

The Origin and Meaning of the Name “Manhattan”

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Albert Anthony knew what “Manhattan” meant and why the island was called that. He grew up in the small Delaware Indian community on Six Nations Reserve, just west of the Niagara River in Ontario. Most people here were descended from Iroquois Loyalists who had relocated from upstate New York after the American Revolution, but the traditions of his people preserved memories from the time when their ancestors had lived on the East Coast.

The Indians that came to be called Delawares (because many had lived in the Delaware River Valley) spoke dialects of two closely related Eastern Algonquian languages.¹ The language that Anthony spoke, which predominated on the three Canadian reserves where Delawares lived, is now known as Munsee; it was the original language of Manhattan, and in fact of the whole lower Hudson Valley, extending south to the south shore of Sandy Hook Bay, the Raritan River, and the Delaware Water Gap, and north into parts of Ulster and Dutchess counties. The other Delaware language, which Munsee-speakers refer to as Unami,² was spoken to the south, in the rest of New Jersey and in

1. The Eastern Algonquian languages were spoken in the Maritime provinces and New England and along the mid-Atlantic coastal plain as far south as North Carolina; besides the Delaware languages they included Mahican (on the upper Hudson and Housatonic rivers), Massachusetts (in eastern Massachusetts), Western Abenaki (parts of New Hampshire), Eastern Abenaki (Maine, the Caniba dialect in the Kennebec and Androscoggin valleys and Penobscot in the Penobscot Valley), and others. The languages of the rest of the Algonquian family, including for example Ojibwe, Cree, and Shawnee, were spoken in southern Canada, the upper Great Lakes region, and a few more westerly areas. See Ives Goddard, “Delaware,” in *Handbook of North American Indians*, vol. 15, *Northeast*, ed. Bruce G. Trigger (hereafter *HNAI* 15) (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1978), 213–239; Ives Goddard, “Eastern Algonquian Languages,” *HNAI* 15:70–77; and Ives Goddard, “Central Algonquian Languages,” *HNAI* 15:583–587.

2. Munsee /wēnáamiiw/ ‘speaker of Unami’, literally ‘downriver person’; /wihwēnaamíiwēw/ ‘he or she speaks Unami’). The last speaker of Unami died in 2000 in Oklahoma, where the language is referred to as Delaware or Lenape (Unami /lěnáappe/).

Words (and parts of words) in Indian languages that are cited in quotes are spelled as in the

eastern Pennsylvania and northern Delaware. Munsee and Unami both had a number of local dialects, and neither corresponded to a political unit. In fact, “Munsee” was originally just the name of the band headquartered on Minisink Island in the upper Delaware river (in Sussex County, New Jersey) and came to be used for all Munsee-speakers only after the various bands consolidated as they migrated west beginning in the seventeenth century.³ In the upper Hudson Valley and further east, Mahican was spoken.



“Manhattan” was the first Native American place-name to be recorded by Europeans between Chesapeake Bay and the coast of Maine, and not surprisingly its early attestation is marked by some uncertainty. It appears in two sources that document Henry Hudson’s expedition of 1609: an English map⁴ and the log of the voyage kept by Robert Juet.⁵

sources; words (and parts of words) enclosed in slashes are transcribed (or retranscribed) in a phonemic notation, one in which all letters have consistent and contrasting values, as determined by linguistic analysis, which in the case of Munsee and Unami is based on my fieldwork. Following linguistic convention, glosses are enclosed in single quotes, except where the exact wording of a source is quoted.

The phonemic spelling of Munsee and Unami words here uses orthographies that minimize the use of unfamiliar letters and diacritics. The mid central vowel /ə/ (schwa) and, in Munsee, its extrashort counterpart, are both written /e/. Long vowels and (in Unami) consonants are written with double letters. (Sequences of identical vowels and consonants, which must be distinguished from long, unit sounds in Unami, do not occur in the words cited.) Otherwise, consonants are written as in the current practical alphabets, with some exceptions where these differ. Each word has a single stressed syllable, marked with an acute accent. For Munsee, see John O’Meara, *Delaware-English / English-Delaware Dictionary* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1996). For Unami, see the *Lenape Talking Dictionary* (www.talk-lenape.org).

3. Munsee *mě'n'siıw* ‘Munsee’ (Unami *mwe'nssi*) means literally ‘person of *měně's*’ and Minisink would have been *měně'sěnk* ‘at or on the *měně's*’; the underlying noun *měně's* is only attested in the placename but is very likely an old word for ‘island’, cognate with Ojibwe *miniss* ‘island’.

4. Alexander Brown, *The Genesis of the United States*, 2 vols. (New York: Russell & Russell, 1890), 1:455–61; Frederik Caspar Wieder and I.N.P. Stokes, “Cartography: An Essay on the Development of Knowledge Regarding the Geography of the East Coast of North America; Manhattan Island and its Environs on Early Maps,” Chapter 2, “Hudson’s Mapping of the Vicinity of Manhattan Island” (the research and analysis is due to Wieder, who refers to himself in the first person singular), in I.N.P. Stokes, *The Iconography of Manhattan Island, 1498–1909*, 6 vols. (New York: Robert H. Dodd, 1915–1928; online in Columbia University Libraries, Digital Collections), 2:41–61, C. Plate 22 (frontispiece), C. Plate 22A (after p. 61); Emerson David Fite and Archibald Freeman, *A Book of Old Maps Delineating American History From the Earliest Days Down to the Close of the Revolutionary War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1926; reprinted Dover Publications, 1969), 108–11; R.C.D. Baldwin, “Argall, Sir Samuel,” in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004), 1:373–75. Baldwin gives no reason for dating the map to 1612.

