

Monthly Letter May/June 2009

New-Netherland: “land more beautiful than I have ever seen in Holland”



400 years ago, Henry Hudson arrived in the bay of Manhattan with the VOC-ship *The Half Moon* (*De Halve Maen*) looking for a safer and faster route to India. He did not find this route, but he did discover a beautiful country with rivers full of fish and a wealth of fruits and crops. According to the ship's journal entry of 2 September it was “a very good land” to come across and “a pleasant land to see.” Not long afterwards this land was colonized through Dutch trading companies and was named New-Netherland. Generations of Dutch colonists followed and they laid the foundation of the present USA. One of these Dutch colonists was Hendrik Meessen Vrooman.

In October 1664, 55 years after Hudson's exploration, this Hendrik writes to his family in Leiden: his brother Jacob, his sister Maartje and his mother Ariaantje. The address tells us that Jacob lives in Leiden in the *Breestraat* close to the *Hogewoerds* bridge and that Ariaantje lives in *Leiderdorp*, close to the castle *Huis ter Does*. Hendrik wrote the first part of the letter on 5 October, but since the letter had not been sent yet two weeks later, he adds a page with extra details on 20 October.

The widower Hendrik Meessen Vrooman left for New-Netherland together with his five children (Adam 1649°, Eva 1651°, Johannes 1653°, Kathlyntje 1657° and Bartholomeus 1659°). The family had arrived in their ‘promised land’ with the ship *The Concord* (*De Eendracht*) only 6 months before the letter was written. The amazement about the new environment is thus still fresh at the time of writing and some passages of Hendrik's letter seem to echo the ship's journal from 1609:

It has been a good summer there. Very fine corn has grown there and the cultivation was good and the land still pleases me. At snechtendeel [Schenectady and the surrounding area] the land is more beautiful than I have ever seen in Holland.



Hendrik lives in Schenectady with his eldest son Adam. His other children are staying with his brother Pieter Vrooman, who apparently arrived earlier in New-Netherland and lives near Fort Orange – now Albany. Hendrik and his son are farming the land. He proudly explains that he has plowed for a certain man called Korrelaer for about a month now and that he will be able to stay on working for him for another month. They have sown about 12 *morgens* of wheat (almost 9 ha/22 acres) and there are still 6 *morgens* (4,5 ha/almost

10 acres) to be done. He will get 16 bushels of wheat a month. His son Adam has plowed for three weeks for another farmer and will have keep working for him for another 5 weeks. This will earn him 14 bushels of wheat.

Hendrik's report of the English takeover

But Hendrik does not restrict his story to his personal work experiences. The year in which he arrived in New-Netherland is also the year in which New-Netherland was taken over by the English. Hendrik recounts the event in his letter:

Furthermore I let you know that there have arrived three English ships at the Manhattans with soldiers and they have claimed the land and they say that it belongs to their king. And Stuyvesant [the governor of the New-Netherlands] has given it to them without one shot, with an agreement. But the English soldiers say that Stuyvesant and Decker [Johannes de Dekker] already sold the land to them two years ago. On 28

September hundred soldiers with their officers have occupied Fort Orange and the guardhouse with permission and the English now keep watch.



At the end of August in 1664, four English ships arrived at New-Amsterdam to claim the land for the English king. Colonel R. Nicolls let Governor Stuyvesant know that the Dutch could surrender under favourable conditions. Stuyvesant wouldn't hear of it – although New-Amsterdam was not prepared for a siege at all – and was prepared to fight till the bitter end. But the inhabitants of New-Amsterdam were not willing to risk their lives and that is the reason why Stuyvesant eventually accepted the English conditions and New-Netherland was surrendered to them. Hendrik Meessen Vrooman seems to be quite well informed about these facts for someone who lives more than 250 kilometers (155 miles) further inland. For example he knows that the country has been given up to the English without violence, “without one shot”. But inevitably there are rumours: Hendrik writes for

instance that the English claim that the land was sold to them two years earlier by Stuyvesant and Johannes de Dekker, a member of Stuyvesant's council and vice-director of Fort Orange. Hendrik reports that the English arrived in the area where he lives on 28 September 1664 and moved in to Fort Orange. According to him, this is not a bad thing, because the English seem to control the “savages” better than the Dutch do: the Indians have to lay low and “be a bit calmer than they have been before.”

How it all ends: the Schenectady Massacre

Fortune smiled upon Hendrik for many years to follow. We know this thanks to different documents that have been kept and studies of the first colonists in Schenectady (1). In 1670 Hendrik could rent his own farm on the east side of the Hudson River and in 1690 he lived in a house in Schenectady and owned two slaves. His son Adam also thrived. He was apprenticed to a carpenter and a millwright. In 1688 he owned land in Schenectady as well as at the Mohawk River (Burke 1991). But in 1690 Hendrik's steady happiness and that of the entire Schenectady community was brutally interrupted. The “savages”, for whom Hendrik felt more safe under English command, were among the people who created a true slaughter. This sad event would become known as [the Schenectady Massacre](#). In the icy cold winter's night of 8 and 9 February, the village was suddenly attacked by a coalition of French and Indians. The villagers were caught off guard and did not stand a chance. The entire village was set to flames and nearly everyone who came running out was shot and scalped. Hendrik Meessen Vrooman was among the murdered that night. The story goes that his son Adam offered such fierce resistance that he was spared by the enemy. However, his wife and youngest daughter were killed and his son Barend was carried off to be a slave.

Hendrik's life story illustrates the guts and perseverance of the Dutch colonists in New-Netherland: they left their safe home behind and built themselves a new life in a wonderful, but harsh country. 350 years later, Hendrik's letter does not only offer us a unique view of the fortunes of a Dutchman in New-Netherland, but also of the unpolished history of development of a nation. This makes his letter a great ego document to celebrate the Hudson year.

(1) Eg: Burke, T. E. (1991) *Mohawk Frontier: The Dutch Community of Schenectady, New York, 1661-1710*. London: Cornell University Press and Merwick, D. (1990) *Possessing Albany, 1630-1710. The Dutch and English Experiences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The letter is kept in HCA 30-226-1. A first diplomatic transcription was made by Netty van Megen for the Wikiscripta Neerlandica project. The comment on this monthly letter is provided by Judith Nobels. The quotations of the letter have been translated freely.