



The Native Place of Manhattan: Where Did the Manhattan “Purchase” Take Place?

By Peter Douglas



Peter Minuit

Doubtless because of paucity of facts, numerous myths and misapprehensions have developed around the so-called Dutch “purchase” of Manhattan. Discussed below is just one of these hazy areas: where did it take place?

While it is generally agreed now that it was Peter Minuit who instigated the acquisition of Manhattan, who actually participated, both on the Dutch and native sides, is unclear. Similarly, the location of this famous transaction is not known. Two have been proposed. One, and by far the more likely, is at the southern tip of Manhattan, at

Peter Minuit Plaza, where South and Whitehall Streets meet near South Ferry and Battery Park, or perhaps the space in front of the Custom House in the Bowling Green area. Being close to the original settlement on Nut Island and in the rudimentary town on Manhattan, this location would certainly have been convenient. While no confirmation exists in any record, it would have been a very handy venue for such a meeting.

The other site put forward is certainly curious, and has more of the flavor of a myth and wishful thinking about it. Legend has it that the site of the meeting with the Indians was in what is now Inwood Hill Park in the far northwest corner of Manhattan. Here in the park, on a level with West 218th Street, there is an inscribed lump of rock called the

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Shorakkopoch or Skorakopock rock.ⁱ Local legend says that this is the site of Minuit’s transaction with the Indians, “near a knoll on the Spuyten Duyvil Creek.”ⁱⁱ The rock bears a bronze plaque and an inscription, as follows:

SHORAKKOPOCH

*According to legend, on this site of the principal Manhattan village, Peter Minuit in 1626, purchased Manhattan Island for trinkets and beads then worth about 60 guilders. This boulder also marks the spot where a tulip tree (liriodendron tulipifera) grew to a height of 165 feet and a girth of 20 feet. It was, until its death in 1932 at the age of 220 years, the last living link with the Reckgawawang Indians who lived here. Dedicated as part of New York City’s 300th anniversary celebration by the Peter Minuit Post 1247, American Legion January 1954*ⁱⁱⁱ

Any statement that begins “According to legend” should be viewed as fishy, and it’s pretty much this boulder’s tablet alone that makes the claim that this is the site—and the mere claim all too readily becomes the legend. Inwood Hill Park contains the last old-growth forest and salt marsh in Manhattan, and is said to be the last 196 acres of how Manhattan looked before the Indians “sold” it to the Dutch. It was known during the colonial period as Cock or Cox Hill, perhaps from “Shorakapok,” “Shorakapkok,” or “Skorakopok,” the Indian name for the area, translating perhaps as “the wading place” or “the waiting place,” i.e. to cross the Harlem River, as it is now called, when the tide was low. Throughout the seventeenth century the Lenape tribe lived here.

It is not at all clear why this implausible place at the extreme northern end of the island, practically *terra incognita* at the time, should have been chosen as the site of the purchase (or, more accurately, is *said* to have been chosen), and we should firmly note that the plaque does hedge its bets by saying that this is the site “according to legend.” It has been reported that Walter Cubita, one of the last remaining members of the Peter

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Minuit Post and a 24-year-old veteran at the time the plaque was made, is baffled too, saying bluntly, *“I don’t know why the hell we put it up in Inwood.”*^{iv}

The site is now by the Henry Hudson Bridge, where the Harlem River Ship Canal meets the Hudson River, and the area would have been nothing but remote wilderness in 1626. It is also some fourteen miles upriver from Nut Island and the site of New Amsterdam, making it quite an inconvenient sail for Minuit and his party. Thus the Inwood site is much less plausible than downtown as the site for the trade. There is really nothing here but the local legend (“now-disputed”) on this rock and plain wishful thinking to substantiate the account, and the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation is quick to acknowledge that “the celebrated sale has also been linked to sites in Lower Manhattan.”^v

Perhaps it is not too cynical to suggest that such a legend would be very helpful to the local Chamber of Commerce. The reason may, on the other hand, be purely sentimental. It is tempting, perhaps, to see, as some have, these backwoods as a more fitting and proper setting for the Dutch meeting with the natives, for Inwood Hill Park is a living piece of old New York. Much has occurred on the land that now composes this park since the arrival of the Europeans in the 16th century, though most of the land thereabouts was largely untouched by the wars and development that took place.

One author, while very skeptical that Inwood was the site of Minuit’s transaction, writes: *“I still prefer to imagine the episode having taken place here, among the last remaining woods of Manhattan’s primeval forests—somewhere in the watery, leafy silence of these paths and hills (Minuit forging along the path at the head of his men in baggy puffed trousers and broad-brimmed hats; the Weckweesgeeks lined up in front of the village with their canoes ditched along the shore just a few yards off)—and not amidst the frenetic cacophony of narrow canyons downtown.”*^{vi}

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The author continues: “*Reading the plaque [on the Shorokkepoch rock] after two mazelike hours meandering about the hills of Inwood Park, with its blocks of shale and dolomite, its oaks and nut trees, makes an odd impression. No matter how doubtful the legend might be, you feel as if you are in the native place of Manhattan.*”

ⁱ Forgotten New York, < <http://www.forgotten-ny.com/YOU'D%20NEVER%20BELIEVE/inwood/inwood.html>>

ⁱⁱ Washington Heights and Inwood Online,
<http://www.washington-heights.us/history/archives/inwood_hill_park_96.html> (10/30/08)

ⁱⁱⁱ New York City Department of parks and Recreation,
<http://www.nycgovparks.org/sub_your_park/monuments/monument_info.php?monId=1578>
(10/29/08)

^{iv} Jesse McKinley, “Minuit Waltz,” FYI section, New York Times, November 12, 1995,
<<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9904E1DE1539F931A25752C1A963958260>>
(11/4/08)

^v <<http://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/inwoodhillpark/highlights/7730>> (10/29/08).

^{vi} Mario Maffi, *New York City: An Outsider’s Inside View*, Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 2004, p.2. (Translation by Derek Allen of *Sotto le Torri di Manhattan*).

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