5. “From ‘The Third Voyage of Master Henry Hudson,’ by Robert Juet, 1610,” J. Franklin Jameson, *Narratives of New Netherland, 1609–1664* (hereafter NNN) (New York: Charles Scribner’s

The map has come to be known as the Velasco map as it was procured in London by the Spanish ambassador Don Alonso de Velasco, who sent it to King Philip III with a coded cover letter dated March 22, 1611. It is evidently a compilation of what English insiders knew about eastern North America after Hudson's voyage of 1609 and the mapping by someone else the following year of southern New England and the south shore of Long Island, presumably a deviously obtained copy of the "master chart" kept in the London offices of the Virginia Company.⁶ This map delineates the shores and some major features of New York Bay and the Hudson River but does not show Manhattan or Long Island as islands. A little north of where Manhattan would be are two conventional mapmaker's mountains symmetrically positioned on opposite sides of the river, with "Manahata" written vertically to the left of the one on the west and "Manahatin" to the right of the one on the east.⁷

The onomastic doublets on the Velasco map explain the odd reference to the name by Juet. Returning downriver on October 2nd, Hudson anchored near a cliff that has been identified as Castle Point in Hoboken, which Juet described as "on that side of the River that is called *Manna-hata*."⁸ Commentators have noted that the name seems to be on the wrong side of the river, and J.F. Jameson even tried to force an interpretation of Hudson's movements that would get it over to where

Sons, 1909; reprinted Barnes & Noble, 1937, 1967), 11–28. (First published in 1625.)

6. David B. Quinn and Alison M. Quinn, *The English New England Voyages 1602–1608* (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1983), 520, described the Velasco map as "clearly compiled by an Englishman who had an exceptionally up-to-date knowledge of the activities of the English, French, and Dutch from Virginia, the Hudson Valley, New England, Acadia, and the St. Lawrence Valley." They state that "his sources for New England are not known" but name seven that are suggested by their analysis. David Y. Allen, "The So-Called 'Velasco Map': A Case of Forgery?" (*Coordinates*, Series A, No. 5, 2006 [online at <http://purl.oclc.org/coordinates/a5.htm>]) "raises the possibility that the map may actually be" (p. 1) a hoax concocted in the 1880's by someone "intimately familiar with early seventeenth century geographical knowledge and cartographic techniques" who produced a map dense with authentic detail, including "an impressive suite of errors" plausible for the time, expending "an immense amount of scholarly labor" with "no economic motivation" (p. 26). He concedes that he has not found anything "that proves beyond a doubt that it is counterfeit" (p. 25), and the weight of the evidence supports its authenticity.

7. The two mountains are missing from the map in Brown, *Genesis*, opp. p. 456 (which appears to be an outline tracing of the copy made for him), and from the map in Fite and Freeman, *A Book of Old Maps*, 108–109 (said to be "reproduced . . . from the beautiful copy of the original" in Stokes, *Iconography*, vol. 2, but perhaps actually from Brown's colored copy in the New York Public Library).

8. NNN, 26–27; Wieder & Stokes, "Hudson's Mapping," 55, n. 72; Douglas Hunter, *Half Moon* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009), 243–44.



The Velasco Map (1610); detail showing the names “Manahata” and “Manahatin” on either side of the Hudson River. Photograph of the manuscript in Archivo General de Simancas (Spain), reproduced from I.N.P. Stokes, *The Iconography of Manhattan Island, 1498–1909*, 6 vols. (New York: Robert H. Dodd, 1915–1928), 2:C. Plate 22A.

it should be,⁹ but it seems not to have been remarked that the turn of phrase Juet used would be natural only if he knew a name for the other side of the river as well and was discriminating between the two. Juet is clearly not an independent authority for the name, though, but only a second witness to the onomastic information that the map displays. His “Manna-hata” is the “Manahata” of the Velasco map, on the west side of the river, and for him as well there must have been a version of the name “Manahatin” on the east. The second-hand nature of Juet’s information explains why he was led to the same implausible misunderstanding as the drafter of the Velasco map: the belief that there were very similar names for two places directly across the river from each other.¹⁰ Anyone who had learned the name first-hand would have been very unlikely to make this error, and the conclusion is forced that it is equally unlikely that Hudson and his companions were the first Europeans to hear the name “Manhattan.” This comports with Juet’s otherwise odd use of the passive “is called,” which would seem rather disengaged in the sole notice of a local place-name that had been learned on the voyage but would be natural in a reference to something someone else had written. This conclusion would also address the more fundamental problem that there seems not to have been a good opportunity for Hudson to have learned any name for Manhattan, a place that, after all, he did not visit. On October 2nd the Indians on the east side were hostile, and the voyagers “saw no people” on the west side where they anchored. Contacts with Indians in the area on the way upriver on September 12th and 13th had been conducted on the water and with wariness.¹¹ There is no way to know exactly how this error arose, but it is clear that, in one way or another, actual or perceived variant names were wrongly understood as pertaining to different locations. This is the sort of misunderstanding that may occur readily enough in trying to interpret someone else’s words, as can happen, say, when a map-maker converts a verbal account

9. *NNN*, 27n.

