



New Amsterdam
HISTORY CENTER

NEWS FROM NEW NETHERLAND

The Animal Fleet to New Netherland

After the first permanent settlers came to New Netherland in early 1624—as discussed in a previous article, “First Families”—the directors of the West India Company decided, in addition to maintaining their trading posts for obtaining furs from the Indians, to take further steps toward the systematic establishment of a regular colony in New Netherland.

Part of the motive was that under the prevailing conditions the WIC directors were at considerable expense to support the colony. A key ingredient in the plan was the development of productive farms so that New Netherland could become self-sufficient, and perhaps even begin producing valuable exports, such as tobacco or wine.¹

As it stood, although the settlers were successfully raising a certain amount of basic produce, such as wheat and other grains, the quantity was relatively small since they plowed and planted with hand tools because there were no horses or oxen to use for working the land. Also, the uncultivated land was still relatively unproductive.

To supply the shortfall in their food production, they were dependent upon trade with the Indians for corn and other food products, such as pumpkins and venison. To make the exchanges, the colonists needed pots, hatchets, blankets, and other items of European manufacture that the Indians wanted. The colonists also depended upon European shipments of food—mainly ship rations, including dried beans. They keenly felt the lack of the kinds of provisions that they were used to at home, especially dairy products and fresh fruit.

To remedy this situation, the directors decided to send out an “animal fleet” in 1625: a convoy of three vessels, two of which were especially equipped to transport farm animals that could be used for working the land, for their various products, and especially for their all-important milk. Also on board were farm tools, seeds, and other things necessary for developing agriculture in New Netherland, probably including cuttings for growing fruit trees.

Our principal source for details on this project is Nicolaes Wassenaer’s *Historisch verhael . . .* (“Historical Account . . .”),² which consists of a series of news reports based on information from global contacts, and published in Amsterdam at intervals from 1622 to 1632. Wassenaer’s intention, at a time when there were no regular newspapers as we know them, was to provide the reading public with up-to-the-minute details on newsworthy events around the world. Since he was writing primarily for a Dutch audience, he included a good

deal of material relating to New Netherland, and his are among the few contemporary descriptions that we have of the earliest activities there.

In a passage dated April 1625, Wassenaer describes how the directors of the West India Company contracted with Pieter Evertsz. Hulft, a brewer and WIC director, to send 103 head of stallions and mares, bulls and cows, for breeding and multiplying (“hondert en drie stucx Henghsten en Merrijen / Stieren en Koeyen / om aldaer te teelen / en te vermeerderen”³), as well as a number of sheep and pigs.

The animals were to be transported in two ships specially equipped with individual stalls for them, attended by crew members assigned to their care. Each stall was furnished with a layer of sand three feet deep, to give the animals a firm and absorbent base to stand on. Suitable quantities of oats, hay, and straw were loaded on board, and a special deck was installed for the storage of barrels of water that could be pumped up as needed for the animals. In addition, six well-established households (“ses gheformeerde huysghesinnen”⁴) were aboard, together with a number of single persons, for a total of 45 new colonists. One imagines that for the colonists the voyage must have been like living inside a crowded barn for six weeks or so. Think of the smells and sounds, at such close quarters!

By July the cattle had still not arrived, but they soon completed the voyage. Amazingly, only two of the animals died during the passage—an impressive tribute to the planning and management of the enterprise. Upon arrival in New Amsterdam that summer, the animals were initially landed at Nooten Island (now Governors Island) but after one or two days it became apparent that the pasture there was not sufficient for them, and they were ferried to Manhattan. But then a more serious problem arose when twenty of them died. The exact cause was not immediately apparent but the prevailing opinion was that in grazing on the uncultivated land they must have eaten something something harmful (“de meyninge is / dat sy yets quaedts van een ongeboudt lant zouden ghegheten hebben”⁵).

In the middle of September 1625 the cattle were moved up the Hudson River to the region of Fort Orange (present-day Albany), where they were able to pasture upon lush grass, as beautiful and as long as one could wish (“gingen sy ten volle gras / soo schoon en langh als men wenschen coude”⁶).

Writing some years later, Adriaen van der Donck commented on this early problem and explained that it had eventually been solved by feeding the animals salt, or sometimes using brackish drinking water, or hay that had grown in salt marshes (“met Sout te voerden / ofte somtijds bracken dranck / ofte Hoy dat in soute valleyen gewassen is / te ghebruycken”⁷).

Initially the farms in New Netherland were owned by the West India Company, which hired men to work them, and assigned a certain number of animals to each farm. Any animals remaining could be made available to individual colonists. However, it soon became apparent that the company farms were not producing up to expectation. In a letter by Isaack de Rasière, this was partly attributed to the rough state of the land, which needed extensive manuring, and partly to the fact that there was little incentive for the farmers to expand

production since they were working as hired personnel (“de boumeesters hurelingen sijn”⁸).

