

Monthly Letter October 2012

'We have to learn English now': Dutch migrants commenting on the capture of New Netherland

Would Dutch have become a global language if... the English had not captured New Netherland? 'Mother and brother and sister, I let you know know that we have to learn English now' is the comment we find in one of our letters, sent from New Netherland. On 12 October 1664, this is the very first remark made by Pieter Meesen Vrooman after having mentioned in familiar formulaic phrases that he, his wife and their three sons are still 'strong and healthy'. He tells his mother Ariaantje Hendriks at Leiderdorp and his brother Jacob and sister Maartje in the town of Leiden that the English took Fort Orange on 28 September. This event and the surrender of New Amsterdam by Stuyvesant have also been described by Pieter's brother Hendrik, who had arrived only a few months earlier in New Netherland (see the monthly letter of May/June 2009).



A map of New Netherland

Considerable consequences

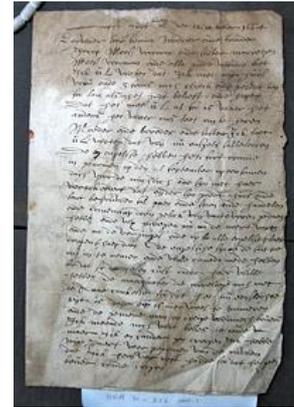
In his letter [see below], Pieter pictures both the favourable and the disadvantageous consequences of the arrival of the English at Fort Orange (present Albany), the place where he lives. There is an agreement that everyone will be allowed to keep their goods, house and land. Moreover, the Dutch will be free to come and go, deal and trade just as they did before, and they will even have the opportunity to trade in the north, in Virginia and at all English places. In the meanwhile, the English have gone to the south to take over that part and they also want to capture Canada in order to control the entire coast. So far the situation is fairly favourable. The bad consequences are due to the turbulent time, for two Indian tribes are at war with one another. All this implies that there is not much carpenter's work to be done and Pieter also cannot get any beavers to send home.

Chain migration

This letter and the earlier monthly letter by Hendrik show us a striking example of chain migration. Hendrik came to New Netherland where his brother Pieter had lived since 1655 (earliest record). Apparently, brother Jacob in Leiden also had migration plans: Pieter warns him not to come before he has sent him another message. In the present situation, it is not clear how things will develop. The English have made good promises, but will they keep them? He will wait and see for another year. Many people will leave: they do not want to feed the soldiers at Fort Orange without the certainty of promised compensation.

The delivery of a surprising letter

Pieter ends his letter with the request to deliver an enclosed letter to his wife's former mistress, Geertruyt Boetselaer at castle Gellicum. The enclosed letter appears to comprise two letters: one written on 6 August 1664 and the other dating from 12 October 1664. Analysing the two letters, we conclude that Pieter's wife did not write the letters herself. Only the two signatures, *kijrtrutt weckmans*, are in her own handwriting.



The first part of Pieter Meesen Vrooman's letter

Geertruit's signature

With some difficulty, we deciphered her first name in the peculiar spelling of *kijrtrutt*, a variant of *Gittruit/ Geertruit/Geertruïda*. The two letters, furthermore, show two different handwritings: that of her husband Pieter in the October letter and that of an unknown person in the August one. Although the letters thus are not autographs and cannot reveal the language use of a former servant, they contain surprising new information about Geertruit Weckmans' background and her arrival in New Netherland. They also give an impression, even more clearly than Pieter's letter does, of how the couple's morale suffers from the turbulent time.

Correspondence with former mistress



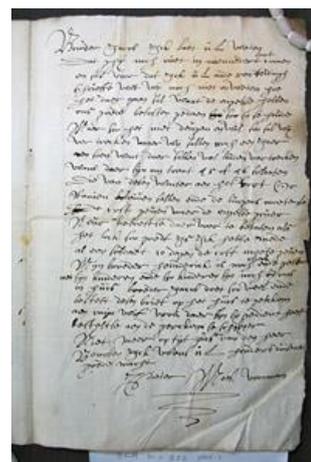
The castle of Gellicum where Geertrui Ermengarde van Boetzelaar lived

Geertruit's letter is a reply to an earlier letter by Geertrui Ermengarde van Boetzelaar (1610-1666), mistress at the castle Gellicum and married to Alexander Tegnagell (1605-1679). Apparently, they have not been in contact for a long time, as Geertruit Weckmans explains how she arrived in New Netherland eleven years ago. In the meanwhile, she has been married to carpenter Pieter Meessen Vrooman for nine years now, and they had a good life, but at present the warfare among Indian tribes makes carpentry and trade difficult. On top of that comes the capture of New Amsterdam and of Fort Orange. The couple is discouraged about their future in New Netherland and they consider remigration. Perhaps mistress Geertrui might know of

any opportunities: 'my husband is a carpenter, but he can also do farmer's work'.