10. Edward Hagaman Hall, “Henry Hudson and the Discovery of the Hudson River,” *Annual Report of the American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society* 15 (1910): 301, solves the problem presented by the names on the Velasco map by arguing that they actually did refer to distinct places. While not literally impossible, however, it would strain the laws of chance for the only two place-names Hudson learned on his voyage to be essentially mirror images.

11. *NNN*, 20.

into a cartographic representation. The conventional mountains and the symmetry of the presentation of the names on the map independently show the hand of an artist who was not a witness.

The shared anomalies seen in the dual names for Manhattan on the Velasco map and inferred for Juet's exemplar can be explained if Hudson had obtained the doublets not directly from Indians but from the account of an earlier voyage. As it has always been known that Hudson had information that drew him to explore New York Bay, the existence of such a report by or about an unknown precursor is a plausible assumption. From Virginia Capt. John Smith had sent to Hudson "letters and maps" that suggested the existence of "a sea" to the north of Virginia that led to the "western ocean." When sea ice towards Novaya Zemlya forced Hudson to turn back from an attempt to find a northeast passage to China, he proposed to his crew, on the basis of Smith's documents, to head across the Atlantic to 40° north latitude on the East Coast (roughly the latitude of the entrance to Lower New York Bay). After some detours and misadventures he reached the entrance to Chesapeake Bay and then headed north, mapping the coast while examining bays and inlets.¹² There must have been something fairly specific in Smith's letters and maps that made Hudson want to make a beeline across the Atlantic to the entrance of New York Bay, and the analysis of the earliest attestations of the name of Manhattan suggests that, whatever it was, it may have included the first uses of "Manahatin" and "Manahata."¹³



12. "On Hudson's Voyage, by Emanuel van Meteren, 1610," *NNN*, 6–9 (first published in 1611). On the Velasco map the coast from Virginia to New York is colored dark red, the same as for New York Bay and the Hudson River, indicating that the authority was the same; the key is missing, but Hudson was certainly the one responsible for mapping these sections (Wieder & Stokes, "Hudson's Mapping," 59).

13. E.M. Ruttenber also suggested "a previous explorer" as the source of these names. E.M. Ruttenber, "Footprints of the Red Men. Indian Geographical Names in the Valley of Hudson's River, the Valley of the Mohawk, and on the Delaware: Their Location and the Probable Meaning of Some of Them," in *Proceedings of the New York State Historical Association*, vol. 7 (Newburgh, N.Y., 1906), 13–14. Commentators that have thought that the Velasco map predated Hudson's voyage necessarily thought the same thing, e.g. Benjamin F. De Costa. "Explorations of the North American Coast Previous to the Voyage of Henry Hudson," in James Grant Wilson, ed., *The Memorial History of the City of New-York*, 4 vols. (New York: New-York History Company, 1892), 1: 1–32.

The initial attempts to explain the name “Manhattan” were undertaken in ignorance of the earliest attested variants just discussed. The Moravian missionary John Heckewelder reported an Indian tradition that when the Dutch first landed on Manhattan Island they gave liquor to the local inhabitants, as a consequence of which “the Delawares call this place (New-York Island) *Mannahattaninĭk* or *Mannahachtaninĭk* to this day, . . . the same as to say, *the island or place of general intoxication.*”¹⁴ Another version, published earlier but evidently somewhat revised, has this as a tradition among the Delawares and the Mahicans that they named the island “Manahachtanienk” meaning “the island where we all became intoxicated.”¹⁵ The story does not agree with known facts, notably the existence of the name already at the time of Hudson’s voyage, if not before, and the translation is nothing more than a folk etymology. The Unami (and Munsee) word /mĕnãhttiin/ ‘everyone drank, there was general drinking’ cannot be extended into the form that Heckewelder gives, and the spelling of the schwa vowel /ĕ/ in the first syllable of the verb ‘to drink’ with an “a” would actually be an extremely rare error for the Moravians, who easily distinguished between /ĕ/ and short /a/ as “e” versus “a,” according to the conventions of German spelling.¹⁶

Henry R. Schoolcraft, perhaps the leading expert on Indians in the mid-nineteenth century, rejected Heckewelder’s story and reported that the name had been pronounced for him by the Mahican chief John Metoxen as “Mon ah tan uk, a phrase descriptive of the whirlpool at Hellgate,” which he generally wrote as “Mon-à-tun,” without the locative suffix “-uk” (‘in’, ‘at’, ‘on’).¹⁷ Schoolcraft’s ad hoc English-based

14. [J.G.E. Heckewelder,] “Indian Tradition of the First Arrival of the Dutch, at Manhattan Island, Now New-York,” *Collections of the New-York Historical Society*, ser. 2, vol. 1 (New York, 1841), 69–74.

