelands—formed single sociopolitical entities, *tribes*, for want of a better designation. This was also the case with the Mahicans.³ During the early to mid-eighteenth centu-

ry, for example, there were a number of autonomous Mahican communities in and around the Hudson and upper Housatonic Valleys, undoubtedly related through kinship and often through alliances. They included Kaunaumeeek, Freehold, Wechquadnach, Stockbridge, the mixed community at Shekomeko, a few others along the Hudson in Dutchess County, that at Westenhoek (Westenhook), and forming part of the Native population at Schaghticoke (NY). Indeed, there is nothing in the record to suggest that multiple, self-governing communities were other than the norm at contact. There is, however, evidence of long-standing dialectical differences within Mahican, a factor that has something to say about settlement history.

By the time of the American Revolution and thereafter, *Mohican* (with Stockbridge and New Stockbridge) had become the preferred name of these Indians. This change basically reflects the Anglicizing of *Mahican*, *Mahikander*, and *Maikens*, names that seem to have resulted from the early Dutch use of Munsee-speaking interpreters who pronounced the name *mà·hí·kan*, *mà·hí·kani·w*, *Mahíkanak*.⁴ Given this background, and in the interests of consistency and ethnological integrity, *Mahican* rather than *Mohican* is used throughout this work.

In terms of a general methodology, I have followed the lead of historian Daniel Richter, where phrases such as “*the Mahicans*,” “*the Munsees*,” or “*the Mohawks*,” in addition to others, should be understood as references to the activities of a particular leader or groups of leaders. They should not be interpreted as a single voice or as a representation of the decision-making process of a unitary sociopolitical entity. The same holds in instances where “*the Dutch*,” “*the English*,” or “*the French*” are used. Additionally, this history of the Mahicans is structured to present to readers what can be learned about these Native people employing the full range of primary sources, as well as a selected number of authoritative secondary works. In all cases, the attempt has been made to verify historical evidence by comparing accounts found in multiple sources, based on the premise

that this will reduce errors that might result from placing reliance on a single source.⁵

Insofar as descriptions of Mahican culture are concerned, and where the documentary record is especially sparse, the drawing of analogies to surrounding groups, whether to other Algonquians or to the Iroquoians, has largely been avoided. An analogy can be useful only if there is a link between elements of Mahican culture found in the surviving record and the elements of a better-known culture or cultures to which the analogy is made. For example, it cannot be assumed that a ritual or a political process recorded for a nearby Native group was identical or even similar to that found among the Mahicans absent any mention in the record on the Mahicans of such matters or the attendant behaviors.

Other than several relatively brief commentaries, no detailed analysis or description of missions or missionaries among the Mahicans, nor of the practice or affect of Christianity on these people, has been undertaken. Rather, these tasks have been left to other historians, several of whose works on these themes are found in the endnotes. Even so, the most recent study on Stockbridge points to how very little is known about the religious lives of the Indians there.⁶ Moreover, Christianity cannot be said to have played an assignable part in the relocation of these Indians to New York—it was external forces, the most destructive being the theft of their lands in Massachusetts by predatory colonials. And as will be seen, the later removal of these Indians to Wisconsin is linked directly to the cupidity of New York State and its citizens, aided and abetted by the federal government.

Eschewing any semblance of the “Great Man” theme, this story is neither driven nor shaped by references to the few identified leaders who left a mark on the historical record, either through the pens of European chroniclers and record keepers or by their own hands. It is, by design, about a people writ large—the Mahicans.

Prologue

All I know of my ancestors commences with the first emigrant from Holland who came over in 1633 [sic], and settled in what is now Rensselaer County in the State of New York.

—President MARTIN VAN BUREN, *Autobiography*

In May 1631 one Cornelis Maesen van Buijmaelsen sailed for New Netherland aboard the ship *Eendracht*. He had been engaged by the patroon, Kiliaen van Rensselaer, to serve as a farm laborer for a period of three years. At the end of his contract he returned to Holland and in 1636, accompanied by his wife Catelijntje Martens and a servant, sailed once again to the colony. For the next decade he and Catelijntje, their family over time growing to include five children, worked a farm for the patroon on or close by Papscaenee Island, a short distance below Fort Orange (Albany). Some time prior to early April 1648, Cornelis and Catelijntje died together, apparently in a flood of the Hudson River.¹ The children survived. It is noteworthy that the lands at Papscaenee where Cornelis and Catelijntje settled and made their home had been purchased of certain Mahican “chiefs and owners” by Jacob Planck, the then agent for the colony, on April 23, 1637.² In May 1665 Wattawit, a Mahican Indian, sold a parcel of land “behind Kinderhook” to Volckert Janse (Douw) and Evert Luycasse (Backer), in part to satisfy unspecified debts. Three years later Governor Nicolls granted a patent to the same Evert Luycasse (Luykasse), along with John Hendrickse Bruyn, Dirk Wesselse,

and Pieter van Alen, for a tract of land south of and adjacent to the 1665 conveyance, one-fourth of which was held by Wesselse (also Wessels). According to the deed of record, “Wessels” had sometime earlier sold his parcel to “Martin Cornelisse van Buren,” a resident of “the Manor of Rensselaerswyck.”³

