

# N<sub>ew</sub>

## Amsterdam on the Hudson

### *The Dutch Background of New York City*

Imagine an island approximately the size of the Frisian island of Vlieland with 571 miles of roads, 102,522 business establishments, 105 banks, 243 hotels, 63 hospitals, 492 churches, 47,669 attorneys, and a population density of 27,000 per square mile. Incredible as this may seem, such an island actually exists. It is called Manhattan Island, at the mouth of the Hudson River in New York State, the central core of New York City; one of the financial, cultural, and intellectual leaders of the world.

As a direct descendant of New Amsterdam, the commercial centre of the Dutch West India Company in North America for most of the seventeenth century, New York City's Dutch background is still apparent in many ways and sets it apart from other American cities. One of these unique characteristics was lucidly expressed in an article about New York high society ('Old Money, New Needs', by Judith Miller in the *New York Times Magazine*, November 17, 1991): 'Perhaps because the Dutch ruled New York society until the early 19th century, the rigid, English-dominated class that led Philadelphia and Boston never created a comparable force in New York City. Indeed, as a great mercantile and financial power dependent on talented new people, New York has always offered relatively fluid access to the ranks of society.'

With the advantage of hindsight it is obvious why New York City has grown into the influential megalopolis that it is today. It meets the three basic requirements of successful real estate: location, location, and location. Manhattan not only offers a natural ice-free harbour midway along the coast of North America, but is also situated at the mouth of the Hudson and Mohawk river systems – for years the sole access to the interior of the continent below the Saint Lawrence River, the main artery of New France.

Despite these obvious advantages, the island was at first ignored by early explorers and traders. Hudson anchored along the shore of 'Manna-hata' upon his return from upriver in October of 1609. However, he was searching for a passage to the Orient and had little interest in the commercial potential of the island. Shortly after Hudson's explorations Dutch traders began to visit the area. In 1613 Adriaen Block's ship *Tijger* was accidentally burned while anchored at Manhattan. Block and his crew overcame the loss

by building a replacement ship called *Onrust* – the beginning of the ship-building industry on Manhattan.

Activity increased in the area after the formation of the New Netherland Company in 1614. This trading monopoly was licensed by the States General of the United Provinces to regulate trade to this new region and prevent the violence that was growing as a result of increased competition for furs. Although Manhattan most likely served as a base of operations more than once during the trading season, it was the smaller island off the tip of Manhattan that probably attracted the most Dutch traders. As a central base of operations *Nooten Eiland* (today Governor's Island) was ideal because it had all the attributes of Manhattan and was small enough to secure against native attack.

When the Twelve Year Truce with Spain expired in 1621, the West India Company was chartered to carry on the war against Spain in the Atlantic theatre of operations. Modelled on the earlier East India Company, the *wic* soon sent out expeditions to Africa, Brazil, and North America. New Netherland, which extended from the Connecticut River to Delaware Bay, was to become the Company's northernmost operation. The colony was expected to supply enough natural resources, especially furs, to sustain itself and to turn a profit for the Company.

In 1624, as soon as the Company had raised sufficient operating capital, it sent over some 30 families, mostly Walloons, to secure its holdings in New Netherland. Several families and men were located at the mouth of the Connecticut River, as well as on High Island (today Burlington Island) in the Delaware River. The remaining families were sent up to Fort Orange (present-day Albany), while eight men were left in the Manhattan area, probably on Governor's Island. The settlement strategy was to locate families at the remote trading posts on the three major river systems to form agricultural support communities. In the beginning, Governor's Island served as the central base of operations where the trading ships assembled before returning with cargo to the fatherland.

The following year, when large shipments of livestock arrived, Governor's Island proved to be too small to pasture the animals adequately. The problem was solved by transferring the livestock to Manhattan where there was abundant space. Although some twenty cows died from eating noxious weeds, Manhattan had become the primary pasture of New Netherland. Nevertheless, Manhattan still was not attracting settlers. In fact, according to the instructions for Willem Verhulst, director of New Netherland from 1625 to 1626, he was to strengthen his southern settlement the most (Fort Wilhelmus on High Island in the Delaware) and consider making this location the centre of the colony. Interest in the Delaware probably stemmed from a misconception that this region enjoyed a climate similar to Florida's. Concern over maintaining an ice-free harbour was paramount. However, it soon became apparent that the Delaware could and did freeze over, while Manhattan's harbour remained free of ice.