15. John G.E. Heckewelder, “An Account of the History, Manners, and Customs, of the Indian Nations, who Once Inhabited Pennsylvania and the Neighbouring States,” in *Transactions of the Historical & Literary Committee of the American Philosophical Society* (hereafter *THLC-APS*), vol. 1 (Philadelphia, Pa., 1819), 54–57, 255–56.

16. For example, J.G.E. Heckewelder, “Words, Phrases, and Short Dialogues in the Language of the Lenni Lenape, or Delaware Indians,” in *THLC-APS* 1 (Philadelphia, 1819), 453, spells Unami /nĕmĕne/ ‘I drink’ as “N’mĕnne” and /nĕmanũnksi/ ‘I’m angry’ as “N’mãnũnxi.”

17. Henry R. Schoolcraft, *Report of the Aboriginal Names and Geographical Terminology of the State of New York. Part I.—Valley of the Hudson* (New York: the author, 1845), 23–25. For John Metoxen see Levi Konkapot, Jr., “The Last of the Mohicans,” *Report and Collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, for the years 1857 and 1858*, 4 (Madison, Wisc.: 1859): 303–07.

transcriptions of this word leave the pronunciation uncertain, and his attempt to analyze it as containing the Ojibwe initial element /maan-/ ‘bad’ is misguided, but the word may well be a genuine Mahican lexical item. It is not likely to have anything to do with the name of Manhattan, however. It does not account for the syllable-initial “h” that appears in the earliest transcriptions and persists to this day, and its existence in Mahican would lend no special authority as, contrary to what Schoolcraft and others thought, the language on the east side of the lower Hudson River was not Mahican but Munsee, the same as on the west side. For example, it is the Munsee locative suffix /-ënk/ (also heard as having “ng”), not Mahican /-ëk/ (Schoolcraft’s “-uk”), that is present in such early placenames as “Mannahanung” for Coney Island (long since joined to the mainland of western Long Island) and “Minnahanonck” for Roosevelt Island (in the East River), both spellings of Munsee /mënáhanonk/ ‘on the island’.¹⁸ The suffix shows grammatically induced variation in the vowel and purely orthographic vacillation between “-nck” and “-ng,” but the presence of the “n” in names that end this way rules out any possibility that they are from Mahican, which lost /n/ from all such consonant sequences by an exceptionless (that is, having no exceptions) sound change of the sort historical linguists call a sound law.¹⁹ Metoxen’s explanation is another folk etymology.

The systematic study of Eastern Algonquian placenames began with J. Hammond Trumbull, who made a thorough study of the Massachusetts language on the basis of John Eliot’s seventeenth-century Bible translation and established the comparative study of Algonquian

18. William Wallace Tooker, *The Indian Place-Names on Long Island and Islands Adjacent with Their Probable Significations* (New York: Putnam, 1911), 98–99, 132–33; Robert Steven Grumet, *Native American Place Names in New York City* (New York: Museum of the City of New York, 1981), 26, 34. A Dutch deed of 1637 refers to “the two islands, situate in the Hellegadt, of which the larger is called Tenkenas and the smaller Minnahanonck, lying to the west of the larger”; Charles T. Gehring, trans. and ed., *New York Historical Manuscripts: Dutch, Volumes GG, HH & II, Land Papers* (Baltimore, Md.: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1980), 7. The identification of these islands follows J.H. French, *Gazetteer of the State of New York* (Syracuse, N.Y.: R. Pearsall Smith, 1860), 619. Roosevelt Island (called Blackwell’s Island until 1973) was about six-tenths the size of Ward’s Island and lies southwest of it. Grumet identifies Minnahanonck as Randall’s Island, but this was directly north of Ward’s Island, to which it is now joined by landfill.

19. Cf. Munsee /mënáhan/ ‘island’. The locative was pronounced /mënáhënk/ ‘on the island’ in the twentieth century, with regular weakening of unstressed /a/ to /ë/ between /h/ and a nasal consonant (/n/, /m/), and some speakers pronounced the unaffixed word analogically as /mënáhën/. The rarer variant /-oonk/ of the locative suffix, found with a small set of nouns, had fallen out of use and been replaced everywhere by /-ënk/, but it is attested in nineteenth-century hymn translations.