Martin Cornelisse van Buren (1638–1703) was a son of Cornelis Maesen (also Maas, Maes, Maersz, Maertsz, Martsen, Maesen) and great-great-grandfather to President Van Buren. Upon Martin’s death, the lands “lying at the Kinderhoeck with house, barn, ricks and all that appertains thereto, acquired by me from Dirk Wessellse,” were offered to a son, Pieter, and a daughter, Cornelia.⁴ It was this conveyance that permanently established the Van Buren family in Kinderhook, the president’s birthplace.

Pieter Martense van Buren (1670–1755) married Ariaantje (Ariaanje) Barents (Barentse) in Albany in 1693. One of their four sons, Marten Pieterse van Buren (b. 1701), married to Dirckje (Dirckje) van Alstynne, was the president’s grandfather. Martin van Buren’s father, Abraham Martense van Buren (1737–1817), who would marry Maria Hoes (1747–1817) about 1776, was one of Pieter and Ariaanje’s surviving children, three of whom had died young.⁵

With the birth of Martin van Buren in 1782, six generations of his family had lived and prospered on lands where once resided the Native inhabitants of the Hudson Valley — the Mahican Indians. But this fact is more than simply a sidebar — a moment of historical curiosity — to the larger story of the Mahicans. It was Martin van Buren, after all, following in the footsteps of the politics of the day, who would play a central role in putting these Indians on a path that would take them from their homeland to a new land.

One

Landscape and Environment

In life and lore the Hudson Valley has long fascinated the multitudes that have contemplated its expanse, sailed its waters, or lived and labored among its forested hills, meadows, and tributary streams. Narratives about the valley are legion, whether they appear as sketches of the early exploits of adventurers and entrepreneurs from the United Provinces of the Netherlands; recount the enchanting tales of Rip van Winkle and Sleepy Hollow; or speak to the creation and administration of first the colony and then the state of New York. And assuredly, there is all of what took place before and after these selected few, though familiar, benchmarks.

