When the Indians Sold Nutley at a Real Bargain

FROM FRANK JOHN URQUHART

THE biggest bargain ever closed in Essex County was the deal that Captain Robert Treat and Samuel Edsal, Godfearing men and refugees from Puritan intolerance in the New Haven Colony, made with the Indians here in May, 1666.

For the whole of the rich valley from the Passaic River to the Watchung Mountains and from Newark Bay up to the Yountakah or Third River, the Puritan refugees paid a lordly sum, the exact words written into the “Indian Bill of Sale to the Newarke Men:” “… fifty double-hands (as much as the two hands held together can contain) of powder, one hundred barrs of lead, twenty

axes, twenty coates, ten Guns, Twenty Pistolls, ten kettles, ten Swords, four blankets, four barrells of beere, ten paire of breeches, fifty knives, twenty howes, eight hundred and fifty fathom of wampum, two Ankers of Liquers (an anker was ten gallons) or something equivalent, and three troopers Coates ...” As an after-thought, 10 years later on March 13, 1677, the Puritans drove another bargain and extended the western boundary from the base to the crest of Watchung Mountain, giving two guns, three coats and 13 cans of rum.

Thus for about $700 in trade the Hudson to the Hackensack River was purchased. The price he paid was 80 fathoms of wampum, 20 fathoms of cloth, 12 brass kettles, one double brass kettle, six guns, two blankets and one-half bottle of strong beer.

It was a mixed band of Indians who trod the pine forests that covered much of this area when the Dutch and English drove their bargains.

The land was rightly that of the Delawares, who with their kin held the Jersey coast from the Delaware River up to Long Island and inland to the foot of the Alleghany Mountains. One of the oldest Indian clans, the Delawares were renowned for their wisdom and their gentleness, neither of which stood them much good when the Iroquois, a tribe much less recently promoted from barbarism, decided to muscle in on the rich Jersey lands.

The Iroquois had already cut in when Hendrik Hudson sailed up the North River. They were warriors and cruel. Subjugating the Delawares, they made them pay taxes for the privilege of hunting and fishing on their own land and streams. The Delawares went in for rudimentary agriculture and that won them the contempt of the Iroquois who spoke of the Delawares as “women.”

The Delawares were a branch of the Algonquins, and the Lenni Lenape were a branch of the Delawares. The Lenni Lenape spread over what is now Essex and Passaic counties. The Hackensacks had their community between Nutley and Passaic. To the north of them were the Tappans and to the south were the Raritans.

A very ancient race of red men, the Lenni Lenape always spoke of themselves as “pure Indians” and the words “lenni lenape” meant “original Indian men.” Of them all, the Hackensacks, who scraped the soil of Nutley to plant their Indian maize, claimed to be the oldest of all Indians. They had a legend by which the Hackensack sub-tribe was known as the “tortoises” while the Minsis, or Mountaineers, were “wolves” and the Raritans were “turkeys.”

The Hackensacks, who like all Indians mixed fact and myth, believed that they were the original race of red men because in their legend the tortoise carried the world on its back and moved around with his load to change the seasons.

Nutley’s original redskin inhabitants were, according to the earliest white travelers, powerfully built and about as tall as the early whites who came here. They had dark eyes, glistening white teeth and coarse black hair.

“They preserved themselves against muskettos by anointing themselves with the oil of fishes, the fat of eagles and the grease of raccoons which they hold in the Summer to be the best antidote to keep their skins from blistering by the scorching sun and their best armour against the muskettos in the summer and the best stopper of the pores of their bodies against the winter’s cold,” Charles Walley recorded in 1701.

So we learn that even before there was a New Jersey, there were mosquitoes here.

William Penn came to present-day Nutley in 1683 and left an interesting record of his observations. He visited the Indian village of Hackensack and then came down the Passaic River and visited other communities. Nowhere did he find the wigwams of other tribes. Instead, the Lenni Lenape favored community houses in which a considerable number of natives gathered.

Penn described the building of these community houses as follows:

“They bent down the bows of saplines and interlaced them, covering this framework with bark quite thick enough to provide a warm shelter. Sometimes they made wattled huts, circular or cylindrical in form, thatches and with an inner wall of mats woven from long reed grass that grows along the Peysac River or from sweet flag stalks. Their bedding was the skins of wild animals, usually the garments they put on and wore when they were abroad.”

A Dutch observer, recording his observations of the period 1621-1632, reported that the Lenni Lenape were religious and generous, and had a sincere belief in a Supreme Being. They were difficult to convert because they believed their Great Spirit superior to the white man’s God and, to missionaries, they frequently argued that the white man’s God had so little faith in his followers that he had to give them a Bible while the Great Spirit spoke to his redskin followers only through their hearts.

Tribal customs were different from other Indians. The Lenni Lenape had a very elaborate marriage ceremony, but marriage, while binding on the wives, was not binding on the males. They left the women for other wives whenever it suited them, and always left the children with the abandoned wife. The tribal word for marriage was “mitach-punge-wiwuladt-poagan” and it figured frequently in their legends.

Girl-children were not in favor and were used at the simple but back-aching tasks of planting and hoeing maize, preparing the food and bearing the heavy burdens when the family was on the move. Boy-children, though, were taught with considerable care the use of the bow and arrow, the making of fish-hooks, how to spear fish or how to trap fish or game with brush nets. The Passaic was a handy school for an Indian boy to learn the use of the canoe almost as soon as he walked, and today’s regattas on the river had their forerunner in canoe races which took place every summer.

Just like today's families in metropolitan New Jersey, our redskins went to the shore every summer. For a thousand years, each tribe had its tribal seashore territory for its "season" on the coast. The hill tribes came down from the uplands, using lakes and paths, while the Hackensacks loaded themselves into canoes and paddled to the shore.

