



CHAPTER I

Discovery and Foundation—1524-1626

GLACIERS, INDIANS, EXPLORERS, FIRST SETTLERS



NEW YORK HARBOR took form when vast glaciers melting in slow retreat scoured out the great rift of the Hudson River Valley. Through hundreds of thousands of years these ice masses, sweeping seaward in four successive waves, ground down the rugged slopes of the Adirondacks, rounded the Catskill sandstones to friendly hills, and dredged the harbor site.

Rolling toward the distant sea, the glacial river cut out a rock-walled chasm through the eroded mountains—a chasm not as wide but almost as deep as the Grand Canyon of the Colorado. During the ice ages the level of the Atlantic Ocean was far lower than it is today, and the site of Manhattan was one hundred and fifty miles inland. Beyond this point the now submerged Hudson River Gorge dipped sharply to the ocean. Today at a distance of one hundred and twenty-five miles from the coast, it gapes seven miles from rimrock to rimrock. Here soundings plumb a depth of seventy-five hundred feet—four thousand feet of this below the canyon brim—and the canyon continues sloping toward the dark deeps of the Atlantic.

Within comparatively modern times, geologically speaking, the waters of the ocean rose to cover the slowly sinking land, and Manhattan, once situated on a plateau at least thirty-five hundred feet above the old sea level, became a low-lying island with tidewater on every side.

Indians and Wampum

Postglacial man roamed North America and reached the Atlantic seaboard. As the climate moderated, he was supplanted by Mongoloid tribes that probably reached this continent from Asia by way of Alaska. These people were hunters and fishermen, living in sparse, seminomadic communities. They had no metal except raw copper, which they used like stone, and they neither cleared lands nor built towns.

Winter brought snow, but the hardwood forests of beech, oak, and maple gave a never-failing supply of fuel. In addition to bitter beechnuts and acorns, hazel, hickory, walnut, chestnut, and butternut trees provided good food. In season the briars were bright with ripe berries. Wild deer drank from every stream; small game was abundant. There were very few dangerous beasts of prey. Quail and partridge found shelter in the woods, and the adjacent swamplands were teeming with clamorous waterfowl. The spring run of shad filled the great river with glistening silver. Summer or winter, in stream or sea, many kinds of excellent fish abounded. Clams could be taken from any sandy beach or mud flat. Huge shell mounds attested the abundance of oysters. Planted maize, squash, pumpkin, and tobacco, harvested with little labor, provided more than sufficient store for the year. Though they grew maize and pumpkin, these Indians had not learned to rotate crops—they simply rotated Indians. After each harvest had been gathered, they moved their plantings to fresh fields. They did not clear forests but made use of natural clearings. At most they girdled tree trunks, in order to kill the heavily foliated standing timber and permit the sunlight to nourish their crops.

The Indian name for the island was *Manna-hata*—variously translated as isle of hills, and place of surpassing beauty—which the Dutch corrupted to Manhattan. Here lived various groups of the Algonkian-speaking Indians. There were other groups on Long Island, giving to its different sections their strangely musical names, many of which are retained today in their original, or in slightly altered, forms. Every

Long Island commuter knows of Manhasset, Rockaway, Setauket, Patchogue, and Montauk. The north shore of Long Island Sound was occupied by the Siwanoy (who also penetrated inland as far as what is now White Plains); while Staten Island and the Jersey shore nearest Manhattan served as camping grounds for Leni-Lenape groups.

Generally these people lived at peace with one another. Occasional tribal wars were as likely as not to end in yelling contests with little damage done to the warriors. It was the fierce painted braves of the Five Nations (called Iroquois by the early French explorers) who supplied most of the excitement, visiting fire and destruction on the harbor villages.

Peacetime occupations, such as hunting, fishing, and primitive agriculture, dominated Indian life on the island and outlying territory. Trade, of course, was in its most rudimentary stage, an affair of individual caprice rather than of organized competitive effort. Transference of commodities might be effected on the spur of the moment, by a pair of Indians (they usually traveled in pairs), visiting a neighboring tribe. Impressed with the colorful beads which the chief was wearing, they would offer in exchange a piece of buckskin, or some eagle feathers, which, by all the rules of Indian etiquette, were invariably accepted.

To a greater extent than is often realized, the barter system prevailed. Mediums of exchange were infrequent. Despite a popular notion of wampum, or sewan (seashell beads), as Indian money, the fact is that wampum had a number of other, and more important, uses. It served as ornamentation, and as a means of communication between tribes, particularly to indicate friendly greetings, or to express condolence over the death of a chief. It also symbolized power: the chief who proudly displayed his shell necklace was bound to be a man of prominence, revered by his people, and feared by his enemies. And, equally important, it was woven into "treaty belts," the exchange of which signified the sealing of contracts between tribes.