In any case, it was an event far to the north that determined the suitability of Manhattan as the centre of the colony. In the Spring of 1626 the Mahican Indians, who lived near Fort Orange, persuaded Daniel van Krieckenbeeck, the Dutch commander, to support them in an attack on their arch-enemies, the Mohawk Indians, who lived farther to the west. A few miles from the



Map of New Netherland by Nicolaas Jansz. Visscher (c. 1690) (New York State Library).

fort the Mahican war party with their Dutch allies were ambushed by the Mohawks and soundly defeated. When Verhulst's replacement, Peter Minuit, arrived in the colony in May he immediately sailed to Fort Orange to assess the situation. Minuit decided that matters had become too dangerous to maintain families in remote settlements. His solution was to purchase Manhattan Island, upon which he planned to consolidate all the families from Fort Orange, the Connecticut, and Delaware. Although trading personnel remained at the remote posts, the Mohawks were apparently satisfied by the withdrawal of the families and caused the Dutch no further trouble.

Soon after the purchase of Manhattan Island work began on Fort Amsterdam, which was to protect the inhabitants of the new settlement of New Amsterdam. In the Fall of 1626 the ship *Arms of Amsterdam* returned from New Netherland with news from the North American colony. Peter Schagen sent a report of the ship's arrival to the directors with a brief account of the situation in New Netherland. This letter, which is among the West India Company papers in Royal Archives in the Hague, is as close as one can come to a birth certificate for New York City. It reads as follows:

High and Mighty Lords,

Yesterday the ship the *Arms of Amsterdam* arrived here. It sailed from New Netherland out of the River Mauritius on the 23d of September. They report that our people are in good spirit and live in peace. The women also have borne some children there. They have purchased the Island Manhattes from the Indians for the value of 60 guilders. It is 11,000 *morgens* in size (about 22 acres). They had all their grain sown by the middle of May, and reaped by the middle of August. They sent samples of these summer grains: wheat, rye, barley, oats, buckwheat, canary seed, beans and flax. The cargo of the aforesaid ship is:

7246 Beaver skins;

178½ Otter skins;

675 Otter skins;

48 Mink skins;

36 Lynx skins;

33 Minks;

34 Weasel skins;

Many oak timbers and nut wood.

Herewith, High and Mighty Lords, be commended to the mercy of the Almighty,

Your High and Mightinesses' obedient,  
P. Schagen

It is from this letter that the famous and oft-quoted purchase price of \$24.00 comes. This figure, of course, reflects the rate of exchange between the guilder and the dollar at the time the letter was first discovered in the late nineteenth century. It corresponds in no way with the actual value of 60 guilders worth of merchandise in the early seventeenth century.

During the early years of the colony New Amsterdam grew slowly. Initially the West India Company directed most of its attention to Africa, the Caribbean, and especially Brazil. Only a small amount of the Company's financial and human resources was diverted to New Netherland. Under the administrations of Minuit, Krol, Van Twiller, and Kieft, New Amsterdam spread from a cluster of houses near the fort northward to approximately present-day Wall Street. As the centre of the colony it served as the entrepôt for commercial activity from Fort Orange on the upper Hudson to Delaware Bay. Ships transferred cargoes of fur and tobacco to the Company warehouse where they were stored until loaded aboard ships bound for the fatherland.

Sailors from various countries, taking shore leave in New Amsterdam, made tavernkeeping one of the most lucrative professions. Governor Kieft remarked once to a visiting Jesuit priest that eighteen languages could be heard in the streets of his city. It has been estimated that approximately one half of the resident population of New Netherland came from places other than the Netherlands. Many were refugees from the Thirty Years' War in Germany, wars between Denmark and Sweden, and the religious wars in France. Thus multi-ethnicity was and has been over the years a characteristic of the area covered by the Dutch colony.



View of New Amsterdam  
by Jan Vingboons (c.1665)  
(The Hague, Rijksarchief).