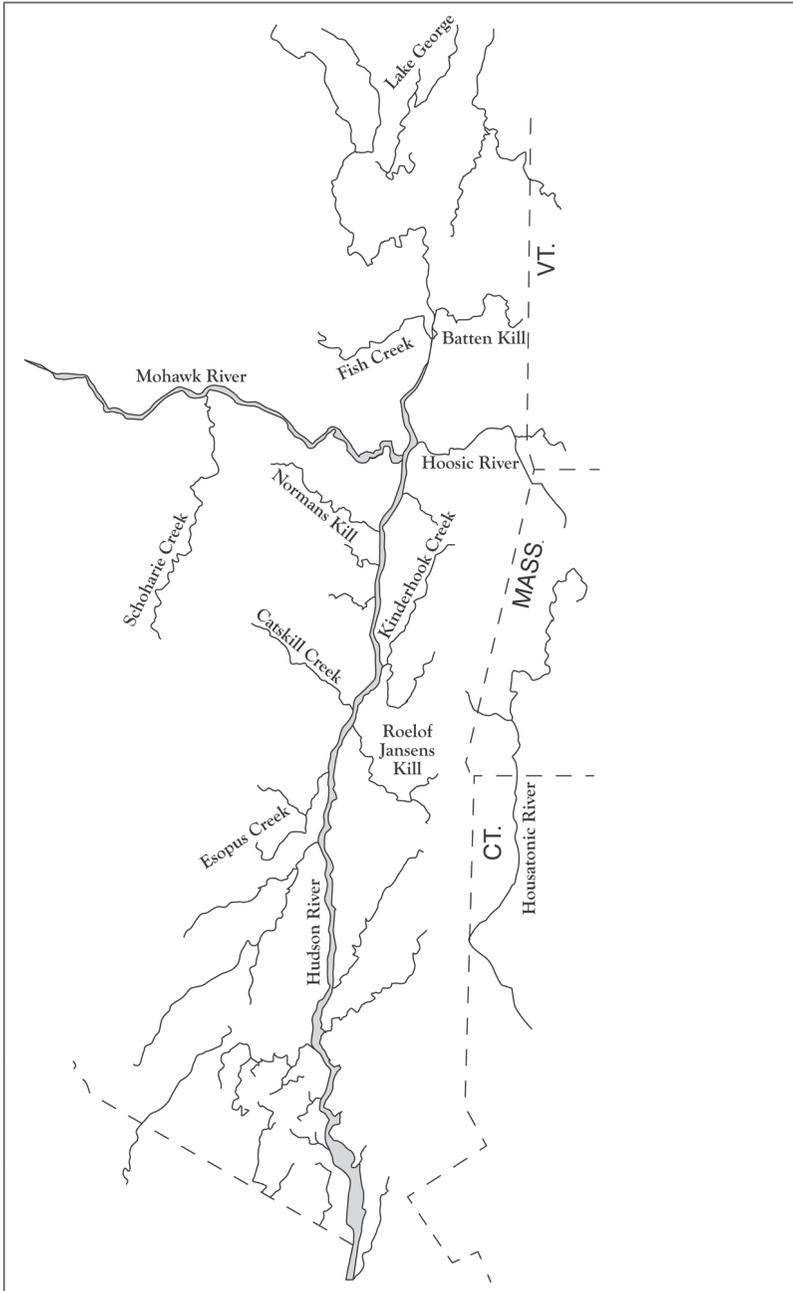
Other depictions of the Hudson Valley can be found on canvas, most notably those created in the middle decades of the nineteenth century by the Hudson River painters, whose collected works are widely considered to represent the first wholly American school of art. The landscapes produced by the likes of Thomas Cole, Asher B. Durand, Frederic Edwin Church, and others framed vistas of the valley in dramatic and reverential luminescence. These naturalistic, if romantic, images extolled the beauty and majesty of the American “wilderness,” presaging perhaps present-day environmentalist ideas of nature. In other ways, however, these paintings suggest what have been fundamental themes in American history, namely, “exploration” and “settlement,” accompanied by the cant of colonialism.¹

Missing entirely from this picture is any recognition or immediate knowledge of the views that American Indians — obvi-

ously the original inhabitants of the Hudson Valley—may have held of its sweep and grandeur. If anyone thought to ask, whatever may have been heard was not recorded. Nor is there any evidence that Indians came forward to see to it that their words would be put down for posterity. All that is known to exist of a Native voice is a short history and sketch of Mahican culture written in 1791 by Hendrick Aupaumut (1757–1830), which offers little description of the lands on which he had been born and raised.² It is certain, however, that Indians saw and experienced of their valley all of what Europeans did for themselves—and, without doubt, even more—but little remains of the substance of what it was they had to say.

The Hudson River flows over three hundred miles from its source in the serene, deep forest setting of Lake Tear of the Clouds, high in the Adirondack Mountains, south to the bustle and clamor of New York Harbor. Drawing water from countless rivulets and streams crisscrossing an expanse of several thousand square miles, the river descends four thousand feet over its 160-mile-long upper reach to a mean water elevation of just two feet above sea level at Albany. Several miles above Albany the Mohawk River, the Hudson's largest tributary, joins from the west to complete the remaining 150-mile, straight-line journey south to the surroundings of Manhattan Island, adding another nine thousand square miles of watershed. From its mouth north to Troy, the Hudson is a tidal river that undergoes a reversal in flow four times a day, the average tidal range being about four feet.³ Under normal fresh water flow conditions, salt water intrusion reaches Highland Falls, fifty miles north of lower Manhattan Island, information useful in assessing the quality of the fishery available to Native people—the Mahicans in particular—as described by Europeans.

In addition to the Mohawk River, the upper and middle valley contains numerous other tributaries that lend relief to the surrounding landscape and provide historical context for both Na-