languages.²⁰ Despite the enduring value of his work, most prominently his posthumously published Massachusetts lexicon, the reliability of his analyses is seriously undercut by the fact that he worked before the establishment of consistent techniques for analyzing and transcribing human speech sounds. As a result he lacked a methodology for reliably segmenting and identifying the meaningful components of words. In addition, he worked before the development of scientifically based historical linguistics, which would later provide a principled basis for discriminating between accidental similarities exhibited by related languages and similar (or dissimilar) features that descend from a shared ancestral proto-language and are accordingly recognized (to use the terms of art) as corresponding and hence being cognate. Trumbull, confident in his control of Algonquian grammar, freely coined words from known (or assumed) components without identifying such words as unattested. He connected the name of Manhattan to words for ‘island’, including Massachusetts “munnohhan” (or “munnoh” without the “formative”) and Delaware “Menatey” (supposedly “*the* island”), “menatan” (supposedly “*an* island”), and “menates” (supposedly the diminutive, ‘small island’). The actual words are Massachusetts “munnoh” ‘island’ (i.e. /mēnah/) and Unami /mēnáatay/ ‘island’; the Massachusetts word has a longer stem in “munnohhanash” ‘islands’ (/mēnahanash/) and “munnohhanit” ‘on the island’ (/mēnahanēt/), matching Munsee /mēnáhan/ and Eastern Abenaki (Caniba dialect) “menahan” (/mēnahan/). The claimed contrast between “*the* island” and “*an* island” has no support in any Algonquian language, and the alleged Delaware words “menatan” and “menates” were invented by Trumbull. His “menates” was presumably intended to somehow prefigure the name Manhattes (also Manahatas, Manhates, etc.) that appears on Dutch maps and in Dutch accounts, where both Manhattes and Manhatans (also Manatthans, etc.) are explained as having been the name of the people living along the lower Hudson who sold Manhattan Island.²¹ But

20. J. Hammond Trumbull, *The Composition of Indian Geographical Names, Illustrated from the Algonkin Languages* (Hartford, Conn.: Case, Lockwood, & Brainard, 1870); J. Hammond Trumbull, *Indian Names of Places etc., in and on the Borders of Connecticut: With Interpretations of Some of Them* (Hartford, Conn.: Case, Lockwood, & Brainard, 1881); J. Hammond Trumbull, *Natick Dictionary* (Washington: G.P.O, 1903).

21. “From the ‘New World,’ by Johan de Laet, 1625, 1630, 1633, 1640,” in *NNN*, 45, 54; figurative maps of Adriaen Block (1614) and Cornelis Hendricks (1616), in Wieder and Stokes, “Cartography,” C. Plates 23 and 24.

Manhattes, which has a Dutch plural suffix “-s” (like all the names of the Indian groups of New Netherland in these early sources), was presumably a shortened variant that came into use in the process of being borrowed. Whatever the explanation of the variation in Dutch usage, however, it remains the case that the genuine Eastern Algonquian words for ‘island’ cannot account for the names “Manahata” and “Manahatin.” In particular, these earliest names are not the word for ‘island’ in the relevant local language, Munsee.

After the publication of the Velasco map in 1890, William Wallace Tooker, an avocational scholar who styled himself “Algonkinist,” undertook a fresh study of the etymology of “Manhattan” based on the newly unearthed variants of the name, taking “Manahatin” specifically as “a very pure form.”²² In Trumbull’s discussions of the common elements in New England Indian placenames he found “munnoh” ‘island’ (from the Massachusetts Bible) and “-ahdin” ‘hill, mountain’ (from the name of Mount Katahdin, in Maine, which is Eastern Abenaki /ktàtën/ ‘large mountain’), each with variants.²³ Putting these two elements together, Tooker concluded that “the name should undoubtedly be translated ‘the island of hills,’ or “the hill island.” As Trumbull had correctly explained, however, in an Algonquian name consisting of two elements the first is “adjectival” and modifies or qualifies the second, which is “substantival” and carries the basic nominal meaning.²⁴ Hence (just as in English), *island* + *hill* could only mean ‘island hill’, referring to a hill of whatever sort might be implied by the use of the qualifier ‘island’, and could not possibly mean ‘island of one or more hills’. This is an inviolable fact of Algonquian and English grammatical structure. Furthermore, if the element meaning ‘island’ were used first, it would have to appear in its full form, with all three syllables of Munsee /mënáhan/, like the Massachusetts stem /mënahan-/ that appears before all inflections. The short form of Massachusetts /mënah/ occurs only in the unsuffixed singular, which has lost the original stem-final /-an/ by a

22. William Wallace Tooker, *The Origin of the Name Manhattan, with Historical and Ethnological Notes* (New York: Francis P. Harper, 1901); Tooker, *Indian Place-Names*, 95–96.

23. Trumbull, *Composition*, 21–22; Trumbull, *Indian Names*, viii.

24. Trumbull, *Composition*, 5; Trumbull, *Indian Names*, v, viii. Tooker’s use of Trumbull’s term “inseparable generic” for the element for ‘hill’ shows that he was following Trumbull closely, but he apparently failed to realize that a substantival generic would necessarily have a nounlike status and function.

regular historical sound change.²⁵ This sound change did not take place in Munsee (or in Unami and Mahican), and the final /-an/ of Munsee /*mĕnáhan*/ is not a “formative” that can sometimes be absent.

