

WHERE DID THE NAME ‘MAMARONECK’ COME FROM?

Every [Indian] name described the locality to which it was affixed. This description was sometimes purely topographical; sometimes historical, preserving the memory of a battle, or feast, the residence of a great Sachem, or the like; sometimes it indicated some natural product of the place, or the animals that resorted to it; occasionally, its position, or direction from places previously known, or from the territory of the tribe by which the name was given...

[When the Indian languages] were living languages, the meanings of most of these names could have been, easily enough, ascertained had any one cared to undertake the task, but now...comparatively few can be analyzed or interpreted with certainty.

(James Hammond Trumbull, author of *Indian names of places, etc., in and on the borders of Connecticut*, 1881)

On September 23, 1661, in the ‘bill of sale’ that John Richbell signed with the Siwanoy Indian sachem (chief) Wappagquewan, the purchase consisted of three ‘necks’ (projections or narrow sections of land) bounded on the east by the Mamaroneck River and on the west by the ‘Stoney’ river.

In that document, Richbell says, “The Eastermost [neck] is called **Mammaranock Neck...**” (He didn’t give names for the other two necks.) This is the oldest reference I have found suggesting that name for this area.

In contemporaneous documents, other settlers in what is now Rye, referred to it as “the Land beyond Mammaraneck River of the Indyans,” (Peter Disbrow), “the land at Mammaranock River,” (William Joanes), “a Certainte Tract of land lyeing westward of the River called Mammaranock River,” (John Finch), “a parcell of Land of the Indyans of the West side of Mammaranock River,” (Jonathan Lockwood). No one else referred to any of the land itself as ‘Mamaroneck.’

Even Richbell doesn’t specifically say that *the Indians* called the land Mamaroneck, but rather that, what is now Orienta, was called, *Mamaroneck Neck*, which sounds more like an English way of referring to the property, since it was the neck of land beside the Mamaroneck River.

In fact, in the two documents Thomas Revell had supporting his purchase of the first two most eastern necks, he says that the first neck (Orienta) was called by the Indians “Caquanost” (or possibly “Caywaywest” or even both - remember they were the writer’s spelling of his hearing of a sound made by an Indian) and for the second (Larchmont Manor) “Mamgapes” bounded on the west by a river he called “Mamgapes.”

Just as Revell’s claim to the property didn’t stick, neither did the Indian name he gave it and ‘Mamaroneck,’ with all its various spellings, quickly became the common designation for Richbell’s purchase.

The official Dutch report of the evidence Richbell and Revell presented referred to “ye Purchase of Mamaronock” and in 1671 some Wickerscreek (Wiquaeskeck) Indians from the Hudson River, trying to negotiate a sale, claimed their land extended to ‘Richbell’s Crosse at Mamaroneck.’

But if the name was settled, the *meaning* of the word still remains a matter of guess work. There are no Siwanoy left to tell us what it meant. Here are some popular suggestions:

Mamaroneck is named after the Indian chief, Mamaronock.

Support for this possibility comes from James Trumbell, who in 1881, citing another researcher, wrote that Mamaroneck was formerly known as "Mammarinecks" (as in, 'belonging to Mamaronock') and named after Mamaronock, a chief of the Wiquaeskeck Indians. The Wiquaeskeck Indians had a primary village as close as Dobb's Ferry, but other researchers say that Mamaronock was a Kitchewanc and lived way up in the Croton area. If correct, there doesn't seem to be any connection between this chief and our area.

Mamaroneck means "the place of rolling stones."

Support for this possibility comes from the fact that Mamaroneck had a tremendous number of what were called 'erratics.' These were boulders carried from some other place to Mamaroneck by the glaciers of the ice age. We know that there was at least one of them (the Rocking Stone in Larchmont) that moved. Perhaps the Indians thought that at some time in the distant past these stones 'rolled' into their resting places and therefore referred to the area this way.

The argument against this is that there doesn't seem to be any *documentary* evidence supporting the idea that the Indian word 'mamaroneck' translates as 'the place of rolling stones.'

Mamaroneck means "the place where the fresh (or sweet) water falls into the salt."

Support for this possibility comes from the fact that there was a waterfall on the Mamaroneck River, created by a rock ledge. When the tide came in, the salt water from the harbor would move inland up as far as the waterfall, so this would literally be where the fresh water fell into the salt water. (That waterfall and the ledge of rocks that created it, are no longer in existence.)

The argument against this is twofold:

First, that *exact* phrase seems to have originated in a surveyor's report for the Governor of the colony of New York in 1664. He described the line of boundary between Connecticut between New York (which at that time was Mamaroneck River) using these words: "...and a lyne drawne from ye east point of Syde where ye fresh water falls into ye salt, at high water marke..."

[In old English, the letter 'y' was used to represent 'th' so 'ye' is pronounced 'the' in these cases.]

Second, while the Siwanoy people disappeared from Westchester around 1750, we believe that they spoke a dialect of Algonquin called Leni Lenape. Philip Reisman Sr. of the Larchmont Historical Society found an 18th century English-Leni Lenape dictionary compiled by the Rev David Zeisberger, a Moravian missionary. He said that if one were to translate the phrase "where the fresh water falls into the salt" it would come out sounding something like "Kschieopectatpennium biskikn' k" rather than "mamaroneck."

Mamaroneck means “the Gathering Place.”

Support for this possibility comes from the interpretation of ‘mama,’ and ‘ock’ or ‘ack.’ The suffix of Mamaroneck was most spelt ‘ock’ or ‘ack’ in documents from the 1660s.

James Hammond Trumbull in *Indian names of places, etc., in and on the borders of Connecticut*, states that ‘mama’ means ‘to bring (or gather, or join, or meet) together.’

William Wallace Tooker in his book *The Indian Place Names on Long Island and Islands Adjacent. With Their Probable Significations* says that the suffix ‘ock’ or ‘ack’ means ‘land’ or ‘place’.

The argument against this are that there was a place on Long Island called “Mamanock” and Tooker translated *that* as ‘land joined to another piece of land.’ (Not very poetic, is it?)

Also, if the suffix was pronounced ‘uck’ by the Indians, instead of either ‘ock’ or ‘ack,’ then the meaning changes from ‘land’ to ‘river.’ And we are still left wondering what the ‘ron’ in Mamaron-eck signifies.

Perhaps the one thing we can be sure of is: today, right now, for the residents of our area, “Mamaroneck” means “a wonderful place to live.”

