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Why the Dutch?

The Historical Context of New Netherland

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The past is elusive. No matter how hard we try to imagine what the world was like centuries ago, the attempt conjures up only blurry images, which slip away like a dream. However, we do have tools available to sharpen these images of the past: primary source materials and archaeological evidence. With both we can attempt to construct a world in which we never lived. If we have any advantage at all, it's only that we know what that past world's future will be like.

The goal of this book is to provide the latest archaeology of the area that the Dutch once called Nieuw Nederlandt. As an increasing number of translations of the records of this West India Company (WIC) endeavor become available to researchers, it is hoped that this collection of articles will enhance the words that the Dutch left behind. It's fitting that we review why the Dutch were here in the first place.

Most of the narrative facts of the Dutch story are well known and accepted among historians who specialize in the history of the Dutch Republic and its colonial undertakings. Accordingly, I use citations here sparingly; however, the reader wishing a deeper understanding should consult the sources cited at the end of this chapter.

In the seventeenth century, the Dutch possessions lay between the New England colonies to the northeast and the tobacco colonies of Maryland and Virginia to the southwest. In 1614 the region appeared in a document of the States General of the United Provinces of the Netherlands as New Netherland. Its boundaries were defined by three river systems: the Fresh (Connecticut), North (Hudson), and South (Delaware). The central river

system opened access to the interior of the country through its connection with the Mohawk River. Until the discovery of the Cumberland Gap in 1751, it would be the only passage westward to the Great Lakes and the interior of the country below the Saint Lawrence River. How did a country with a population of a little more than one million gain control of an area that would become the center of the fur trade in the New World?

During the late Middle Ages many nations, such as Sweden, France, Spain, and Russia, expanded their territories and commercial interests through war. However, the Netherlands' rise to a global commercial powerhouse began by virtue of a marriage.

In the fifteenth century, a large part of Western Europe came under the control of the House of Habsburg, when Frederick III was crowned emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. The marriage of his son Crown Prince Maximilian to Princess Mary of the House of Burgundy brought the 17 provinces of the Low Countries into the empire. Overnight, this north-western corner of Europe, which had been serving mainly as a delta to three major river systems, had been added to a commercial network that spanned the globe.

The Low Countries' location fit perfectly with the worldwide ambitions of the Habsburgs. Halfway between the Baltic and the Mediterranean, they were positioned ideally to serve as a warehouse, processing center, and distribution facility for ships loaded with goods from abroad. From this location, England, France, and the Baltic and Scandinavian countries were all accessible by water. The provinces, especially Holland and Zeeland, were flourishing from this water-related commercial activity. What could possibly go wrong?

To a certain extent, it all began with the Reformation. John Calvin's rendering of Luther's reform of the Catholic church struck a responsive chord in the Low Countries. The Counter-Reformation, led by the Habsburgs, attempted to stamp out this "heretical" movement. Although Emperor Charles V, grandson of Maximilian and Mary, was a devout Catholic, it was his son Philip who forced the issue when he succeeded his father as king of Spain. Coupled with this was Philip's attempt to consolidate the collection of taxes in the Low Countries. Philip's wars with France and the Ottoman Turks required a more consistent income flow. However, this more efficient way of squeezing money out of the "fatted cow" violated privileges, which had been granted to the provinces over the centuries. Religion and politics, the two taboo subjects of conversation at a cocktail party, were now on everyone's lips.

Armed combat broke out in 1568. This struggle against the empire would not end until 1648. Cities were besieged, atrocities committed, and thousands of people displaced. If that wasn't enough, in 1618 a war broke out between Protestants and Catholics in central Europe which lasted for 30 years. The massive disruption caused by this war sent thousands of refugees into the Low Countries. The only respite from this turmoil was a truce in 1609 between the Dutch and Spanish combatants. During this period of 12 years, the Dutch East India Company took advantage of the suspension of hostilities by hiring Henry Hudson, an experienced English navigator, to find a northern route to the Far East. Many attempts had been undertaken by both the Dutch and English to find shorter trade routes and less hostile waters to sail in, but all had failed. Although Hudson's attempt was also a failure, his explorations along the northeastern coast of America defined an area that the Dutch would claim by right of discovery.