In recent years, writing on the Algonquian place-names of the East Coast south of Maine has continued to be the province of avocational scholars and others exhibiting little linguistic knowledge. With few exceptions, the original transcriptions are too imprecise and the languages too poorly known to support linguistically responsible interpretation. The literature is a vast morass of repeatedly recycled guesswork and error. Even when better information is available, unlikely and impossible explanations from the earlier writers are repeated as alternatives.²⁶ Interpretations of Indian place-names have become a genre of Euro-American folklore, used as evocative establishing shots in certain kinds of historical narratives and often fondly and tenaciously believed to be true and significant. Manhattan has not been spared. A recent history of the Munsee claims that “Manhattan is simply a Delaware word for island,” citing a spurious “Munsee form, *menatayn*” as the source.²⁷ The Mannahatta Project, which reconstructs the natural history of Manhattan as of 1609, has spread the claim that the name used by the local Lenape Indians was Mannahatta and meant “island of many hills.”²⁸ In fact, the spelling “Mannahatta” is taken from a poem by Walt Whitman and does not mean in any spelling “island of hills” let alone “island of many hills.” The Native Americans who encountered Hudson would have used the Munsee word /*lĕnáapeew*/ for themselves only as a general term for “human being,” which they would have extended to their visitors as well.

25. In Massachusetts, unaccented word final syllables ending in a nasal consonant or a semivowel (/w/, /y/), or with no final consonant, were lost; another example is Massachusetts “*óm*” ‘fishhook’ beside its Unami cognate /*áaman*/, which preserves the older Eastern Algonquian shape.

26. John C. Huden, *Indian Place Names of New England* (New York: Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, 1962); Grumet, *Native American Place Names*; William Bright, *Native American Placenames of the United States* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004). (Bright’s compilation is more reliable for other parts of the country.)

27. Robert S. Grumet and Daniel K. Richter, *The Munsee Indians: A History* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009), 290. The translation as ‘island’ credited to me was given in the sources cited only for Minisink Island; “*menatayn*” is Unami /*mĕnáatay*/ ‘island’ plus an added “n” that is linguistically impossible but has the effect of increasing the similarity to the name being explained.

28. Eric W. Sanderson, *Mannahatta : A Natural History of New York City* (New York : Abrams, 2009), 10, 71; Peter Miller, “Before New York,” *National Geographic* 216(3) (September, 2009): 126.

Albert Anthony's explanation of the name of Manhattan has not been ignored completely, but it has been lost among the mass of conflicting guesswork and commentary on the subject, misattributed, and even expressly rejected. Anthony was born in 1839 and given the Munsee name Shiikwáhkunund, loosely but evocatively translated as "the Lone Pine." He finished his education at Huron College in London, Ontario, a Low Church Anglican theological school, and was ordained as an Anglican priest in 1873. He served as a missionary and interpreter on Six Nations Reserve, retiring for unknown reasons in 1886, and later described himself as a farmer. Until he was thirteen, he was said to have spoken nothing but Munsee, his father's language (locally called Delaware), but as he served as an interpreter in several Iroquois missions he must also have spoken one or more Northern Iroquoian languages. The Mohawk physician and civic leader, Oronhyatekha (Peter Martin), published a Munsee vocabulary obtained from him, and the ethnologist Daniel G. Brinton sought his opinion of the Walam Olum, the bogus Delaware migration legend concocted by Constantine Rafinesque, and enlisted his help in editing a Moravian manuscript dictionary that included both Unami and Munsee words.²⁹

In 1884 Anthony was a member of the Delaware delegation from Six Nations Reserve that traveled to Buffalo to attend the ceremonies accompanying the reinterment in Forest Lawn Cemetery of the Seneca chief Red Jacket, who had died in 1830. While there, he "and three chiefs" gave an interview that included the following passage:

29. Daniel G. Brinton, *The Lenâpé and Their Legends* (Philadelphia, Pa.: D.G. Brinton, 1885): v, 156, 161, 219; Daniel G. Brinton, "Lenâpé Conversations," *Journal of American Folk-Lore* 1 (1888): 37; Oronhyatekha, "The Mohawk Language," *The Canadian Journal of Industry, Science, and Art*, n.s. 10 (1865): 180; Daniel G. Brinton & Albert S. Anthony, eds., *A Lenâpé-English Dictionary* (Philadelphia, Pa.: The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1889); C.A. Weslager, "A New Look at Brinton's Lenape-English Dictionary," *Pennsylvania Archaeologist* 42 (1972 [1974]): 23–24; [Henry William Busk], *A Sketch of the Origin and the Recent History of the New England Company* (London: Spottiswoode & Co., 1884), 38–42; Census of Canada for 1901 (online at ancestry.com); Ven. James R. Broadfoot, Diocese of Huron Archives, personal communication (Aug. 10, 2010). Anthony's annotated copy of the Brinton and Anthony *Dictionary* is in the Elliott Moses Fonds, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa, Ont., and a photocopy of this is in the University of Delaware Library, Special Collections, Newark, Del.; it has not been possible to confirm that a second photocopy that was once in the Bartlesville Public Library, Bartlesville, Okla., is still accessible there.

