

The Canarsie People of Brooklyn

The original people who lived on most of the land that is Brooklyn were the Canarsie people. The Canarsie had lived in Brooklyn for thousands of years. They were part of the Lenape nation. They were connected to the people who lived in Manhattan, and spoke the same language: Munsee. The Munsee name for Brooklyn is Seawonhacky, which means “place of wampum.” (Wampum is a special kind of clam shell which is turned into beautiful purple and white beads, and was very valuable to the Indigenous people in the area. Indigenous people are people who have lived in a place for many thousands of years, and who didn’t settle on someone else’s land.)

There were a number of villages in Brooklyn. They were connected to each other by paths or roads. The main path ended at the East River near where the Brooklyn Bridge is now. The people of Brooklyn and Manhattan would use canoes to travel across the river, so that Manhattan and Brooklyn were connected just like they are today: except that today people travel under the river in the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel or one of the bridges like the Brooklyn Bridge or the Manhattan Bridge, and in those days people used boats.

If you look at the map, you can see that the Canarsie villages were quite close to water. Think about all of the islands around Brooklyn and the NYC area that people might have wanted or needed to travel to: they would have needed to live near the water so that they could use canoes to get around.

The Canarsie, like other Lenape people, also used footpaths or roads. Many of these paths or roads were later used by the Dutch settlers to build their roads. These include Flatbush Avenue, Atlantic Ave and other streets.

Archeologists and historians have discovered where some of the Canarsie villages and farmlands were. We can find those places on a map. The settlers who took over the land and lived on it after the Canarsie were forced to leave, made changes and built over the villages and farmlands, so we can no longer see any sign of the houses in the villages or any of the farmlands.

The main village of the Canarsie was where the modern neighborhood of Canarsie is now. It was right near the beach, where Canarsie Beach Park is. There were also fields near the village, where the Canarsie grew corn and other vegetables.

There was also a village called Marechkawick, on Fulton Street near Jay Street, and a village near the Brooklyn Bridge on Front Street, called Rinnegaconck. There were cornfields between these villages, on Court Street between Atlantic Avenue and Baltic Street, called Sassion's Maize-land (maize is another word for corn). There was also a village called Warpos nearby.

There was an important village between Marechkawick and the village of Canarsie, called Keskaechquerem. It was at a crossroads, where roads from all four directions met, where the present-day Kings Highway and Flatbush Avenue meet and cross. Because of this, it was an important meeting point, where

different communities could gather together and discuss issues or share ideas.

When the settlers arrived from Holland nearly 400 years ago, the Canarsie people in Brooklyn and the Indigenous people living on the rest of Long Island, as well as the Lenape people on Manhattan, began to be pushed off their land. Over around thirty or forty years, the Canarsie were forced to leave their villages and their fields, and move west across the Hudson River. Over the next few hundred years, they kept settling in places and being forced to move again. Some of the Lenape people who are Munsee-speaking now live in Wisconsin, and some live in Canada.

Written by Sue Giffard
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The information comes from two books by Reginald Pelham Bolton, who was an archeologist in New York City around a hundred years ago:

“Indian Paths in the Great Metropolis.” 1922.

“New York City in Indian Possession.” 1920.



Map of Canarsie Villages and Fields in Brooklyn/Seawonhacky