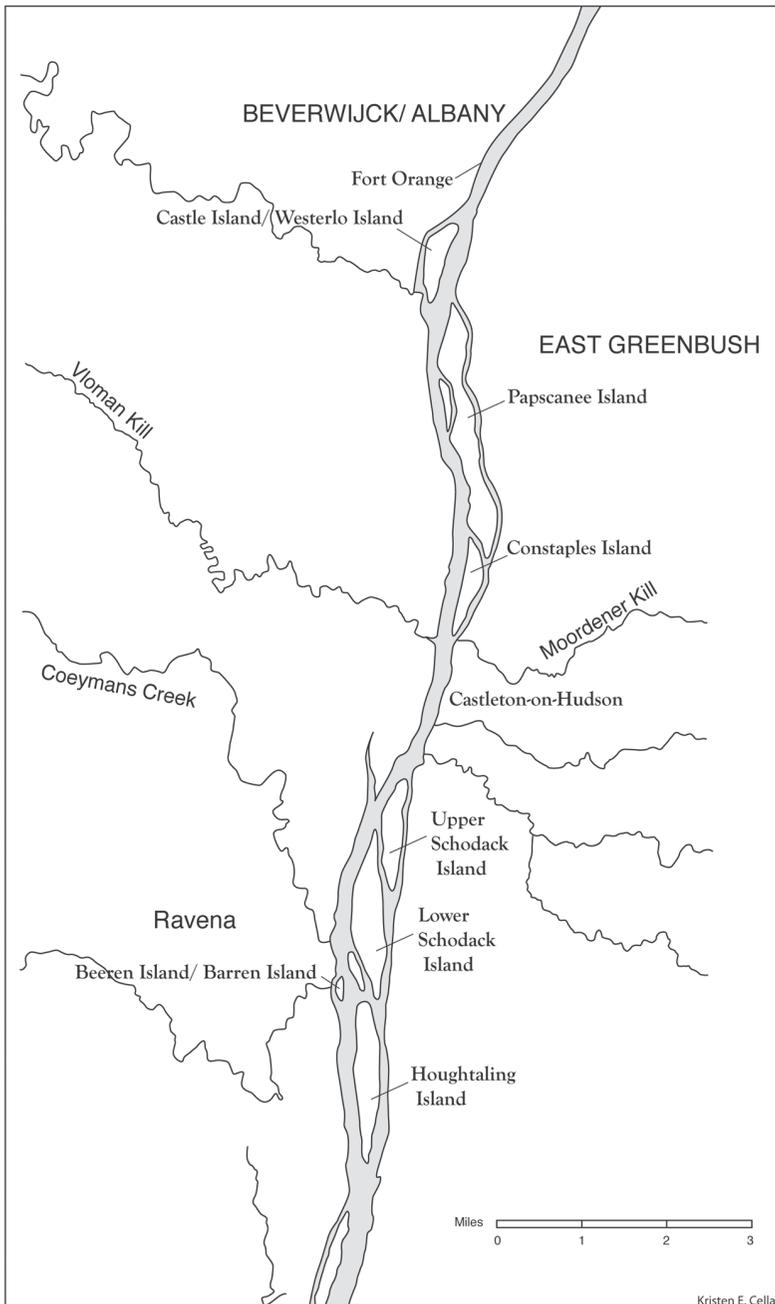


MAP 1. The Hudson Valley and Environs.

tive people and colonists (maps 1 and 2). On the east side, from north to south, are the Batten Kill at about Schuylerville, east of Saratoga Springs; the Hoosic River at Stillwater; the Poesten Kill and the Wynants Kill at Troy; the Kinderhook and Claverack Creeks, which later merge to form Stockport Creek at Columbiaville; and the Roelof Jansens Kill, opposite and south of Catskill. For reasons to be explored later, the Roelof Jansens Kill and its environs are routinely regarded as the linguistic and cultural boundaries between Mahican and Munsee speakers in the valley.

On the west side of the Hudson, below the confluence of the Mohawk River, and also on a north-to-south line, flows the Normans Kill, a stream that was of critical importance during the first decades of the fur trade and the establishment of the colony of New Netherland. Farther downriver are the Vloman Kill, Coeymans Creek, Coxsackie Creek, Catskill Creek, and finally, the Esopus and Rondout Creeks at Kingston.

The main reach of the Hudson is geologically less a river than it is an estuary of the Atlantic Ocean, its shallow-graded bed permanently inundated by tidal flow.⁴ The river's channel, from midvalley north to Albany, is something of a hydrological chameleon, underlain as it is by gravels and silts derived from deposits of glacial drift carried as part of the stream load from the northern, nontidal reach of the river. The resulting and constantly shifting shoals have been hazards to navigation dating to the early seventeenth century. Adding to the channel's ongoing transformation are the islands that have come and gone, their existence predicated on the directions and strengths of the river's currents and the seasonal changes in water levels, linked primarily to the amount of snow melt in the watershed but also to spring and fall rains. While sailing from New York to Albany in 1769, surveyor Richard Smith reported that a short distance above the mouth of Coeymans Creek on the west side of the river there was "an Island of about Two Acres covered with