Although the cattle thrived and multiplied, they were on average (“door de banck”⁹) smaller than cattle of the same breed raised in the Netherlands, and their level of production continued to be less than had been hoped for. Partly this was attributed to their hay, which was considered to be less nutritious, and partly to the fact that the heifers were generally bred after only two years, instead of being allowed to mature longer, as in the Netherlands—the colonists were anxious to enjoy the profit from their multiplying (“de luyden de *Veersen* op haer tweede laer gemeenlijck laten speelen / om het voordeel vande aenteelinghe te eerder te genieten”¹⁰).

Domine Jonas Michaelius arrived on April 7, 1628 to be the minister to the first regular Reformed Church congregation in the colony, he wrote home on August 11th to describe the living conditions in New Amsterdam. He commented particularly upon the lack of dairy products, such as butter and milk, which were unobtainable even at a high price (“hier en is gene verversschinge van boter ende melk etc. te erijgen, hoewel het tot gansch dieren prijs vercocht”¹¹). Also, he complained that the available food was expensive, and consisted mainly of ship rations, often of not very good quality and not abundant either. He specifically mentions beans, grey peas (“which are pretty tough” he adds), barley, stockfish [air-dried fish], etc. (“boontgens, graeuw erwten die hard genoech zijn, gort, stockvis etc.”¹²).

The directors of the West India Company were balancing competing programs of running a fur-trading operation, versus making serious efforts to establish a colony. Clearly the profits for the moment were in furs. Permanent settlement would strengthen the Dutch claim upon the territory, but colonization was an expensive, long-term undertaking—there was no Potosí or Eldorado in New Netherland, and the WIC needed to pay its shareholders reasonable returns. The compromise solution that the directors eventually settled upon was to encourage colonization through contracting with private investors (“patroons” in Dutch) who would be willing personally to bear expenses and risks in the hope of future returns. This will be discussed in a later article.

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NOTES

1. Although some effort was made to develop viniculture in New Netherland, conditions turned out to be unfavorable for it. Nevertheless, wine was produced for local consumption, as mentioned, for example, by Domine Megapolensis in a letter of 1644; see Jameson, p. 169 (full title in next note).

2. Nicolaes Janzoon van Wassenaer, *Historisch verhael, alder ghedenckweerdichste geschiedenissen die hier en daer . . . voorgevallen syn*, 21 vols.

(Amsterdam: J. Janssonius, 1621–1632) (title varies). The portions on New Netherland appear in English translation in J. Franklin Jameson, *Narratives of New Netherland, 1609–1664* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1909); however, the original Dutch text seems never to have been reprinted and must be read from the original volumes. Fortunately they are available online, but the black-letter print is sometimes unclear and difficult to read.

3. Wassenaer, *Historisch verhael*, vol. 9, folio 40 (April 1625); Jameson, *Narratives*, pp. 79–80.

4. Ibid.

5. Wassenaer, vol. 12, folio 37 (November 1626); Jameson, *Narratives*, p. 83.

6. Ibid.

7. Adriaen vander Donck, *Beschryvinge van Nieuwv-Nederlant (Gelijck het tegenwoordigh in Staet is)* . . . , 2nd edition (Amsterdam: Evert Nieuwenhof, 1656), p. 33. Translation in *A Description of New Netherland*, by Adriaen van der Donck, edited by Charles T. Gehring and William A. Starna, trans. by Diederik Willem Goedhuys, foreword by Russell Shorto (Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2008), pp. 44–45. As with Wassenaer’s *Historisch verhael*, the Dutch text of Van der Donck’s *Beschryvinge*, first published in 1655, seems not to have been reprinted in a modern edition, but an early printing is accessible online.

8. Rasière’s account (or “memorial”), based on his visit to New Netherland (where he arrived in 1626) and written circa 1629, was edited by A. Eekhof, “De ‘Memorie’ van Isaack de Rasière voor Samuel Blommaert,” *Nederlandsch archief voor kerkgeschiedenis*, vol. 15 (1918), p. 267; translated in Jameson, *Narratives*, p. 104. Original manuscript at the Nationaal Archief (formerly Rijksarchief), The Hague.

9. Van der Donck, *Beschryvinge*, p. 33.

10. Ibid.

11. Quoted from: Henry C. Murphy, *J. Michaelius: The First Minister of the Dutch Reformed Church in the United States* (Amsterdam: Frederik Muller & Co., 1883), pp. 20–21 (Dutch text of letter), 13 (English translation); original manuscript at the New York Public Library. See also Michaelius’s similar comments in another letter, dated August 8, 1628, published by Dingman Versteeg, *Manhattan in 1628 As Described in the Recently Discovered Autograph Letter of Jonas Michaelius* (New York: Dodd Mead and Company, 1904), pp. 43–44, 64–65; original manuscript at the Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

12. Murphy, *Michaelius*, as above.