Our traditions affirm that at the period of the discovery of America, our Nation resided on the Island of New York. We call that island Man-ă-hă-tonh, *The place where timber is procured for bows and arrows*. The word is compounded of N'man-hum-in, *I gather*, and tan-ning, *at the place*. At the lower end of the island was a grove of hickory trees of peculiar strength and toughness. Our fathers held this timber in high esteem as material for constructing bows, war-clubs, etc.³⁰

In the name the original transcriber presumably wrote “nk” rather than “nh,” which spells nothing in word-final position in either Munsee or English. In the analysis, the component “tan-ning” does not correspond to anything that is part of the name as given; it seems to point to there having been an alternative form in the original discussion spelled something like *Man-ă-hă-tan-ning, which would match Heckewelder’s “Mannahattanink” or “Mannahachtanink.”³¹ The gloss “at the place” refers to the locative suffix /-ĕnk/ (heard in English as “ing,” which it resembles): this cannot be pronounced as a separate word and so was expediently attached to the last syllable of the noun stem.

Anthony worked with Brinton on the dictionary in 1886 and 1887, traveling to Philadelphia, where Brinton lived. While there, he recognized aspects of the natural environment from traditions he had heard in Canada about the former Delaware homeland, such as the area south of the city where “rushes” were gathered for mats; he also noted various kinds of trees he had never seen. (Presumably the traditions about the Philadelphia area had been heard from some of the Unami-speakers on Six Nations Reserve, as that had been within their territory.) He told Brinton about the use of the bow for hunting. Brinton continues:

The name for the compound instrument “bow-and-arrow” is *manhtaht*, the first *a* being nasal; from this word, Mr. Anthony states, is derived the name *Manhattan*, properly *manahah tank*, “the place where they gather the wood to make bows.”³²

30. “An Interview with the Delawares, Rev. Albert Anthony and Three Chiefs,” *Transactions of the Buffalo Historical Society* 3 (Buffalo, N.Y., 1885): 102.

31. An asterisk is used in historical linguistics to indicate that a word (or other linguistic element) is assumed to have existed but not attested.

32. Brinton, “Lenâpé Conversations,” 38.

The Munsee word for ‘bow’ is /mätáht/; the first vowel may strike the ear as being nasalized but technically it is murmured, or pronounced with a breathy voice. Brinton’s “tank” is presumably intended to be read like the English word. The regional expression “bow-and-arrow” is commonly used as a lexical unit, but on both occasions Anthony was referring to bows alone, as his explanations make clear; the reference to “bows and arrows” by the recorder in Buffalo is presumably just a hypercorrection. Native Americans made arrows from the ready-formed limbs and stalks of shrubs and reeds, not from split timber.³³

The name Anthony gave can be interpreted as Munsee /(*éenta-*)manaháhtenk/ ‘where one gathers /-aht/’. The word /*éenta-*/ ‘where’ can be omitted in the citation of placenames; the verb suffix /-nk/ marks an indefinite subject (which can be translated ‘they’, ‘one’, ‘we’, or ‘you’ in their indefinite uses, or as a passive). The stem /manahahtee-/ is only attested in this name, but following Anthony’s translations it can be analyzed according to known grammatical patterns:

/manah-/	+	/-aht/	+	/-ee/
‘gather’		‘bow’		(abstract)

The initial element /manah-/ ‘gather’ is derived from the verb stem /manah-/ ‘to gather (something)’, seen, for example, in the imperative singular form /manáhi/ ‘gather it!’. After a prefix (like /nē-/ ‘I’) the regular vowel-alternation rules of the language produce the shape /manh-/, as in the example that Anthony gave: /nēmanhámēn/ ‘I gather it’. On Anthony’s authority, the medial element /-aht/ corresponds to and in effect substitutes for the full word /mätáht/ ‘bow’. The final element /-ee/ is an abstract element that forms verb stems. An exactly parallel stem is found in the attested word /manahaapšáhkaneew/ ‘he or she gathers medicine plants’ (which has the verbal suffix /-w/ ‘he’ or ‘she’):

/manah-/	+	/-aapšáhkan/	+	/-ee/
‘gather’		‘medicine’		(abstract)

33. Saxton T. Pope, *Bows and Arrows* (foreword by Robert F. Heizer) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962), 45.

In this stem, /-aapāsíhkan/ ‘medicine’ substitutes for the independent word /wchápíhk/ ‘(herbal) medicine’ in the same way that /-aht/ ‘bow’ substitutes for /mătáht/. It may also combine with an initial element to make a noun: e.g., kooyaapāsíhkan ‘turpentine’, literally ‘cow medicine’.³⁴ The appearance of /-aht/ in the noun /mătáht/ ‘bow’ is exactly parallel, although the meaning ‘bow’ is not otherwise attested for /-aht/ alone, and the meaning added by the initial /măt-/ is vague.

A Mahican tradition about the name Manhattan independently confirms the essence of the Munsee tradition reported by Anthony. Heckewelder wrote:

The Mahicanni . . . call this place by the same name as the Delawares do; yet think it is owing or given in consequence of a kind of wood which grew there, and of which the Indians used to make their bows and arrows. This wood the latter (Mohicanni) call “gawaak.”³⁵

Tooker argued that the fact that Heckewelder’s translation differed from the explanation of the Mahicans and the translation of Anthony (who he thought spoke Mahican) “is enough in itself to throw a decided doubt on both derivations.”³⁶ The translation as “the island or place of general intoxication” is impossible, however, as has been seen, and thus obviously casts no doubt at all on the essentially identical Munsee and Mahican traditions, which confirm each other.