In the days of the Indian, the southernmost end of Manhattan Island was a flat formed of mud, silt, and swamp. Cattails and tall grasses swayed in the wind. Occasionally a canoe would glide from a near-by shore into the harbor waters. For the most part, however, there was little sign of human life. It was a peaceful, desolate spot, without history. And thus it remained until the white man came.

Early European Explorers

Thirty-two years after Columbus' discovery of America the first Europeans dropped anchor in New York Harbor. Giovanni da Verrazano, a Florentine navigator in the service of Francis I, King of France, left Madeira January 17, 1524, in command of the *Dauphine*, and sighted land at Cape Fear (North Carolina) in March. In quest of a route to Cathay, he sailed north and is believed to have found in our Lower Bay "a pleasant place below steep little hills," from which "a mighty, well-guarded river runs into the sea." The ship anchored and some of the crew rowed upstream in a small boat. Feathered Indians put out in canoes to meet them, but the wind turned and the small boat scurried back to the *Dauphine*, which put out to sea. Verrazano made another stop, possibly at the site of Newport, before abandoning his northern quest and returning to Europe.

The next year Esteban Gomez, a Portuguese sailing under Charles V of Spain, explored a good part of the American coast from Nova Scotia to the Caribbean. Gomez charted the mouth of the Hudson, and, by him or in his time, the river was first named Rio de San Antonio. Maps of New York Harbor began to appear in Europe. A Paris library has one dated 1570, cartographer unknown. An Englishman, Thomas Hood, signed a "platte" of "Cape de las Arenas," or Sandy Hook, in 1592, probably after a visit by some Virginia colonists. If others came here before 1609, their names have been lost to posterity.

Henry Hudson, who rounded Sandy Hook on September 3, 1609, was the first navigator to realize the commercial possibilities of New

York. "This territory," he wrote, "is the finest for cultivation that I ever in my life set foot upon and the situation well adapted for shipping." Hudson had tried to reach China via the Arctic in 1607 and 1608. With other explorations, these two attempts made him famous, and the Dutch East India Company employed him to take the *Halve Maen* (*Half Moon*) on a similar search. He set out through the Zuyder Zee April 4, 1609, trying the eastward passage first and then doubling back around North Cape to cross the Atlantic.

Portrait of a Mariner

After three months at sea the *Halve Maen* came within sight of the Newfoundland coast. Hudson proceeded south from his landfall as far as the James River in Virginia. Finding no ready northwest passage in this direction, he turned back and on September 2 "anchored probably off what are known as the Navesink Highlands to the south of New York Bay." Continuing north, he found "a fruitful, pleasant region of islands and great rivers." The voyage continued inland up the "great river," and Hudson traded with the Indians. "Many brought us Beaver skinnes, and Otters skinnes which we bought for Beads, Knives and Hatchets," wrote Robert Juet, first mate of the *Halve Maen*. About one hundred and forty miles from the river mouth sand bars and shallows convinced the navigator that, despite the tides of this straitlike inlet, it was indeed a river, and he had again missed the long-sought northwest passage. He turned back and shortly thereafter returned to Holland.

Hudson's charts refer to the river that now bears his name as the Great River of the Mountains. Subsequent Dutch traders called it variously the Mauritius, the River of the Manhattees, the Rio de Montaigne, and the North River, the last because it marked the northern limit of the Dutch territorial claims in America. This name distinguished it from the South or Delaware River. It was not until fifty years later that the name Hudson's River was first used on the charts of the encroaching English. The North River designation still holds for the lowermost reaches of the Hudson.

First White Traders and Shipbuilders

Between the years 1610 and 1612 two Dutch mariners, Hendrik Christiaensen and Adriaen Block, visited the island of Manhattan in a ship, which presumably they had chartered, loaded with articles suitable for barter with the Indians. The exact date of the voyage is uncertain, but the fact is established that they returned to Holland with a cargo of valuable pelts and were engaged by a group of Dutch merchants to make a second voyage. Accordingly in the fall of 1613 there sailed into New York Bay two small high-pooped sailing vessels, the *Tigre* and the *Fortyn*, commanded by Captains Block and Christiaensen.

While Captain Christiaensen proceeded up the Hudson in the *Fortyn* and founded Fort Nassau, the first Dutch trading post in America of which there is absolute record, Captain Block remained with the crew of the *Tigre* to winter on Manhattan Island. It was during this time (winter of 1613-14), while the *Tigre* was riding at anchor in the Upper Bay, that Captain Block and his crew had to fight a fire which broke out aboard ship. This disaster, unfortunate in itself, resulted in the genesis of a great industry that was in centuries to come to breed the sturdy packets and the romantic clipper ships of the New York shipyards.