MAP 2. The Core of Mahican Country, 1600–1700. After Huey, “Mahicans, the Dutch, and the Schodack Islands.”

young Button wood [sycamore] Trees which Island, our Skipper says, has arisen there to his Knowledge within 16 years and since he has navigated the River.”⁵

The lower one-third of the Hudson Valley, beginning above Manhattan, is characterized by impressive promontories or bluffs, most of which are on the west side. These soon coalesce into a virtually unbroken line of precipitous, scrub- and tree-covered rock faces in the direction of West Point and Storm King Mountain, with intervals of steep elevations on the east bank. Above Beacon, high slopes of varying heights predominate, broken by stream mouths; hollows; low, relatively narrow terraces; ravines; points of land extending into the river; and rocky islands. At Cox-sackie, however, the river narrows considerably, making flooding from spring freshets an annual event. Over many centuries this has allowed for the formation and then continual replenishment above this point of deep, expansive, and fertile alluvial flats—bottom lands—that attracted and were of great value to first Native and then colonial farmers. Added to this are wetlands of swamps, marshes, and bogs, which are most extensive in the upper third of the valley. Possessing significant biodiversity, these were areas from which Natives could draw critical plant, animal, and raw material resources.

There exist from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries several descriptions of the Hudson—both river and valley—in particular the stretch beginning a short distance above Kingston and extending to above Troy, roughly the area within which lived the Mahicans. The first of these is from the brief report of Robert Juet (1610), an officer serving on Henry Hudson’s ship the *Halve Maen*. His concerns, understandably, were with the river’s channel, especially the depth of its waters and the presence of shoals. Both were measures of the possible hazards to his ship, which, nonetheless, did not prevent its grounding on occasion when it sailed too close to a “banke of Oze in the middle of the river” or the river’s edge. As the ship neared present-day Albany, crewmen went ashore and “gathered good store of Chest-nuts.”

Then, walking along the west side, they found “good ground for Corne and other Garden herbs, with great store of goodly Oakes, and Wal-nut trees, and Chest-nut trees, Ewe trees [Canadian or American yew], and trees of sweet wood in great abundance, and great store of Slate for houses, and other good stones.”⁶

Johannes de Laet’s chronicle (1625), while not firsthand, does contain the valuable extracts from Hudson’s journal suggesting that he may also have had access to a ship’s log or accounts kept by sea captains who sailed the river after the *Halve Maen*. This supposition is strengthened by the plain fact that throughout De Laet provides the names that the Dutch had assigned to reaches, hooks, islands, and other points of land, all important navigational markers for anyone on the river. Beginning about midvalley, he mentions Playsier’s Reach and Vasterack, where the latter’s most northern point was at about Nutten Hook on the east bank opposite Coxsackie. The river along these reaches was “dotted with sands and shallow, both on the east side, and in the middle of the river.” From “Kinderhoeck [Kinderhook]” and beyond, “the river at its greatest depth has but five fathoms of water, and generally only two or three.” Above Kinderhook “there are several small islands in the river, one of which is called Beeren [today Barren] Island.” Several others in this part of the river, notably, Houghtaling, Lower Schodack, and Upper Schodack Islands, figure importantly in Mahican history.⁷ “The land,” De Laet wrote, “is excellent and agreeable, full of noble forest trees and grape vines, and nothing is wanting but the labor and industry of man to render it one of the finest and most fruitful lands in that part of the world.”⁸

In a 1644 narrative describing the Mohawk Indians, Johannes Megapolensis, a minister whose home was on the east side of the Hudson opposite Fort Orange, thought to include information on the Hudson River. In this river, he wrote, “are very beautiful islands, containing ten, twenty, thirty, fifty and seventy morgens of land.”⁹ The soils in the area were exceptionally good, he explained, “but the worst of it is, that by the melting

of the snow, or heavy rains, the river readily overflows and covers that low land.”¹⁰ Flooding such as this was a constant source of frustration, not to mention danger, for farmers who worked the islands and the adjacent low-lying floodplains. Yet as mentioned before, these waters acted to annually replenish soils so that Megapolensis could report that “in this ground there appears to be a singular strength and capacity for bearing crops, for a farmer here told me that he had raised fine wheat on one and the same piece of land eleven years successively without ever breaking it up or letting it lie fallow.”¹¹

Jasper Danckaerts (1680), a Labadist agent in America to find land for a religious colony, traveled the length of the Hudson River, about which he nevertheless wrote very sparingly. Sailing north above what is today Kingston, he gave what was becoming a familiar description of this stretch as “difficult to navigate, and beset with shoals and passages” and that it was impossible to proceed “without continual danger of running aground.”¹²