Although the folk-etymology Heckewelder reports must be set aside, the Delaware name he gives as “Mannahattanink” and “Mannahachtanink” appears genuine and can be interpreted on the basis of the specifically Munsee name attested by Anthony. By the conventions of the Moravians’ German-based orthography “Mannahachtanink” would spell a Munsee word /manahahtáanënk/, and “Mannahattanink”

34. Munsee /kooy-/ is the combining form of /kóowëy/ ‘cow’ (/kóoyak/ ‘cows’); this is an early borrowing from Dutch *koe* ‘cow’, either from the plural *koeien* or, more likely, from a dialect singular *koei*.

35. [Heckewelder], “Indian Tradition,” 73. Here again “bows and arrows” should be taken to refer to bows alone. Mahican “gawaak” would correspond to an unattested Munsee */káawahkw/, literally ‘rough tree,’ a reasonable name for the species of hickory that has scaly or shaggy bark.

36. Tooker, *Origin*, 27.

would be its Unami counterpart /manahatáanink/.³⁷ These have the shape of nouns with the locative suffix, Munsee /-ënk/ and Unami /-ink/. The Munsee noun stem /manahahtaan-/ that precedes this suffix can be regularly derived from the verb stem /manahahtee-/ that Anthony used: a derivational suffix /-n/ is added and, by an ancient rule of Algonquian word formation, stem-final /ee/ is replaced by /aa/. An exact formal parallel is the Munsee noun /piimënáhtaan/ ‘thread’, derived from the verb stem /piimënahtee-/ ‘to make thread’, though in this case the noun denotes the product rather than the place. Heckewelder’s translation was presumably from Unami-speakers, for whom the Munsee name would have been a foreign word (even if pronounced with a Unami accent) and its meaning opaque; Unami has /hatáappi/ for ‘bow’ and does not have a cognate of Munsee /-aht/ with this meaning. The opacity of the name to Heckewelder led him ultimately to redact “Mannahachtanink” as “Manahachtanienk,” seeing in the locative noun suffix “-ink” the verb suffix “-enk” that means ‘we’ and creating a completely impossible word.³⁸



The names on the Velasco map provide the ultimate confirmation of the Munsee names for Manhattan that Anthony and Heckewelder give and are in turn explained by them. The two variants can be identified as renderings of two different Munsee designations:

Velasco	Heckewelder	Anthony	Munsee (phonemic)
Manahatin	—	“manahah tank”	/((éenta-)manaháhteenk/
		“Man-ǎ-hǎ-ton[k]”	
Manahata	—	—	/manaháhtaan/
	Mannahachtanink	“[Man-ǎ-hǎ-]tan-ning”	/manahahtáanënk/

37. Unami has regular metathesis of /ah/ to /ha/ under certain conditions; this would produce a sequence /hh/ in this case, though the double consonant is not written distinctly.

38. Heckewelder, “An Account,” 256.

Both early spellings appear to show the effects of the devoicing (whispering) that the final syllable or two of a Munsee word may be subject to at the end of an utterance, as when pronounced in isolation. Devoiced syllables can be hard to hear and even partly or entirely inaudible. Thus, “Manahatin” can be taken as a reasonable representation of Anthony’s word /manaháhtenk/, given also that the end of the Munsee syllable /-tenk/ falls between the sound in English “thing” (or “think”) and that in “tang” (or “tank”). And “Manahata” is a reasonable spelling of the noun /manaháhtaan/ for which Heckewelder (and apparently also Anthony) gave the locative form /manahahtáanënk/. In fact, Charles Wolley, who served as an Anglican chaplain on Manhattan from 1678 to 1680, provides a close parallel to the writing of /manaháhtaan/ as “Manahata”: he wrote down the Munsee word /ampiiraméekwaan/ ‘needle’ as “Um-be-re-mak-qua,” either missing the final /-n/ entirely or not knowing how to write the faint sound he heard.³⁹

We may never know who first wrote “Manahatin” and “Manahata” in one of documents that lay behind the Velasco map, but thanks especially to Albert Anthony we know who said these words, what language they were speaking, what the words mean and, why they were used.

/ (éenta-)manaháhtenk/	‘where one gathers the wood to make bows’
/manaháhtaan/	‘place for gathering the wood to make bows’
/manahahtáanënk/	‘at the place for gathering the wood to make bows’

More literally and more colloquially we might translate: ‘the place where we get bows’. The name of Manhattan was anchored in an ancient culture that drew on a keen knowledge of the environment and the critical resources available from it. The island was named in the Munsee language for a stand of hickory trees at the lower end so ideal for the making of bows that it was known the length of the Hudson River. The true word recovers the true history.

39. Charles Wolley, *A Two Years’ Journal in New York and Part of its Territories in America; Reprinted from the Original Edition of 1701* (Cleveland: Burrows Brothers, 1902), 63. Munsee words and placenames recorded in the seventeenth century have an /t/ for the sound that later became /l/.