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## Permit Us to Speak Plainly

### The Memorial

This letter addressed "To His Excellency Zachary Taylor, President of the United States of America" is a "memorial" – a form of petition to an authority, laying out the basis for requests – written by John W. Newsom, a Stockbridge Mahican Indian, on behalf of 21 Munsee "memorialists," who represented the Munsee community then living on Delaware lands in Indian Territory, in what is now Kansas.

There are two versions, dated March 15 and March 29, 1849, and although the earlier one is labelled "Copy," the discrepancies between the two indicate that it was more of a draft. Richard W. Cummins, the Indian Agent at Fort Leavenworth, forwarded the memorial to the Superintendent of Indian Affairs in Saint Louis, and it now resides among the "Letters Received by the Office of Indian Affairs, 1824-1851," in the National Archives in Washington DC. Cummins's cover letter and two pages of commentary by the ethnologist and former Indian Agent Henry Rowe Schoolcraft are part of the set of documents.

### Who and Where are the Munsees

The ancestors of the present-day Munsees lived in a region straddling the Delaware and Hudson River watersheds, taking in what is now northern New Jersey and New York Harbor. They were related culturally and linguistically to the peoples in regions to the south and north, but as they consolidated into a national entity during the early colonial era, the Munsees or Minisinks (People of the Stony Country) remained distinct from the Lenapes or Delawares (of whom they are sometimes described as a "branch") and the Mahicans. Like their neighbors, they were dispossessed of their homelands, and forced into a series of

removes north, east, and west in the eighteenth- and early nineteenth centuries. A large body of Munsees converted to Christianity through the Moravian Church, and most of these moved to Canada during the American Revolution. Contemporary communities are the [Delaware Nation at Moraviantown](#) and the [Delaware-Munsee Nation](#), both in Ontario, Canada, and the [Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohican Indians](#) in Wisconsin.<sup>1</sup>

A mixed band of Munsee and Mahican Christians belonging to the Moravian Church migrated from Canada to the Delaware Reservation in Indian Territory in 1837, where they were joined a year later by Stockbridge and Brotherton Munsees from Wisconsin.<sup>2</sup> In the 1849 memorial, they complained about their treatment by the Delawares, who had sold the tract they lived on out from under them. They requested a tract of their own in Indian territory. They complained that they had been deprived of their share of annuities from the [Treaty of Fort Industry](#), which they had been parties to in 1805 in northern Ohio, and they requested compensation. They also requested compensation for the sale of land in Genesee County, New York, in the late eighteenth-century. In supporting these claims and requests, the letter stretched the genre of the “memorial”— by reaching back to the very beginnings of Munsee colonial history, to their first contact with Dutch colonists in New York Harbor in the early seventeenth-century.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert S. Grumet, *The Munsee Indians: A History* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2009); Mark Peters, “[Munseedelaware - History](#),” Munsee-Delaware Nation.

<sup>2</sup> Grumet, *The Munsee Indians*, 281; Siegrun Kaiser, “Munsee Social Networking and Political Encounters with the Moravian Church,” in *Ethnographies and Exchanges : Native Americans, Moravians, and Catholics in Early North America*, ed. A. G. Roeber (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), 163.

## Literacy and Nonliteracy

The memorial represents a conventional dichotomy between literacy and illiteracy, or nonliteracy, insofar as Newsom, the scribe, was educated at the Foreign Mission School in Cornwall, Connecticut, whereas the “undersigned memorialists” employed marks: you can see on the final page where some of them made x’s and Newsom filled in their names. “An x-mark is a sign of contamination,” according to the Ojibwe/Dakota scholar Scott Richard Lyons. “There were no ‘treaties’ before the arrival of the whites, no alphabetic writing or ‘signatures’ at all.”<sup>3</sup> Yet although in this regard the memorial resembles one-sided treaties, and especially land cessions, it is also very different, not only because Newsom was a trusted collaborator, but also because there is every indication that the Munsees were full participants in the literacy practices that generated the petition, and indeed that they are the authors of its content. Most likely, many of them could read, as they had had a considerable exposure to European literacy as members of the Moravian Church. They just didn’t have the training that Newsom had.