What followed

The letters were confiscated and did not reach their destination. Pieter stayed in New Netherland till his death in 1684. His brother Jacob did arrive: all three brothers are mentioned in Jonathan Pearson's *Contributions for the Genealogies of the Descendants of the First Settlers of the Patent and City of Schenectady, from 1662 to 1800* (Albany, NY: J. Munsell, 1873). In this publication and various other genealogy studies, the only personal data known of Pieter Meessen Vrooman are that he remarried widow Volckje Pieterse and that he had only one son, Matthys. The confiscated letters reveal who his first wife was and that they had three sons. Matthys definitely is a son of Geertruit (and Pieter) which can be proven by following a link in Geertruit's letter. She asks her former mistress to send a reply to her brother Philippus Weckmans in Leiden who, according to the register of baptism, had a son Matheus. The similar names *Matthys*, *Matheus* 'Matthew' indicate naming after a member of the Weckmans' family, probably the grandfather. What tells us even more is that Pieter's son Matthys had a daughter Geertrui, without any doubt named after his mother Geertruit.



The second part of Pieter Meessen Vrooman's letter

Thus we see that confiscated letters sometimes offer new genealogical information. But what these ego-documents from New Netherland show us most of all is how migrants evaluated and experienced a turbulent period in American-Dutch history.

The letters under discussion are kept in HCA 30-226-1. A first diplomatic transcription of Pieter Meessen Vrooman's letter was made by Puck Wijnschenk Dom for the Wikiscripta Neerlandica project. Hetty Krol did the same for the two letters sent by his wife, Geertruit Weckmans. The quotations of the letters have been translated freely. The comment on this monthly letter is provided by Marijke van der Wal.

Bijlagen

Translation of Pieter Meessen Vrooman's letter sent from New Netherland

This letter is to be delivered to Ariaantje Hendriks at Leiderdorp

Praise God above all, 12 October 1664

Dear, very beloved Mother and brother Jacop Meesz Vrooman and sister Marretgen Meesz Vrooman and all good friends, I let you know that I, with my wife and three sons, am still strong and healthy as long as it pleases God and we hope that the same applies to you. If it were different, we would be very sorry to hear that.

Mother and brother and sister, I let you know that we have to learn English now. The English have taken Fort Orange on 28 September on a Sunday, before noon and we have agreed with them that everyone will be allowed to keep their goods, house and land. We will come and go, deal and trade just as we did before. And we are allowed to go to the north and to Virginia and trade at all English places. The English have gone to the south to take over that part and they also want to get Canada in order to control the entire coast. The Maecquasen are still at war with the Anneconkese which means that it is a bad time now. There is not much carpenter's work to be done and the common man gets few beavers. I intended to send a few beavers, but I cannot get any. I have taken my good horse back that I had sold to Hein: he was not able to get any beaver.

Brother Jacob, I let you know that you should not come to New Netherland before I write you another message, because we do not know yet how it will go. For the English have made us good promises, if they keep them. But if it will not be right, then we will leave. We will wait and see for another year, because many people will leave. For there are about 45 or 46 soldiers who will stay at the Fort Orange this winter and the citizens will have to feed them. But the English governor promises them to pay for it, if fortune is good. I had also to feed a soldier for ten days.

My brother Hendrik is still strong and healthy with his children. And his children are still with us. Brother Jacob, be so kind and deliver this enclosed letter at the Castle Gellicum to my wife's mistress whom she served. Deliver the letter to the skipper of Gorkum. Nothing more for now than be recommended to the Lord. I wish you a hundred thousand good nights.

Pieter Meesz Vrooman