

# **EARLY HISTORY OF STATEN ISLAND**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9781760572099

Early History of Staten Island by Cornelius G. Kolff

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.  
Cover @ 2017

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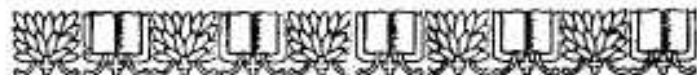


## DEDICATION

It is with a feeling of pleasure and of gratitude that I dedicate this modest volume to my old friend, Ira K. Morris, whose history of Staten Island has endeared him to all those who love Staten Island and whose indefatigable and painstaking historical researches of many years have challenged the admiration of those interested in the history of our Island.

CORNELIUS G. KOLFF.

Harbor View,  
Rosebank, N. Y.  
May, 1918.





## INTRODUCTION

A feeling of gratitude for the many happy years spent on Staten Island, and the desire to awaken in the hearts of the growing generations of Staten Islanders an interest and a love for their native Island, have induced the writer to present this short history.

Being neither a literary man nor an historian, the writer asks the kind indulgence of the critical reader. Much information has been obtained from histories of Staten Island, written by men more intimately acquainted with events.

If this modest volume serves to instruct the youth of Staten Island, and to create a love for the place, the writer's effort will be amply rewarded.

CORNELIUS G. KOLFF.



## *Early History of Staten Island*

At the time Christopher Columbus discovered America, in the year 1492, Staten Island was inhabited by Raritan Indians, a branch of the Delaware Nation.

With the exception of the sandy beaches and the salt meadows, the Island was almost covered with woods, and owing to this fact it was called by the Indians "Aquehonga Manadnock" — "The Island of Woods."

In the forests were many wild animals, such as bears, panthers, and deers, and also wild birds. In the lakes, the creeks and waters surrounding the Island were fish of all kinds, and in the waters along the shores were oysters and clams.

The Indians spent their time hunting the wild animals, fishing in the streams and sea, and sometimes in wars with neighboring tribes.

The Indian women cultivated the fields and grew corn, which they ground with stones in wooden mortars, and made into mash. They also raised some tobacco, which the men smoked. Their food consisted of corn, venison, fish, oysters and clams. Their clothing was made of skins of wild animals.

Their weapons were mainly arrows, with points made of flint, and axes of stone, fastened to wooden handles by leather strings. Their fish-hooks were made of fish bones, and the claws of birds. They lived in tents, called wigwams, made of the bark of trees and the skin of animals.

The Indian money consisted of shells, with a hole in the centre, through which a string was passed. This money was called "wampum." Their religion consisted of the worship of good and evil spirits.



The Indian doctor was called the "Medicine Man." They may have used some herbs in curing the sick; but their principal "medicine" was the making of as much noise as possible, by howling and groaning, in order to drive the bad spirits out of the sick and the dying.

The Indian chiefs usually had several wives, and these were called "squaws." The children were called "papooses." The Staten Island Indians did not chop down trees, because they had no suitable tools; but they built a fire around a tree, and when enough of the trunk was charred or burnt, the tree fell. Their boats were made of tree trunks by burning out the middle of the log.

In order to make a fire, they rubbed two pieces of dry wood against each other until they finally ignited. Whenever they wanted some good ground on which to plant corn or tobacco, they "girdled" the trees—that is, they cut away the bark with their knives, made of flint or shell. The trees then died, and later they burnt them and thus secured the ground.

They had clay pots in which they boiled their water. Their meals were very simple, and they drank nothing but the pure, clear water from the many fine springs which were found on the Island.

Just as we have weather prophets to-day, who tell us in advance what kind of weather we are going to have, so the Indians had a "weather priest," whom they called "Kitzinake." He had the queer habit of never eating any food prepared by married women.

Our New Year, as we all know, commences on the first of January, but the Indian New Year commenced in March, when the days and nights were of the same length, and they celebrated the New Year with feasts.

They smoked their tobacco in long pipes, made of the same serpentine rock found to-day in the hills between Tompkinsville and Richmond.

From time to time, they had great feasts, which were usually celebrated at some point near the Seashore. They evidently ate a great many fish, oysters and clams, as indicated by the large heaps of shells which can be seen to this day. At these feasts they sometimes amused themselves by torturing prisoners taken in their warfare with neighboring tribes. They usually tied their prisoners to stakes, and then shot them with arrows which had sharp points made of flint.

At one of the places where these feasts were celebrated, near Tottenville, the skeleton of a big Indian, nearly seven feet tall, was found, with arrows still sticking to his chest bone. He had evidently been taken prisoner, had been tied to a tree or stake, and then shot to death.

As both food and water were necessary, their villages were usually situated near the seashore, not far distant from a good spring. We know that there were Indian villages at Tottenville, near the Southern end of the Island; at Holland's Hook, opposite Elizabethport; at Green Ridge; at Giffords, and at West New Brighton. At the latter point was the "Council Place," where the Indians usually met the white men, to carry on peace negotiations after a war.

When the Indians died, they were buried in a sitting position on a log, and alongside of them was placed a pot of food, a spoon with which to eat, and some wampum, or money, so that they would be well supplied with necessaries in the Spirit Land, or the "Happy Hunting Grounds," into which they passed at death.

## THE FIRST COMING OF THE WHITE MAN

Thirty-two years after Columbus discovered America, on a summer afternoon in 1524, the Indians living on the South Shore of the Island were greatly astonished at seeing, far out at sea, what looked to them to be a huge bird; but which, as it came nearer and nearer, proved to be a ship in full sail. They had never seen anything like it before, and as soon as the news of this wonderful thing spread, the Indians swarmed to the shore, where they hid behind trees to watch the strange visitor. It was a French ship, commanded by an Italian captain, called "Verrazano." The first discovery of Staten Island by white men was thus made by an Italian.

The ship sailed up the Lower Bay, and anchored in the Narrows. The Indians from their hiding places saw queer men with white faces and beards, and heard them talk a language which they did not understand.

As frequently happens now, on hot summer afternoons, a sudden storm came up, and the captain, fearing that his ship might be driven ashore by the storm, hoisted his anchors, put out to sea, and disappeared as rapidly as he had come.

The Indians watched the ship until it faded away in the distance, and scarcely knew what to think or say. You may well imagine that it was discussed by them for years afterwards. They wondered whether it would return, and watched for it; but no ship came, and the strange incident was related around the camp fires of the rude natives, as we tell fairy tales to-day.