Moreover, as Lyons and other scholars point out, while alphabetic literacy was introduced by the colonists, native peoples had and continued to employ other media of memory, such as wampum and oral traditions. The memorial exhibits a complex interrelation between alphabetic literacy and indigenous media. The Munsees, construing the government of the United States as continuous with the British (as well as the earlier Dutch) colonial administrations, reminded President Taylor of the 1757 treaty they had been parties to at Easton, Pennsylvania. The Easton Treaty itself hearkened back to the Great Treaty of Peace

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<sup>3</sup> Scott Richard Lyons, *X-Marks: Native Signatures of Assent*, 1 edition (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2010), 1.

with William Penn, with the friendship lasting “whilst the Sun Shines and the Rivers run,” or in the Munsee petition, “as long as the Sun would be seen, and as long as Rivers run, and Trees grow.”<sup>4</sup> According to the Munsees, a Commissioner named Capt Bullen “told our people to commit it to Memory in their feeble way of entering into Record, such important national matters. Thus a Wampum Record was made out directly to that effect, which now still remains in our hands to this present day.”<sup>5</sup>

It is unclear whether the Munsees are attributing the characterization of wampum as “feeble” to Bullen, or, whether, in writing, they are making a self-deprecating reference to a non-alphabetic medium. But the memorial also expresses the dynamism of wampum as a living record of community memory. The wampum belt was to serve as a record of the agreement and a token of the colonists’ continuing obligation. According to the memorial, the “Wampum is divided into thirteen parts, which signifies Friendship strongly established, by the authorized Commission of thirteen Governors of the thirteen original states.” The various transcripts, or written representations, of the Easton treaties make numerous references to wampum changing hands, but no such descriptions of belts – and a belt with “thirteen parts” seems unlikely from 1757; the colonial parties were Pennsylvania and New Jersey. But the wampum belt was not a record of a past agreement, but of a continuous and renewable one, and it may have been given at a later time, and been both retroactive and proactive. Thus the written “memorial” cites a wampum belt, which contained a treaty

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<sup>4</sup> Samuel Hazard, ed., *Pennsylvania Archives*, vol. 1, First Series (Philadelphia: Printed by Joseph Severns & Co., 1852), 8: 213. On the Great Treaty, see Andrew Newman, “[Treaty of Shackamaxon](#),” *Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia*, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> I haven’t been able to identify Bullen.

agreement, which in turn cites previous agreements. More properly, both artifacts are components in an inter-medial “chain of memory” that reaches into the distant past.<sup>6</sup>

#### Colonial Documents and Their Connection to the Munsees

The Munsees also, apparently, held onto or had access to colonial documents. In claiming that they have been shut out of the annuities from the 1805 treaty known as the “Treaty of Fort Industry,” they write, “we would most tenderly refer your kind attention to the fourth article of said Treaty, which was made on the fourth of July 1805.” They show a detailed knowledge of the terms of the treaty, and cite the names of the two Munsee Chiefs who signed it.<sup>7</sup>

The memorial also reaches back to first contact with Europeans, with the premise that their kind treatment of the first colonists conferred an obligation that the United States should still uphold in 1849. Their account of the arrival of the Dutch in New York Harbor expresses another medium of memory, oral tradition. Their narrative account features a premonition about the coming of the white men, a first sighting of a ship, and a gift of metal implements that they didn’t know what to do with.

#### The Accounts

According to the tradition, on a return trip, the colonists made their first request for land: “You first requested your Munsee children to grant you as much land, what a Bullock Skin would cover; and which was cut into small cords, which was laid in the form of a circle on the land which you desired to have, and we your Munsee Children directly complied to your

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<sup>6</sup> See Andrew Newman, *On Records: Delaware Indians, Colonists, and the Media of History and Memory* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 11, 163–64.

<sup>7</sup> For the text of the treaty, see Richard Peters, ed., *Treaties between The United States and the Indian Tribes*, vol. 6, Public Statutes at Large of the United States of America (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1846), 87–89.

request for land.” This detail, the description of a colonial ruse employing the hide of a bullock or ox-hide, isn’t at all a rhetorical emphasis of the petition, but it has significance for the way that “hidden literacies” convey historical knowledge, and for that reason it will be the subject of the remainder of this introductory essay.

Like other written records of oral traditions, the Munsees’ account of the arrival of the Dutch brings questions about authenticity and reliability. To what extent might the written version be attributed to the writer, rather than the teller? Is it indeed a Munsee tradition? If it does date from first contact, how might it have changed, over the course of its existence, and through the Indians’ continuing experience of settler-colonialism? Is it an authentic oral tradition, now represented in writing by Newsom, or has it been “contaminated” by colonial contact?