These annual "shore seasons" served to allow the Indians to fish. They prized salt-water fish for their taste and their medicinal value. The summer was also spent in making wampum which the Hackensacks used more for ornament than as a currency, because their hunting and fishing was so rich that they had no need for money.

Oysters and clams were dug. The shellfish were dried, salted or soaked and put aside to be brought home for the winter, often packed in bales or strung on strings. Sea fish were treated in the same way, and while the women and girls were busy curing the seafood, the men made wampum.

With stone implements, they chipped the oyster and clam shells into little disks, working them down to the size of a bead. Then by using a sharp-pointed pencil-like stone, skillfully rotated between their fingers, they perforated each bead. It was polished and rounded by being rubbed on stone sprinkled with sand. Each bead was tested for smoothness by rubbing it against the nose.

Since the Hackensacks here lived a life of primitive Socialism, each contributing his share to a common pot, they had no need for money, so in this area wampum was used for writing history and for personal adornment. By making use of colors, manifold meanings were woven into the wampum belts and they often were used to record agreements between tribes. Each tribe had its skilled "wampum reader."

As far as can be estimated, there were barely 1,500 Indians in the whole of what is now New Jersey. Each tribe had its own loose government and had its own domain carefully marked along its boundaries.

Up and down this part of New Jersey, however, was a gridiron of trails which the Dutch traders found to their astonishment had been carefully mapped. The main trail from the highlands to the sea ran through Nutley, along the west shore of the Passaic River.

Called the Minisink trail, it ran northward from Newark through Nutley to the Hackensack village and then across country to Great Notch and was the principal highway of Indian travel from the Hudson to the Delaware. The trail itself was a well-marked path, but the Indians blazed the trail and set up landmarks for bad weather. Every stream and mountain was named and in the Indians' minds was a memorized map consisting of a succession of landmarks.

The records of the Indian "Bill of Sale" show that Treat and his fellow pioneers were thrown out of this area when they first tried to land. Behind that crisis was a bit of duplicity by Governor Carteret.

The migration of the New Haven dissidents was provoked by discord between themselves and the Pilgrim Fathers of the Plymouth colony who, in the opinion of the New Haven Puritans, were too liberal. The Puritans in the New Haven colony had set up a theocratic form of government that was based on the dual thesis that “the Word of God shall be the only Rule attended unto in ordering the affairs of government and that only members of the church should have the right to vote or to hold office.”

It was among these intolerant Puritan reformers that Captain Treat recruited volunteers for settling a new colony on the Passaic banks. There were four towns making up the colony which the Puritans called their “Isle of Innocence”-New Haven, Branford, Milford and Guilford. When the New Haven Colony was absorbed by Connecticut, volunteers were recruited from the four towns to found a new colony wholly separate from any political government.

Treat and Jasper Crane, who gave his name to Cranetown as Montclair was called originally, sailed to New Amsterdam and approached Peter Stuyvesant, asking to buy a site for the new colony in the Dutch lands. Stuyvesant sent them across the bay and up the Passaic River in his own barge to allow them to gaze at the green meadows and pine woods in the area which, eventually, they were to buy.

When the British suddenly seized New Amsterdam from the Dutch in 1664 and changed its name to New York, Treat and his fellows had to start their negotiations all over again. They finally struck a bargain with Philip Carteret, first governor of New Jersey, who assured them that the land they required would be bought from the Indians.

It was May, 1666, before the first group of settlers left New Haven Bay for the Passaic, a three-day sail to the Kill van Kull. Treat directed the boat up the Passaic River, then a magnificent tidal stream with lush green settings. At a point Treat had chosen for the new town, now a part of Newark, the boat tied up to trees and the settlers began unloading their belongings at a point near the present Centre Street Bridge.

Indians began gathering in considerable numbers and finally a spokesman for Oratam, chief of the Hackensacks, arrived and ordered the white men off the red men’s land, denying that they had sold any of it to Governor Carteret as Treat insisted.

Returning to their boat, the Puritans sailed to Elizabethtown where they hunted up Carteret who feigned surprise at the news. Treat was aghast at the Governor’s lack of respect for his given word and was about to order a return to New Haven when Carteret proposed that Treat try to negotiate the purchase with the Indians. He lent a Dutch trader-interpreter to handle the bargaining, John Capteen.

It was then that Perro appeared as the Indians’ bargaining agent, first with the approval of the Sagamores and then with the blessing of Oratam, the

venerable sachem of the Hackensacks. It was in that bill of sale that Treat and his fellow settlers bought all the land up to the point where the Third River flows into the Passaic and back to the Watchung Mountains.

In his records, Treat said that he went up the river to the Hackensack village which was located south of present-day Passaic, between that City and Nutley. The negotiations lasted several days and, finally, 10 Indians signed the bill of sale with their marks and the settlers who signed, beside Treat, were Obediah Bruen, Michael Tomkins, Samuel Kitchell, John Brown and Robert Denison. Samuel Edsal, who helped to interpret, Edward Burrowes, Richard Fletcher and Pierwim, sachem of Pau, signed as witnesses.

The sale having been signed and the trade goods handed over, the settlers unloaded their baggage again and if you are looking for a happy ending, let it be said that the records are not clear but that legend has it that the first of the Puritans to set foot on the newly bought shore, while the Indians were dividing up the handsful of powder and the “four barrells of beere,” “ten paire of breeches” and other riches, was Elizabeth, daughter of Captain Samuel Swarne, Swaine or Swain-the yellowed old documents of the early records are faded and indistinct.

The Swarnes or Swaines were of the Branford group and as Elizabeth stepped ashore she was helped by Josiah Ward, another Branford settler. The legend has it that within a short time after that historic event, Elizabeth and Josiah were married and lived happily ever after.