



New Amsterdam History Center Virtual New Amsterdam 3D Model

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Appendix III, Part B: A Historical Background Summary:

“Imports and Exports — Outfitting Voyages”

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The Centrality of Trade

Trade and commerce was the guiding force behind the founding, growth, and development of New Amsterdam and New Netherland. Within four years of Henry Hudson's voyage in 1609, ships representing the financial interests of private merchants from Amsterdam arrived at Manhattan to trade for furs. Dutch merchants quickly organized the New Netherland Company to better organize and protect their interests; these private merchants controlled the commercial landscape in early New Netherland until the founding of the Dutch West India Company (WIC) in 1621.

The WIC's primary purpose was to challenge and confront Spanish influence in the New World. Although its creation had been debated in Holland for many years, the WIC was finally organized just as the Twelve Years' Truce ended, leading to a resumption of what became known as the Eighty Years' War between Spain and the newly independent United Provinces of the Netherlands. The company's major goal was to attack Spanish possessions in the Atlantic world and capture Spanish ships sailing home with North American treasure. Using bases in Brazil, the Caribbean, and West Africa as trading centers, the WIC also pursued profits to be made in sugar, salt, and enslaved Africans. And in

their northernmost possession in New Netherland, extending from the Fresh (Connecticut) River southwest to the South (Delaware) River with the North (Hudson) River settlements at Fort Orange and New Amsterdam in between, the WIC hoped to tap the riches of another valuable commodity — furs.

In its original charter, the WIC was given a monopoly on New Netherland's fur trade, which would be conducted and supervised by company officials on company ships, with company administrators regulating exports. Nevertheless, for a variety of reasons, the WIC had difficulty converting its monopoly into profits for its stockholders and decided that the colony could best survive by ending its monopoly in 1639 and reopening of the fur trade to private merchant investors. Immediately, several leading Amsterdam merchant families began operations in Manhattan, represented by their "factors." Among them were Govert Loockermans, factor for the Verbrugge family, and (eventually) Cornelis Steenwijck, factor for the van Hoornbeecks. The documents being used in this New Amsterdam History Center learning exercise are generally from this unique moment in time — the end of the company's fur trade monopoly and the resumption of private merchant trade with an intensity not previously seen, with the WIC operating primarily as an administrative body.

Becoming an Entrepôt

In the 1640s, trading patterns were more complex than is generally understood. As the "staple port" for all of New Netherland, New Amsterdam was the entrepôt through which passed all imports and exports being shipped to and arriving from transatlantic and regional sources. A wide variety of furs and hides came into Manhattan from all over New Netherland. Also arriving were hogsheads of tobacco, mostly from the English Chesapeake colonies of Virginia and Maryland but some from within New Netherland. These principal commodities were sent aboard ships sailing to "the Patria" (the Netherlands). They returned with many types of manufactured goods, including tools, farm implements, clothing, firearms, household items, liquor, and luxury goods. Once these Dutch cargos arrived in New Amsterdam, they were quickly transshipped to New England, English Long Island, the Chesapeake, and the Caribbean, as well as to various points in New Netherland. From these many ports returned vessels carrying furs, foodstuffs, tobacco, sugar, salt, and dyewoods (literally, woods like acacia or logwood that could be used to extract dyes to color cloth).

By the 1650s, New Amsterdam began to experience a significant commercial boom, sponsored by Dutch private merchant capital and accomplished by local merchants, which continued to the time of the English conquest in 1664 and beyond. The conventional image of New Netherland as a colony in decline was certainly a myth.

For Further Reading:

Jacobs, Jaap. *The Colony of New Netherland: A Dutch Settlement in Seventeenth-Century America*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009.

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Matson, Cathy. *Merchants and Empire: Trading in Colonial New York*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998.

Rink, Oliver. *Holland on the Hudson: An Economic and Social History of Dutch New York*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986.