

*First Manhattans:
A History of the Indians
of Greater New York*

ROBERT S. GRUMET

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As school children, most Americans learn about Indians selling the island of Manhattan to a Dutch explorer “for twenty-four dollars.” While often mentioned in history textbooks, this episode is typically overshadowed by the much broader narrative of colonial domination, and the “outwitted” Indians are quickly written into colonial obscurity. Who were these “gullible” Indians? Why would they make such a land deal? What ultimately happened to these folks?

In *First Manhattans: A History of the Indians of Greater New York*, Robert S. Grumet takes on these questions while exploring 500 years of colonial interactions involving Munsee speaking communities and European settlers in what is now metropolitan New York and New Jersey. This work, which is intended for a general audience, is a much-shortened version of Grumet’s 2009 *The Munsee Indians: A History* (University of Oklahoma Press, Norman). Unlike most standard histories, Grumet uses property deeds as the foundation for his narrative, arguing that these documents manifest the strategies and entanglements that defined the early colonial period for both Indians and Europeans. In the terms stipulated in these documents and in the timing and distribution of land transactions, the author sees a complex and fluid

set of Munsee strategies aimed at maintaining ownership of ancestral lands in the face of ever-increasing European pressure.

In the first four chapters of the book, which cover the period 1524–1664, Grumet introduces the Munsee Indians and discusses the impacts of the two main historical forces that shaped the colonial landscape—warfare and disease. The introduction presents a standard, albeit normative, ethnographic sketch of Munsee speaking groups. This description reads much like the early 20th-century ethnological literature upon which it is based. The following three chapters discuss the conflicts that overshadowed early relationships between Munsee speaking groups and European settlers. Grumet portrays these episodes of violence from the perspective of the Munsee Indians, defining them as strategic attempts to stanch the loss of land to settler encroachment and the loss of loved ones to disease. By the end of these chapters, he envisions the Munsee Indians and European settlers weighing their options for the future in light of the tremendous losses both sides incurred from violence and disease.

Grumet believes that the solution for both sides was found in the diplomatic arena of land transactions. For Europeans, a deeded sale was a transparent, legally binding agreement that ensured permanent transmission of land from Indian to European ownership—at least in principle. For Munsee Indians, these sales provided a way to obtain trade goods and protection from enemies (especially the Iroquois) for the cost of small pieces of territory—at least initially. Indeed, Grumet’s study of over 600 deeds reveals a pattern of

land sales reflecting an intentional Munsee “withdrawal” from the coast to inland areas that was led by a small group of leaders. It was not the haphazard “land grab” typically assumed from history textbook narratives. Grumet argues that this strategic withdrawal allowed Munsee groups to maintain control of their ancestral land for over a century and a half—not quite the “vanishing act” presented in textbooks.

In the remainder of the book, which spans the period 1630 to the present, Grumet constructs an historical narrative of this diaspora told through the lens of land sales. He highlights Munsee leaders’ use of strategic manipulations in land dealings, what he calls “creative misunderstandings,” to play the many competing colonial interests against one another—trading companies against free traders, Dutch against English, New Netherlanders against New Englanders, and New York colonials against New Jersey colonials. In this narrative, Grumet also traces out the many complex social, political, and economic relationships that united Munsee Indian communities and tied these groups to neighboring Susquehannock, Shawnee, Delaware, and Iroquois communities. These relationships became increasingly important during the second half of the 18th century when

Munsee groups began emigrating from their ancestral lands. Grumet concludes the book with a brief chapter that follows the Munsee diaspora to adopted settlements in Massachusetts, Ohio, Wisconsin, Kansas, Oklahoma, and even Mexico during the late 18th and 19th centuries.

My only substantive criticism of this work is its lack of detailed notes and/or citations. There is only a brief discussion called “Note on Sources” at the end of the book. In the preface, the reader is notified that this is a streamlined book intended for general readers and is pointed to the version of the history with full citations and notes. Regardless, the absence of such contextual information is quite frustrating at times. This criticism aside, Grumet’s book is a superb example of ethnohistoric research that demonstrates the interpretive potential of property records. Furthermore, his painstaking reconstruction of land sales successfully recasts Munsee Indians from their history-book roles as hapless victims to strategic actors deftly negotiating the colonial landscape.

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