If so, the primary evidence of such contamination would be the story of the bullock’s hide, and even the use of the word “bullock,” and the source would be the Moravian missionary John Heckewelder, who wrote down and translated the earliest extant written version of the “Indian Tradition of the First Arrival of the Dutch at Manhattan Island” in the late eighteenth century. In that version, the colonists asked the Indians for “only so much land as the hide of a bullock would cover (or encompass,) which hide was brought forward and spread on the ground before them. That they readily granted this request; whereupon the whites took a knife and beginning at one place on this hide, cut it up into a rope not thicker than the finger of a little child, so that by the time this hide was cut up there was a great heap.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> John Heckewelder to Samuel Miller, February 26, 1801, Miller Papers 1 (BV), New-York Historical Society. A published version is available through Google Books: [John Heckewelder](#),

As Heckewelder himself recognized, the Indian account about the bullock's or ox hide parallels the classical story of the Phoenician Queen Dido's founding of Carthage in North Africa, an episode referred to in Virgil's *Aeneid* and detailed in Livy's *Roman History* and other sources. [Figure 1] Heckewelder astutely proposed an explanation for this parallel: that the Dutch colonists, imitating Dido, "put their classical knowledge to good account."<sup>9</sup> However, with one exception, colonialist scholars have not taken Heckewelder's proposition seriously.

Washington Irving, who read Heckewelder's version in the New-York Historical Society, made it material for parody. In an 1850 revision of his *History of New York*, the fictional author Diedrich Knickerbocker asserts that the story of the bullock's hide was "an old fable" which Heckewelder "may have borrowed from antiquity. The true version is, that Oloffte Van Kortlandt bargained for just so much land as a man could cover with his nether garments." They then brought out Mynheer Tenbroeck, or "Ten Breeches," a "bulbous-bottomed burgher" whose layers of underwear covered the whole site of New Amsterdam. [Figure 2].

Irving's contemporary Schoolcraft, who commented directly on the Munsee memorial, was similarly dismissive of its traditional content. He declared it "a mere reproduction of old Delaware and Mohegan traditions, which are recorded in various ways, & may be seen at large in the [blank] volume of the transactions of the American Philosophical Society." He may have intended to go back and verify the volume, but as far as I can determine the APS didn't publish a version of the tradition; Schoolcraft may have had in mind the one published

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*Indian Tradition of the First Arrival of the Dutch, at Manhattan Island, Now New-York* (New-York, 1841).

<sup>9</sup> John Gottlieb Ernestus Heckewelder, *History, Manners, and Customs of the Indian Nations Who Once Inhabited Pennsylvania and the Neighboring States*, Memoirs of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia : Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1881), 71.

by the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in 1819 as part of Heckewelder's *History, Manners and Customs of the Indian Nations who once inhabited Pennsylvania and the Neighboring States*, a book based on Heckewelder's decades as a missionary among the Lenapes and related peoples that has been an indispensable resource for scholars. The chapter containing the "Indian Account of the First Arrival of the Dutch at New York Island" has recently reached a wide readership, as a selection in the latest edition of the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*.<sup>10</sup> In it, Heckewelder designates the Lenni Lenape or Delawares and the Mahicans as the first Indians to greet the Dutch colonists, and he attributes his account of the tradition to "an intelligent Delaware Indian."<sup>11</sup> So he leaves the Munsees out.

Schoolcraft explains that Munsees are "relatives of the Delaware" and the Mahicans who in "early days" lived "in the western parts of New Jersey, extending to the banks of the Hudson above the Highlands, where the Dutch found them in 1609 & onwards." He states: "They never lived on Manhattan island, according to any testimony left by the colonial writers. The traditions mentioned by the memorialists, are therefore to be viewed as the common traditions of the kindred tribes of the Delaware & Hudson rivers."

Schoolcraft's dismissal makes little sense, however, insofar as the indigenous peoples who first met Henry Hudson wouldn't have identified as Delawares, Munsees or Mahicans – ethnonyms that came to identify Indian nations during the colonial era. The place called "Minisink," the "Stony Country," was in the area of the Delaware Water Gap, but Manhattan was well within the region of Minisink or Munsee dialect-speakers. And in the first version of Heckewelder's record of the tradition, he presents it as "verbatim as was related to me by

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<sup>10</sup> Heckewelder, *History*, 71–73; Sandra M. Gustafson, ed, *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 9th ed., vol. A (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017) 103-106.

<sup>11</sup> Heckewelder, *History*, 71.



Aged & respected Delawares; Monseys & Mahicanni.”<sup>12</sup> So the Munsee memorialists had good reason to claim the tradition, including the story of the bullock’s hide, as their own, and to claim it reports events in which their ancestors participated. And their version contains many details, such as the premonition and the turtle drum, that don’t appear in Heckewelder’s version, and omits some, such as the story of the first taste of alcohol, that do.