In 1749 the intrepid Pehr (Peter) Kalm, a student of the great botanist Linnaeus, made his way up the Hudson River on one leg of a tour that would take him through the colonies of New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, and also to southern Canada. Leaving the vicinity of present-day Newburgh, his sloop sailed past stony and forested lowlands on both sides of the river, “there being no spot of ground fit for cultivation,” and tellingly, not seeing a single settlement there. Beginning at about the midway point between New York and Albany, he saw to his west the distant Catskill Mountains, and close-by there were well-cultivated lands, “especially on the eastern shore, and full of great plowed fields; yet the soil seemed sandy.” Farther on, now beyond Rhinebeck, “the country on the eastern side was high, and consisted of well cultivated soil. We had fine plowed fields, well-built farms and good orchards in view.” The west bank, while high as well, was “still covered with woods, and we now and then, though seldom, saw one or two little settlements.” Then, nine miles below Albany, Kalm reported that “the coun-

try on both sides of the river was low and covered with woods, only here and there were a few scattered settlements. On the banks of the river were wet meadows, covered with sword grass (*Carex*), and they formed several little islands.” These were like the Schodack, Houghtailing, and Barren Islands. Approaching Albany he saw broad alluvial flats and “more carefully cultivated” fields. Here the river “was seldom above a musketshot broad, and in several parts were sandbars which required great skill in navigating the boats.”¹³

The final related description of the river and the surrounding landscape of the mid- to upper Hudson Valley is that of Richard Smith in 1769, mentioned before. Smith had set out from Burlington, New Jersey, “with a View to survey a large Tract of Land then lately purchased from the Indians.”¹⁴ He was to supervise a party of surveyors sent to map the boundaries of the Otego patent, located in the present-day towns of Oneonta and Otego on the upper Susquehanna River, some ninety miles southwest of Albany. Booking passage on a sloop, skippered, fittingly, by a Dutchman, one Richard Scoonhoven, Smith and his men sailed upriver. Picking up his observations from a point above Kingston, Smith observed that the “Kaatskill Mountains” were to the northwest and appeared to be “very near tho they are at a considerable Distance. The Country on both Sides continues still hilly and rugged.” Sixty miles from Albany “the Aspect of the Farms rough and hilly like all the rest and the soil a stiff clay.” The hills sloping toward the river were covered with wheat. On the west side, near the mouth of Catskill Creek, was “A Quantity of low cripple Land,” and farther up, “good low Bottom fit for Meadow.” This was at the location of “Bears” or “Bear-en” Island,” that is, Barren Island, “said to be the Beginning of the Manor of Renslaerwic[k] which extends on both Sides of the River.” Here Smith describes one of the Schodack Islands, the upper end of which “is a fine cleared Bottom not in Grass but partly in Wheat & partly in Tilth.” Further attesting to the changes in island forms in this part of the river, Smith’s editor

added the following footnote: “This island by the action of the water has since been divided into two, which are known as Upper and Lower Schodack Islands.”¹⁵

Taking into account the now four centuries of dairy, market, and truck farming; the emergence and proliferation of rural villages and towns; industrialization; and large-scale urbanization, all of which have been accompanied by the development of transportation networks and an elaborate infrastructure, the Hudson River Valley nonetheless retains its natural beauty and form. Yet today there exist factors that have done much to diminish the ability of its residents to share in the region’s bounty. This is true, in particular, for the river itself.

Seventeenth-century observers left detailed descriptions of a pristine waterway rich in marine and freshwater fish and shellfish. The most lengthy list of species is found in Adriaen van der Donck’s *Description of New Netherland* (1655). “According to season and locality,” Van der Donck wrote, the Hudson was home to sturgeon, salmon, striped bass, shad, pike, trout, minnow silverfish, sucker, eel, lamprey, sunfish, tomcod, herring, mackerel, plaice, and sheepshead, among others. He also reported lobster, crab, conch, clams, oysters, and mussel.¹⁶ Several of these fish and shellfish are restricted to the more saline stretches of the river nearer its mouth and also to Long Island Sound. In his earlier report Juet noted that “the River is full of fish” and that his crewmen had taken numbers of “Mulletts, Breames, Bases [bass], and Barbils.”¹⁷