After building log cabins for shelter, these first shipwrights of the New York area set to work constructing a new ship, using materials hewn from the virgin forest for the hull which had been destroyed and fitting it out with the sails and rigging salvaged from the *Tigre*. In the following spring they were able to launch the "long yacht" *Onrust* (*Restless*). The first ship built in the region, the *Onrust* was forty-four and a half feet long, of eleven and a half feet beam, and of sixteen tons burden. Block's shipyard, if it could be called such, was probably on the bank of a creek which still flows beneath the pavement of Broad Street.

The *Onrust* is credited with being the first vessel to brave the dangerous rip tides of Hell Gate. Captain Block's own chart, prepared after an exploratory voyage as far north as Cape Cod Bay, shows a fairly accurate knowledge of both shores of Long Island Sound. Landings were

made at Visschel's Hoek, now Montauk Point, and on Block Island, which bears the navigator's name.

Block returned to Holland in July 1614. On the basis of his explorations, the States-General granted a charter to the United New Netherland Company, giving it a three-year monopoly in the "aforesaid newly discovered countries in America between New France and Virginia, the seacoast whereof lies in the latitude of from forty to forty-five degrees, now named New Netherland, as is seen by a Figurative Map, hereunto annexed."

A series of voyages to New Netherland by many little ships, including *Vosken* (*Little Fox*) and *Nachtegael* (*Nightingale*), as well as the *Fortyn* (*Fortune*) and others, were made between 1615 and 1618, although no permanent colony had as yet been established.

The charter of the United New Netherland Company was not renewed, presumably because more powerful merchants became interested in the new fur trade. In 1621 an act of the States-General made exploitation of New Netherland a monopoly of the Dutch West India Company, newly organized with a capital equivalent to about five million dollars—a company which was to figure for years to come as the dominant factor in the life of the colony. Trading continued as usual, but nearly three years elapsed before the directors of the company felt that a permanent settlement was necessary if they were to protect their investment. This belated decision arose from their alarm over the increasingly possessive attitude adopted by the English toward the new colony. In 1609 King James I had openhandedly made a grant to the Plymouth Company of all land in North America between 41° and 45° north latitude.

Dutch Settlers

In the spring of 1624, the two-hundred-and-sixty-ton *Nieuw Nederlandt*, with Captain Cornelis Jacobsen Mey in command, sailed from Amsterdam with the first Dutch colonists. There were aboard thirty families of Protestant Walloon refugees who had fled from the Spanish Netherlands to escape the Inquisition. They were required to be loyal

Reformed Calvinists, to obey orders, to convert the heathen, to live where they were told for six years, and to lend a hand in all communal enterprises. The vessel carried one hundred and ten men, women, and children, with farming implements, livestock, seeds, household effects, and trading goods. In May the ship entered the mouth of the Mauritius.

On her return voyage to Holland the *Nieuw Nederlandt* carried seven hundred otter and four thousand beaver skins valued at twenty-seven thousand guilders. Captain Mey remained with the colony. During the following summer (1625), while Willem Verhulst was director of the colony, Pieter Evertsen Hulft, one of the directors of the Dutch West India Company, sent over from Holland more than one hundred head of cattle. The expedition embarked on three ships, furnished by Hulft, and an armed yacht provided by the Dutch government accompanied it. That the cattle were well cared for is proved by the fact that of the one hundred and three head aboard only three died on the voyage. The transportation of a herd of this size was of the greatest service to the colonists and gave them considerable advantage over the Plymouth colonists of the same period.

Willem Verhulst was recalled to Holland within the year, and on May 4, 1626, the *Meewtje* (*Little Sea Mew*) brought Pieter Minuit to replace him. On the new Governor's orders Kryn Fredericks, an engineer, made plans for a stockade, Fort Amsterdam, not far from the moldering log huts originally built by Captain Block. Some settlers who had come with Minuit cleared fields and built their homes near the stockade.

Before the first frost appeared in 1626 the guns of Fort Amsterdam commanded the narrow entrance to the East River and the broader sweep of the Hudson. It was at this time that Director Minuit consummated his famous real-estate deal with the Indians. An extract from a letter sent by one P. Schaghen to his colleagues back in Holland reported the matter with commendable brevity:

. . . they have bought the island Manhattes from the wild men for the value of sixty guilders, it is 11,000 morgens in extent. . . .