New Amsterdam was a lively seaport town. In addition to the many seamen from all parts of the globe, Indians from the various tribes of Long Island, Westchester, and New Jersey, and Africans, both free and slave, frequented its streets. During the period of Dutch administration, the community at the tip of Manhattan Island was witness to many exciting events. Although Wouter van Twiller's tenure as director of the colony is often characterized as one of stagnation and torpor (a paucity of documentary sources for his administration is partly responsible for this assessment), several dramatic events occurred that must have stirred the populace.

In April of 1633 an English ship, the *William*, put into New Amsterdam's harbour. Its skipper was Jacob Eelckens, who had served with Dutch trading cartels in the Hudson River before the formation of the *WIC*. His experience in navigating the river and familiarity with native customs and languages in the Hudson Valley made him a distinct threat to Van Twiller when he requested permission to trade at Fort Orange. The *WIC* could not admit competition from foreign powers and still remain a monopoly. When denied access to the Dutch fur trade, Eelckens proclaimed that the land in any case belonged to the English king. After some weeks in harbour, the *William* managed to slip free and proceed up the river. Van Twiller eventually sent several ships in pursuit. They forced Eelckens to return to New Amsterdam where he refused to comply with Van Twiller's demand to surrender his cargo of furs. Matters returned to normal when Eelckens departed for London.

The English would continue to threaten New Netherland, not only because of its proximity to New England and Virginia but also because the Dutch controlled the most important fur trading routes south of New France. A few years after the episode with Eelckens, the English sent a force from Point Comfort, Virginia to seize the Dutch fort and trading post on the Delaware River. Since Fort Nassau (present-day Gloucester, NJ) was only garrisoned during the trading season (May-September) the English were able to occupy it without bloodshed. As soon as Van Twiller heard of this





Manatus Map by Jan Vingboons (c.1639)  
(Library of Congress).

intrusion into the South River region of New Netherland, he sent a military force by sea to recover the fort. The Dutch were aware that whoever controlled the Delaware could also control the fur trade behind Fort Orange. The English soldiers surrendered without incident and were brought to New Amsterdam. They were eventually brought back to Virginia by David Pietersz. de Vries who was sailing to the Chesapeake on business. Once again an English incursion into Dutch territory had demonstrated to the people of New Amsterdam the tenuous nature of their settlement on Manhattan Island.

The civil war in England during the 1640s reduced the threat from this external force; however, it was soon replaced by disruption from an internal force when Van Twiller's successor as director of the colony, Willem Kieft, became involved in a devastating Indian war. These hostilities, which laid waste Dutch settlements in New Jersey and on Staten Island, and gave rise to numerous brutalities against the Indians, introduced New Amsterdam to a wartime situation replete with refugees and casualties.

Kieft's misadventures with the native population led to his removal as director of the colony in 1647. His replacement was Petrus Stuyvesant, newly married to Judith Bayard, daughter of the Walloon minister in Breda, and newly fitted with a wooden leg. As governor of Curaçao, Stuyvesant had lost his right leg in an assault on the Spanish held island of Saint Martin. Stuyvesant had been selected for the position of director-general of New Netherland as much for his administrative abilities as for his reputation as an aggressive military commander.

Stuyvesant arrived before New Amsterdam on May 11, 1647 in grand style. He sailed into the harbour accompanied by a ship that he had captured from the Spaniards off the coast of Curaçao. His administration lasted seventeen years; a period of time during which New Netherland began to attract more settlers and develop into a busy commercial centre with trade connections throughout the Caribbean and along the coast of North America. During Stuyvesant's tenure as director-general New Amsterdam was granted the rights and privileges of a municipality and experienced near hysteria from rumours of invasion.

When the English Civil War (1642-1648) was resolved in favour of the Parliamentarians, Cromwell attempted to improve England's commercial interests around the world by limiting the Netherlands's ability to compete. The so-called Navigation Act, which allowed only English ships or ships of the country of origin to carry goods to England, led to the first Anglo-Dutch War (1652-1654). The war in Europe soon threatened to spill over to New Netherland. In the Spring of 1653 a delegation from New England visited Stuyvesant in New Amsterdam with accusations that he had incited Indians to attack settlements in Connecticut. The New Englanders left abruptly for a conference in Boston when the charges were denied, leaving the impression that military action would follow. Stuyvesant immediately began strengthening defenses throughout the colony. It is at this time that he initiated the building of the defensive barrier along the northern edge of New Amsterdam, which is remembered to this day as Wall Street. In Boston, attempts to form a united New England force to attack New Netherland failed, deflating the possibility of invasion. When word reached the city of peace between England and the Netherlands in 1654, the news was celebrated with a huge bonfire and a day of prayer and thanksgiving.