For the Dutch, the establishment of trade routes was now a matter of survival. When the Dutch severed political ties with the empire, it also severed all economic ties. Ships that had been adding to its wealth were now enemy combatants. It was now up to a population of only one and half million people to create a commercial trade network that could compete with England, France, Spain, and Portugal. Everything depended on water. To supply grain from the Baltic to feed the population, ships had to be built. Ships required large supplies of wood which all had to be transported in from Scandinavia. It was do or die. Not only did the Dutch succeed in maintaining its break with the empire, they exceeded all expectations. Noted English historian Jonathan Israel (1989:12) states: "Except for Britain around 1780 no one power ever achieved so great a preponderance over the processes of world trade as did the Dutch for a century and a half."

However, it was not just their ability to build ships and to exercise the navigational skills learned while part of the empire. It was the creation of the Bank of Amsterdam in 1609. As Barbara Tuchman (1988:28) states: "It was the heart that pumped the bloodstream of Dutch commerce. By introducing new methods of regulating the exchange of foreign currencies it allowed checks to be drawn on the bank, providing credit and loans and assuring the reliability of deposit. Dutch guilders soon became the most desired currency."

At the end of the truce in 1621, the West India Company was founded on the model of the East India Company. Its primary mission was to resume the war with the empire; secondary was the establishment of a trade network from the west coast of Africa westward across the Atlantic and Pacific

to the easternmost reaches of the Indonesian archipelago. The region called New Netherland, which had been an area of interest since 1614, was of special interest to merchants in the Netherlands because of the abundance of furs available through the Mohawk-Hudson corridor.

In spite of the WIC's early preoccupation with Africa and Brazil, it managed to take possession of New Netherland. The initial plan was to take control of the three river systems that served as conduits for the fur trade. In 1624 the first group of colonists were settled at the mouth of the Connecticut, on High Island (present-day Burlington Island) in the Delaware, and at the newly constructed Fort Orange on the upper Hudson. In the same year, colonists also settled on Governors Island, just south of the island of Manhattan, where a fort and windmill were constructed.

However, this large expanse of land, which would eventually become parts of Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Delaware, was not devoid of people. The indigenous peoples of the area were divided linguistically into two distinct language families: Algonquian and Iroquoian. Algonquian speakers occupied roughly the eastern half of New Netherland and Iroquoian speakers the western half.

Shortly after Hudson's explorations in the area, Adriaen Block was sent out to find the source of Hudson's reference to "a beautiful and fruitful land." What must have caught the eye of Dutch merchants during the height of the Little Ice Age was mention of the abundance of fur-bearing animals. Fur garments and castor hats were the fashion in Europe. During several centuries of exceptionally cold winters caused by increased volcanic activity and the paucity of sunspots, fur-bearing animals were sacrificed for the sake of comfort and fashion. It wasn't long before new sources of furs were being sought.

Block was hired by Lutheran merchants in Amsterdam to find the fur-rich river Hudson had described. He sailed along the coast of Connecticut, entering every river from the Thames to the Housatonic, and finally into the Hudson. Along the coast of Connecticut, he encountered Indians who were eager to trade for European goods. Among the items he received in return was *sewant*, or wampum. This decorative device was prized by Indians from other regions. It not only required a certain type of shell to produce but also the hole bored through the cylinder was labor intensive. When Block reached the upper Hudson around present-day Albany, the Indians there must have spotted the sewant aboard his ship. It soon became evident that furs could be traded for this device. It was so sought after that it was referred to as the "source and mother of the whole beaver trade"

(O'Callaghan 1868, 2:543). Dutch traders could exchange Dutch goods for seawant along the coast of Connecticut and Long Island, then take the seawant up the Hudson to trade for furs. Block played a role not only in setting up this profitable trade but also in establishing the trading post, Fort Nassau, on Castle Island (present-day Port of Albany) in 1614.

It was in this context that the Dutch established a fur-trading operation that became the envy of their European rivals, the English and the French. Although trading posts were located on the three river systems, it was Fort Orange on the upper Hudson that would prove the most productive. It was this post's access to the interior of the country via the Mohawk Valley that made it irreplaceable.

