

# The Hudson River: Its Native American Name and Meaning: What and Why.

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The Hudson River is one of the most important rivers in North America, both now and in the past 400 years. European awareness of the river began with Henry Hudson, exploring for the Dutch East India Company. The river was long well known to Native Americans, being the home to two major Algonquian speaking nations, the Munsee in the south and the Mohicans in the north. Both used the same name for the river, calling it *Muhheahkunnuk* or *Mohicanichtuck* depending on whether the Dutch or English transcribed the Indian word. Those spellings are archaic, but do convey the phonetics of the Native American name. What did it mean? And more important, why does it mean that? This short paper presents answers to both questions. Far too often modern writing simply states a meaning. Sometimes they give a source. Rarely, if ever, do they give the reason. To show a proper respect and understanding for the Native American peoples who lived in this land, the reasons are needed.

The tidal aspect of the river is a characteristic feature. According to the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation:

“Of course, native tribes had named the river long before Hudson's arrival. One of their names – Mahicantuck - means "great waters in constant motion" or, more loosely, "river that flows two ways." It highlights the fact that this waterway is more than a river - it is a tidal estuary, an arm of the sea where salty sea water meets fresh water running off the land.

“The Hudson estuary stretches 153 miles from Troy to New York Harbor, nearly half the river's 315 mile course between Lake Tear of the Clouds in the Adirondacks and the Battery at the tip of Manhattan. The estuary feels the ocean's tidal pulse all the way to Troy. Push a stick into the beach at the water's edge, or note the water's height on a piling or rock. Check back in 20 minutes. Is the water level the same? The estuary usually has two high and two low tides in twenty-four hours. With this rise and fall come changes in the direction of flow. In general, a rising tide is accompanied by a flood current flowing north towards Troy, a falling tide by an ebb current flowing seaward.

“Salty sea water also pushes up the estuary, diluted by freshwater runoff as it moves north. In years with average precipitation falling in usual seasonal patterns, spring runoff holds the leading edge of dilute sea water-the salt front-downriver in the Tappan Zee. As runoff slackens in summer, the salt front pushes northward to Newburgh Bay, and further-to Poughkeepsie-in droughts.”

Copied from <http://www.dec.ny.gov/lands/4923.html>

Below the derivation of the meaning is given from publically available print sources, not from Internet sites. A term sheet format is used to show the facts and arguments clearly and concisely. Sources are given for all facts; complete source references are on the last page.

Mohican Name	Muhheahkunnuk – the <u>Mohican</u> name for the river reportedly meaning, “River that Flows Both Ways” (Grumet I pg. 32) This early name seems to be a Dutch rendition of the NY DEP name, Mahicantuck, which is a modernized spelling of the 1820 name given by John Heckewelder, who lived with Mahican Indians in Ohio in the 1770s at their settlement in Gnadenhütten in the Ohio country.
aka	Mohicanichtuck (from John Heckewelder in JHaccount pg. xxxvi)  The name of the river used by the Mohican seems also to be <u>both</u> (a) the name of the rough location of the nation and (b) their own name.
Meaning	<i>Muhheakunnuk</i> , a locality name referring to the tidal water of the Hudson River, which is subject to ebb and flow of tides as far north as Albany. “Similar words in the related Munsee language corroborate these native testimonies.” (Trigger pg. 211 in chapter on the Mahican Indians).  The tidal aspect of the location seems to have been very important to the Mohican peoples – see the <b>Mohican Origin Story</b> below.
Alternate:	<i>Muhheakunneyuk</i> - “Those dwelling on the great tidewater” – (Schmick pg. 1). See <b>Mohican Origin Story</b> for this grammatical variation. Note that source Schmick includes the “great” in the meaning. <b>Schmick “wrote the dictionary” on the Mahican language.</b>  In the 18 <sup>th</sup> century, the modern name, <b>Mohican</b> , was spelled <b>Mahican</b> .