The most valuable and readily available fish for Native people would have been the anadromous herrings, shad, striped bass, and lamprey, which ascended the river and its tributaries in the spring in huge numbers, and would have been taken with little difficulty and in equally large numbers with nets and spears. Such runs of fish occur today, although for a variety of reasons, most tied to environmental degradation, they are noticeably reduced in size. Because of the presence of chemical pollutants in the river, which have found their way into the bodies of fish, the

state has been forced to place severe restrictions on eating even these. At present, from Troy north to Hudson Falls there is a “don’t eat” warning in effect for any and all fish. South of Troy to the bridge at Catskill, formerly a part of Mahican territory, there is a “don’t eat” advisory for women of childbearing years and children under fifteen. For all others there are just four species that can be eaten once a month, shad once a week. All other fish are off-limits.¹⁸ This is in stark contrast to a time when fish were a dietary mainstay for both Indian and Dutch residents of the valley, including the more distant Mohawks, who along with later arriving European populations fished its waters.¹⁹

The composition of the Hudson Valley woodlands today corresponds to the chestnut, oak, and yellow poplar zone of the Southern Hardwood Forest. The surrounding region, including the Catskills to the west and the Taconic Mountains to the east, is representative of the Northeastern Hardwood Forest of birch, beech, maple, and hemlock.²⁰ Natives of the Hudson Valley and southern New England made extensive use of the yellow poplar (aka tulip tree), the white pine, the chestnut, and the eastern cottonwood to manufacture dugout canoes, often of considerable size. Other woods provided materials from which weapons, utensils, tools, and houses were fashioned. Moreover, trees such as the hickories, walnuts, and beeches provided Indian and colonial alike with nuts, an important supplement to other foodstuffs. A potentially more significant source of food would have been wild, primarily vascular plants. Nonetheless, as in other areas of New York and the northeast in general, there is little direct evidence for their exploitation or use by Indian people save for the scattered mentions by European observers and the remains of seeds that are often recovered from archaeological contexts. One approach to addressing this question is to acknowledge the broad availability of edible wild plants, understanding, nonetheless, that virtually nothing is known regarding either their value or their palatability to Natives of the Hudson Valley prior to or into the seventeenth century and be-

yond. There are, however, useful comparative data available from the Catskills and the Upper Susquehanna Valley to the west, in addition to descriptions of the use of plants and plant foods in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Iroquois communities.²¹ Also to be counted are non-edible plants such as hemp, rushes, gourds, and others, raw materials from which woven bags, baskets, cordage, mats, and containers were manufactured.²²

Within these forests there existed, and in most instances still exist, a great range and variety of mammalian, avian, and other fauna.²³ Many of these were noticed, remarked upon, and listed by early European observers.²⁴ Those animals that first and foremost drew the attention of the Dutch were, for them, and very quickly for Native people, the economically important fur-bearers; namely, the beaver, then otters, martens, foxes, minks, but also bears and “wild cats.”²⁵ Of special interest is that the earliest, most comprehensive, if at times quaint discussion on the natural history of the beaver in the Americas is found in Van der Donck’s *Description*.²⁶

There were, of course, many other creatures that were of critical significance to the Indians, providing food and also hides and pelts to be used as clothing and footwear. Of these, the ubiquitous white-tailed deer is ranked first among the mammals that Indians hunted. In rough order, deer are followed by raccoons, squirrels, muskrats, black bears, and woodchucks. In addition there were elk, river otters, porcupines, fishers, hares, and rabbits. Also present in the forests and open meadows of the Hudson Valley were chipmunks, wolves, turkeys, lynx, bobcats, mice, voles, and others.²⁷

An assortment of avian, amphibian, and reptilian fauna were present in the Hudson Valley at contact, an unknown number of which may have been exploited by Native people as subsistence choices. Van der Donck provides an extensive listing of birds, both migrants and year-round residents, virtually all of which can be found in the region today. They include raptors, song birds, water birds, and what are now regarded as game birds.

The chief exception is the passenger pigeon (*Ectopistes migratorius*), a migratory species that appeared in vast numbers in the spring and whose squabs were harvested by Natives throughout the eastern woodlands. These birds were also hunted by newly arrived Europeans and, certainly, their descendants. The passenger pigeon was declared extinct in 1914. Van der Donck and other observers paid much less attention to reptiles and amphibians, although these too were plentiful.²⁸

For present-day residents of the Hudson Valley, the region's climate and weather patterns are no mystery. Moreover, these elements of the environment have, over the long run, remained relatively stable. The most detailed description of the valley's seasons and climate is, again, from Van der Donck, who had resided in the patroonship of Rensselaerswijck from 1641 to 1644, moving then to Manhattan, where he remained until the end of the decade when he sailed for the Netherlands. He returned to his estate on the Hudson above Manhattan several years later, meeting his death in an Indian attack in 1655.²⁹