Moreover, what Schoolcraft, Heckewelder, Irving and the editors of the *Norton* didn’t know is that New Amsterdam isn’t the only site of early modern maritime imperialism, according to recorded oral traditions and non-western histories, where Dutch colonists brought out an ox hide and asked for as much land as the hide could cover. They performed the same ruse in Cambodia, Java, Taiwan and South Africa. Parallels attribute the hide trick to Portuguese colonists in Malaysia, Sri Lanka, India, Burma and Cambodia, and to Spaniards in the founding of Manilla. So the Munsee and Lenape traditions share this element with accounts from across the Indian and Pacific Oceans.<sup>13</sup>

#### What the Accounts Demonstrate

As I have argued extensively elsewhere, these accounts corroborate one another. It’s not possible that all these unrelated authors – John Heckewelder, the authors of the *Ming Annals*, the author of the *Arabic History of Gujarat* and many others – all decided to embellish or invent traditions in precisely the same way. There is no channel by which the stories could have spread by word of mouth, as apparently it did among neighboring Native American peoples. The best explanation is the one suggested by Heckewelder with respect to the New York instance. It is possible, if seemingly unbelievable, that these early modern maritime

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<sup>12</sup> Heckewelder to Miller, February 26, 1801.

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Newman, ed., “[The Dido Story in Accounts of Early Modern European Imperialism—An Anthology](#),” *Itinerario* 41, no. 01 (April 2017): 129–50.

imperialists, all connected with one another through the Habsburg Empire, went around emulating the story of Dido's founding of Carthage.<sup>14</sup>

Why does it matter? Because it's a challenging test case that vindicates indigenous memory-work over colonial documentary evidence. For the Munsee memorialists, their traditional knowledge is not incidental, as Schoolcraft seemed to think, but significant to their present demands. The memories of the 1805 Treaty of Fort Industry, the 1757 Treaty of Easton, and the early seventeenth-century arrival of the Dutch compose a coherent historical narrative and claim to historical knowledge. It's important to the Munsees that they were the first to greet the colonists and to give them land. What they're proposing in 1849 is a long protracted exchange: a tract of valuable Manhattan real-estate for a tract of "vacant" land on the Great Plains.

The Munsees' 1849 Memorial made a strong case: it demonstrates their understanding of the process and their effective mastery of its forms. In forwarding it to his Superintendent, the Indian Agent Cummins endorsed their request for "a Small country on which they can live and thrive, and claim as their own," and urged "a speedy and Serious consideration of this Subject"; Schoolcraft added that it "was worthy of favorable consideration." Yet like so many Native petitions for redress, it did not ultimately succeed in its practical aims. The Munsee community on Delaware lands in Kansas mostly disbanded. Many returned to Wisconsin and Canada; others joined the Delawares in an eventual move to eastern Oklahoma.<sup>15</sup> Today, the document serves as a memorial in another sense of the word: a

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<sup>14</sup> Newman, *On Records: Delaware Indians, Colonists, and the Media of History and Memory*, 55–93.

<sup>15</sup> Robert S. Grumet, *The Munsee Indians*, 277, 282.

reminder of a particular, transitory phase in the Munsee diaspora, but also of a different way of understanding history, left whole, rather than broken into parcels.

Sources:

For a great framing of relevant theoretical and methodological issues, see Alyssa Mt. Pleasant, Caroline Wigginton, and Kelly Wisecup, “Materials and Methods in Native American and Indigenous Studies: Completing the Turn,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (2018): 207–36, winner of the NAISA Award for thought-provoking article. See also Andrew Newman, “[Indigeneity and Early American Literature](#),” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*, February 27, 2017 (an open access version is [also available](#).) On the Munsees, in addition to Robert S. Grumet’s *The Munsee Indians: A History* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2009), the [Delaware Nation at Moraviantown](#), the [Delaware-Munsee Nation](#), and the [Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohican Indians](#) each have community history pages on their websites. To learn more about the significance of John Newsom’s education at the Foreign Mission School in Cornwall, see Hilary E Wyss, *English Letters and Indian Literacies: Reading, Writing, and New England Missionary Schools, 1750-1830* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012). On the Lenape, Mahican and Munsee accounts of the arrival of the whites in New York Harbor, and on parallels from around the world, see Andrew Newman, *On Records: Delaware Indians, Colonists, and the Media of History and Memory* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), and “[The Dido Story in Accounts of Early Modern European Imperialism—An Anthology](#),” *Itinerario* 41, no. 01 (April 2017): 129–50.



Figure 1: Dido Cutting the Ox-Hide, woodcut by Tobias Stimmer, in *Titus Livius and Lucius Florus, Von Ankunfft unnd Ursprung des Romischen Reichs...* Straszburg, 1575, fol. 220. Courtesy of Houghton Library, Harvard University. [OLC.L765.En575]





Figure 2: Mynheer Tenbroeck. Illustration by Felix O. C. Darley in Washington Irving's *A History of New York* (New York: George P. Putnam, 1850). Courtesy of The American Antiquarian Society.