Derivation of Meaning – Syllable by Syllable

<b>muh-</b>	The broad vowel sound is attested as ‘u’, ‘o’, and ‘a’: Muhheakunnuk, Mohican, Mahican. [In Dutch, the double consonants are divided between the syllables.]	
	“muh’ literally seems to be an unknown prefix. Very few words begin with these sounds in the Mohican dictionary (Schmick) or various Delaware dictionaries.-However, allowing for some transcription flexibility provide the results below.	
ma-	much (?)	Schmick pg. 171
máchaak	big, great	ibid. [‘ch’ is ‘h’, ‘x’ – pg. 12]
machan	very	ibid.
machè	great	ibid.

'Mach-' could be transcribed as 'mah-' by Dutch or English speakers as the phoneme ch -> 'h' sound sometimes. (Schmick pg. 12)

**-heakunn-**

Based on the other spellings, the 'ea' was pronounced as in 'eat' as the 'i' in machine. In source Schmick, this is written 'ee'. (pg. 12)

No word for tide, ebb, sea or ocean is attested in the Mahican Dictionary (see Schmick passim). Other related languages must be used to find a possible root. 18<sup>th</sup> century Lenape-Delaware Indian language provides several as their long term home, the Delaware River, was also tidal. Modern Munsee-Delaware (closely related to Lenape) also does not have words for tide and ebb, as they lived in Ontario far from tidal waters. Their word for ocean, sea and salt water is *shuwánopuy* (O'Meara pg. 542) which is related to a different Munsee word, *shíiwang*, meaning *salt* (O'Meara pg. 577). Also, there is a similar Delaware word, *schwónack* meaning *from the salt ocean*, and *schwón*, meaning *saltish*. (Brinton pg. 180) The Delaware words below clearly apply. Note that various Mahican peoples lived with the Delaware in Ohio in the 1770s.

Hikan	ebb tide (at the ending of the flow. Anthony)	(Brinton pg. 48)
Hi ckan	tide of ebb	(Zspell pg. 8)
Kittahican	great sea, ocean	Brinton pg. 54)
<b>-uk</b>	at, to; <i>inverse</i>	(Schmick pg. 185)

**Muh/Mo/Ma – hican-uk**

**At the great ebb tide**

**Place of the great ebb tide**

Alternate Names

European	"North River" by the Dutch and English (Grumet I pg. 50, Grumet II pg. 9)). "River of the Mountains" by Henry Hudson (Grumet I pg. 32; Grumet II pg. 9) "Mauritius River" after Prince Maurice of the House of Orange (Grumet II pg. 9) "Manhattan River" from the name of a Munsee tribe which lived on its banks (Grumet I pg. 49; Grumet II pg. 9).
Iroquois	<i>Cahohatatea</i> ("river of the mountains below Cohoes Falls at the head of navigation of the Mohawk River above Albany" – Grumet II pg. 9) <i>Ohio</i> , their word for 'beautiful river' (Grumet II pg. 9 and further source therein). <i>Skonetade</i> , "a Mohawk word meaning 'the other side' river" (Grumet II pg. 9 and further source therein).

## Mohican Origin Story

The tradition which the Mahicans give of their origin states:

“The country formerly owned by the Muhheakunnuk nation, was situated partly in Massachusetts, and partly in the states of Vermont and New York. The inhabitants dwelt chiefly in little towns and villages. Their chief seat was on Hudson’s river, now it is called Albany, which was called Pempotowwut-hut-Muhhecanneuw, or the fire-place of the Muhheakunnuk nation, where their allies used to come on any business whether relative to the covenant of their friendship or other matters. The etymology of the word Muhheakunnuk, according to original signification, is great waters or sea, which are constantly in motion, either ebbing or flowing. Our forefathers asserted that they were emigrants from west-by-north of another country, that they passed over great waters, where this and the other country were nearly connected, called Ukhkokpeck; it signifies snake water or water where snakes are abundant, and that they lived by the side of a great water or sea, from whence they derive the name of Muhheakunnuk tribe. Muhheakunneuw signifies a man of the Mukkeakunnuk tribe. Muhheakunneyuk is a plural number. As they were coming from the west they found many great waters, but none of them flowing and ebbing like Muhheakunnuk until they came to Hudson’s river; then they said one to another, this is like Muhheakunnuk, our nativity. And when they found grain was plenty in that country, they agreed to kindle a fire there and hang a kettle, whereof they and their children after them might dip out their daily refreshment. That before they began to decay, our forefathers informed us that the Muhheakunnuk nation could then raise about one thousand warriors who could turn out in an emergency.”