Once again the resolution of external problems was followed by a series of internal problems. In 1638, during Kieft's administration, the crown of Sweden sanctioned the planting of an colony in the Delaware, on land claimed by the *wic* (present-day Wilmington, Delaware). Although dissatisfied with the situation the Dutch managed to coexist with little friction. However, when the Swedes captured the Dutch stronghold and trading post of Fort Casimir on Trinity Sunday of 1654 plans were laid for the elimination of New Sweden. In the summer of 1655, after Stuyvesant returned from a trading mission to the Caribbean, he began to assemble a force for the Swedish expedition.

On Sunday, 5 September, after church service, the invasion force of seven ships carrying over 300 soldiers left New Amsterdam. New Sweden's defenses were no match for Stuyvesant. He quickly brought the Swedish colony under Dutch control; however, operations on the Delaware were disturbed when news reached the Dutch encampment that Manhattan and the outlying settlements in New Jersey and on Staten Island had been attacked by a large force of Indians. Ostensibly the Indians were searching for a man who had shot an Indian woman for stealing peaches in his garden. However, some officials in New Amsterdam suggested that the Swedes were behind it. Although little damage was done on Manhattan Island, the settlements in New Jersey and on Staten Island were laid waste; there were many casualties and many hostages in Indian hands. Once again New Amsterdam was full of refugees and the smoke of burning farms hung in the air.

Despite these problems with the Indians, the Dutch colony began to grow rapidly. The new influx of settlers and increased commercial activity was propelled by the loss of Dutch Brazil in January of 1654. Once Brazil ceased to consume most of the Company's resources, more attention was devoted to strengthening the colony in North America. However, as New Amsterdam was growing into a major commercial centre between the English colonies of New England and Virginia, it attracted the attention of the newly restored Charles II, king of England, and his brother James, duke of York



Portrait of Peter Stuyvesant, attributed to Henri Couturier (New York Historical Society).

and Albany. Both were eager to enrich English commercial operations at the expense of the Dutch.

In 1664 Charles granted his brother James extensive territories in North America, which included the Dutch colony of New Netherland. In September of the same year, without a declaration of war, a naval force under the command of Richard Nicolls demanded the surrender of New Netherland. Fort Amsterdam and Fort Orange surrendered without resistance; however, Fort New Amstel on the Delaware (formerly Fort Casimir), belonging to the city of Amsterdam, refused to surrender and had to be taken by storm. The easy capture of the colony was replicated in 1673 when a Dutch fleet retook the colony. It remained in Dutch hands until the end of the third Anglo-Dutch war when it was returned to England as part of the peace settlement.

By the time New Amsterdam became New York, the city already had a rich and exciting past. A period when the attributes of its namesake in the Netherlands were steadily being transferred to the New World. Amsterdam, the financial, cultural, and intellectual leader of Northern Europe in the seventeenth century, and haven for refugees displaced by European wars, had laid the foundation for the ascendancy of New York City as financial, cultural, and intellectual capital of the world, and primary port of entry for millions of European immigrants.

CHARLES GEHRING

#### SOURCES:

GEHRING, CHARLES T., *New Netherland Documents*, (Council Minutes 1651-1656), vols. 5 and 6, Syracuse, 1983 and 1993.

PHELPS STOKES, J.N., *The Iconography of Manhattan Island, 1498-1909*, 6 vols. New York, 1915-1928.

VRIES, DAVID PIETERSZ. DE, *Korte historiael ende journaels aenteyckeninge van verscheyden voyagiens in de vier deelen des werelts-ronde, als Europa, Africa, Asia, ende Americcka gedaen*, Linschoten-Vereeniging, volume 3, 's-Gravenhage, 1911.