Relations with the various Indian bands depended mostly on location and politics. Allen W. Trelease uses the terms "expendables" and "valuables" to describe whether such relations were positive or negative for the Dutch and English. For example, in 1626 the commander at Fort Orange made the mistake of supporting the Mahicans in an attack on the Mohawks. This was contrary to instructions to remain neutral in Indian political affairs. Things didn't go well. The Mohawks ambushed the Mahican war party, killing the Dutch commander and several of his soldiers. Mahican losses are unknown. Only after all settlers were withdrawn from the area did the Mohawks agree to resume normal trade relations (Jameson 1909:84). Thus, the Mahicans became "expendables," as the Dutch needed them on land for agricultural expansion, while the Mohawks became "valuables" as the major supplier of furs to Fort Orange.

During the period of WIC administration of the region called New Netherland, the shape of the actual ground under its control varied. In the early years, the Dutch "right of discovery" extended from Cape Cod (called Cape Malabar by the Dutch) to Cape Hinlopen at the mouth of Delaware Bay. However, over time the borders shifted according to political pressures from exterior forces.

Exclusive control of the Delaware was temporarily lost when Sweden established the trading colony of New Sweden in 1638. However, 17 years later aggressive action by Governor Petrus Stuyvesant brought the river back under Dutch control. As payment for the city of Amsterdam's loan of a warship for the "Swedish expedition," a section of the river was brought under the city's direct administrative control.

In the Northeast, aggressive pressure was coming from New England. The Dutch had initially established a trading post at the mouth of the Connecticut River. However, they soon moved the operation farther upriver

to establish a permanent trade post deeper in Indian country. The trading post, called 't Huys van Hoop (the House of Hope), was serviced by a small agricultural community. But it wasn't long before the growing English population to the east invaded. Pressure became so relentless that the Dutch sought a secure border. The Treaty of Hartford in 1650 formed a provisional border that was never ratified but at least brought about temporary stability with New England.

The final reshaping of New Netherland's area of settlement came in 1661, when Arent van Curler was granted land along the Mohawk River. This agricultural community was named Schenectady. Altogether, there were 17 communities when the English gained control of the Dutch possession in 1664. The Dutch regained control of New Netherland in 1673 during the third Anglo-Dutch war. However, 14 months later, it was ceded permanently to the English under terms of the Treaty of Westminster.

Evidence of the existence of New Netherland didn't vanish with the arrival of the English. Most of the inhabitants didn't just pack up and return to Europe. They had large families and were for the most part firmly rooted in the New World. Their language and customs survived for generations. The Dutch left a significant footprint, which would contribute to the characteristics we call *American*.

Certain prominent traits of Dutch culture transmitted to New Netherland included social mobility, tolerance, and free trade. It wasn't necessary to be born to an upper level of society to become a respected participant in commerce and politics or society in general. You only needed to be ambitious and talented to rise to the top (but it also helped to marry well). Religious tolerance was guaranteed in article 13 of the Union of Utrecht, the de facto constitution of the United Provinces, which stated that no one would be prosecuted or persecuted because of their religion. Everyone was guaranteed "freedom of conscience." No one was ever hanged in New Netherland because of their religious convictions. And the Dutch were proponents of open trade everywhere. Free trade, also known as *mare liberum* (freedom of the seas) was valued as essential in the "carrying trade," as opposed to *mare clausum* (restricted waters), as exhibited by the English Navigation Acts. Not a trait but rather a consequence of history is multiethnicity. In contrast to the English and French, the "Dutch" population of New Netherland reflected the multiethnic makeup of its home country. Displaced persons from all over Europe had found refuge in the Netherlands. Many were fleeing the various wars in Europe, others natural disasters. In many ways, the Netherlands had become a kind of halfway house for desperate

people rolling the dice for a better life. The United East India Company offered opportunities in the Far East, while the WIC offered the prospects of Hudson's "beautiful and fruitful land" in North America. New Netherland became the crucible that produced the beginning of the American "melting pot." It can be argued that the New York City of today is a reflection of the city of Amsterdam in the seventeenth century.

In addition to these somewhat intangible and subjective characteristics, the Dutch also left behind layers of material culture as witness to their presence here at the beginning of European settlement of North America. In the articles that follow in this volume, various aspects of what was left below the surface of New Netherland are explored and analyzed to provide new insights into that time and place.

SELECT WORKS SUGGESTED FOR FURTHER READING

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