--Source Rutenber pg. 42, who quotes from Massachusetts Historical Society Collections, IX, 101 stating that, “In some of its parts this tradition bears the impress of the theories entertained by the early missionaries.”

## Sources

Brinton [A Lenape-English Dictionary. From an Anonymous Manuscript in the Archives of the Moravian Church at Bethlehem, Pennsylvania](#) edited, with additions, by Daniel Garrison Brinton and Albert Seqaqkind Anthony, Philadelphia: The Historical Society of Pennsylvania 1888. Published in 1889 by same as vol. 1 of the Pennsylvania Students; Series. Kessinger Legacy Reprint. From the 1888 Preface, the manuscript was likely written before 1840. The co-editor, Mr. Anthony, who was a born Lenape perfectly familiar with the Delaware language, Minsi dialect, added some words to the manuscript and made some dialect additions. The editors also added some words from the Zeisberger dictionary (Source ZD below). The grammatical forms in the manuscript indicate the manuscript used Unami dialect (preface, pg. vi).

Grumet I [The Munsee Indians: A History](#) by Robert S. Grumet, University of Oklahoma Press: Norman (2009).

- Grumet II Manhattan to Minisink, American Indian Place Names in Greater New York and Vicinity by Robert S. Grumet, University of Oklahoma Press: Norman, 2013
- JHaccount An account of The History, Manners AND Customs of the Indian Nations Who Once Inhabited Pennsylvania and The Neighboring States 1819 by John Gottlieb Ernestus Heckewelder. Philadelphia: Printed and Published by Abraham Small (1819). Revised edition by Rev. William C. Reichel, Philadelphia: Publication Fund of The Historical Society of Pennsylvania (1876, published in Memoirs of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, vol. XII.
- O'Meara Delaware-English / English-Delaware Dictionary by John O'Meara, University of Toronto Press 1996; paperback edition reprinted 2014. The work was created with the cooperation of the few surviving Ontario Delaware speakers in or from Moraviantown, Ontario, Canada. This language is referred to by linguists as Munsee Delaware, which is distinct, but closely related to Unami Delaware still spoken by a few survivors in Oklahoma.
- Ruttenber History of the Indian Tribes of Hudson' River to 1700; Their Origin, Manners and Customs; Tribal and Sub-Tribal Organizations; Wars, Treaties, Etc. Etc. by E. M. Rutenber, Albany, N. Y., I Munsell, 82 State Street, 1872. A Sabin American public domain reprint. Also reprinted by Hope Farm Press, 252 Main Street, Saugerties, NY in 1988 in two volumes.
- Schmick Schmick's Mahican Dictionary edited by Carl David Mastay, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 1991. The work is a re-working and translation of the manuscript of Johann Jacob Schmick who was an 18<sup>th</sup> century Moravian missionary. The original manuscript is in the American Philosophical Library in Philadelphia.
- Trigger Handbook of North American Indians, Volume 15, Northeast edited by Bruce G. Trigger, various chapters identified by author's surname, Smithsonian Institution, Washington 1978.
- Zspell Essay of a Delaware-Indian and English Spelling Book: For the Use of the Schools of the Christian Indians on Muskingum River by David Zeisberger, missionary among the Western Indians, Philadelphia, Printed by Henry Miller, 1776. A Nabu public domain reprint.