"The swift messenger and foster mother of commerce, the wind, blows in New Netherland from all points of the compass, without the regularity of monsoons and trade winds," Van der Donck wrote.³⁰ North winds in the winter brought cold weather, while in the summer south and southwesterly winds prevailed. Calm days were common at midwinter. Northwest winds were often "very sharp, violent, and persistent." Thunderstorms, occurring mostly in the spring, "seldom go on for more than three days." Warm air and haze, along with rainy weather, arrived on southerly winds. Rapid shifts in the winds brought equally rapid changes in temperatures. "The air in New Netherland," Van der Donck concluded, "is as dry, pure, and wholesome as could be desired, and so clear, agreeable, and delicate as would be hard to match anywhere else," a distinct advantage, he suggested, for those who were sickly or not in the best of health.

Commenting on the seasonal variations in temperature, Van der Donck offered that "the heat is bearable and in the hottest

part of summer is often tempered by a sea wind, a northerly breeze, or a shower. The cold is more severe than the climate seems to suggest and, owing to the keen air, sharp and penetrating, though always dry when the wind is from the north.” There was no wiser advice than “to dress so as to withstand the cold,” the most extreme of which, he observed, was not long-lasting.

During the familiar-to-all dog days of summer “the humidity is seldom oppressive,” Van der Donck said, “nor does it continue for long. Yet there is plenty of rain in season, more in some years than in others. It pours down freely, seeping down to the roots, and quite soon the weather is fine again and the sky clear. Thunder and lightning, which are common in warm weather, thoroughly cleanse and clear the air. For the rest the weather depends, with exceptions, on the time of year.”

Spring generally made its appearance in March. “Then all of nature bursts free, fish dart forth from muddy depths, the trees bud, and the grass sprouts.” By May the grass and foliage were in full green. Gardens might be planted and fields sowed in April, or a bit later “if one is not quite ready for it.” Although “most of the changeable and turbulent weather occurs at this time,” forests were not yet choked with grass and brushwood, but once they were cleared by intentionally set fires, “the land is now most accessible, the trees are in flower, and sweet scents pervade the forest.” Then came the summer, which might begin in May, “but is reckoned from June so as not to make it too long.” Although quite hot, summers were “seldom so rainy that it becomes tiresome.” Dry periods, Van der Donck remarked, were mitigated by frequent and heavy dews that acted to refresh plants and herbage.³¹ Still, “no one wearies of the summer, however long it may seem, before it draws to a close, for in that season man and beast alike enjoy its bounty everywhere.”

Fall in the Hudson Valley today is universally viewed as the most delightful of seasons. And so it was in the seventeenth century. “The autumns in New Netherland are normally as fine, lovely, and pleasant as could be desired anywhere on earth,”

wrote Van der Donck, “not only because the fruits that awaited the passing of summer now yield up their treasure and the fields their surplus, but mainly because the season is so well tempered as regards heat and cold; and the weather it brings is fine and lovely as though it were in the month of May.” Many mornings began with a slight haze that would quickly vanish with the warmth of the sun. Rains were infrequent and usually fell as showers. Otherwise, they seldom lasted longer than two or three days. “For the rest the weather is fine and wonderful day after day, with bright sunshine and moderate temperatures.” But then would come winter.

Van der Donck expressed great surprise that New Netherland, “situated on the same latitude as Spain and Italy and as hot in the summer, is yet so cold in winter.” But the cold was drier, he believed, posing an immediate threat to plants that were not cold-resistant. On the other hand, he explained, this same cold produced the much desired animal furs that “actually surpass those of Muscovy in beauty and quality.” Still, the cold was not so severe “as to be harmful and hard to bear; in many respects it is desirable and beneficial in that it clears the land of vermin and removes all pungent and injurious. It also firms up the skins of bodies and plants and improves their fitness.” It is doubtful, however, that today’s residents would express the same positive note about winter’s “benefits” as did Van der Donck.

Native people of the valley, Van der Donck volunteered, apparently bore up well under winter’s cold and harsh conditions. “Even the Indians,” he said, “who do not wear the thick clothes we do and go about half naked, withstand the cold well and have no fear of it, nor are they ever overcome or noticeably harmed by it. On bitterly cold days, perhaps, they will not disport themselves in the open so much. Then it is mainly the women and children who do, as the men are not so keen on it, except in summer or on warm days.” One might hazard the guess that, from the Indians’ point of view of winter, the devil was in the details.