

## Manhattan – mana-hatta

The Manhattan we see today with all of its varied neighborhoods presented a very different landscape 500 years ago, before the first white settlers appeared. In upper Manhattan near the East River, blueberry fields bisected the forests and provided food for both animals and the *Wechquaesgek Indians*. They called the place where they lived *Manahatta*, meaning *hilly island*.

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And then, obviously, there is Mana-hatta, Manhattan, whose meaning and origins are still subject to debate: “*a place for general inebriation*”? “*the place for gathering bow wood*”? “*the hilly island*”? “*small island*”? “*rocky island*” (or “*rocky founded island*,” as Walt Whitman translated it)? from the name of the *Manates* (= “*island inhabitants*”)?

In Washington Irving’s 1809 work *Diedrich Knickerbocker’s History of New York*, a comicopera blend of history and fantasy, America’s first professional author treated his readers to an *amusing explanation of the name*. It derived, he wrote, from the native women’s custom of putting on men’s headgear: “*Man Hat On*”! Meanings and origins are, then, plagued by uncertainty. Nonetheless, the sheer musicality of the name possesses a mythical force and conjures up images of a controversial past shrouded in mystery. And a feeling of guilt that has yet to be fully dealt with.