



New Amsterdam
HISTORY CENTER

NEWS FROM NEW NETHERLAND

The First Families

An “Interview” with One of the First Colonists, Catalina Trico

Pieter Schaghen writes in his letter to the States General with news from New Netherland in 1626: “our people there are doing well and living in peace. Also, their wives have had children there.” Reading this, one naturally wants to know more about these people—Who were they? What were they like?

Certain details about them are available, and the purpose of this article is to outline some high points. But it needs to be stated at the outset that unfortunately a great deal of information about the first years of New Amsterdam has been irrecoverably lost. The loss of documents that were kept in the early colony is understandable in light of the relatively primitive and ever-changing conditions during the initial years of the settlement. But many parallel records kept on file by the West India Company in the Netherlands have also been lost. As explained by the historian John Romeyn Brodhead in 1856: “all the books, documents and papers of every kind, belonging to the old East and West India Companies, of a date prior to 1700” were by government order sold at public auction in 1821, evidently as waste paper.¹ As a result of this loss, information on the early history of New Netherland has had to be pieced together from a variety of surviving sources which give a somewhat fragmentary picture.

After Henry Hudson’s exploratory voyage of 1609, Dutch traders made frequent visits to New Netherland and they occasionally remained through the winter before returning to the Netherlands. But there were no permanent settlers in New Netherland until 1624, when the first colonists arrived aboard the *Eendracht* (called in English the “Unity” or “Concord”), and the *Nieu Nederlandt* (“New Netherland”). The *Eendracht* evidently departed from Amsterdam on January 25th and arrived in New Amsterdam in March. The *Nieu Nederlandt* sailed after March 30th, and arrived proportionately later, in May/June of 1624.

There are no existing lists of the passengers who were on board these vessels, but from other sources it is known that Joris Jansen Rapalje (or Rapaille) and his wife Catalina Trico (or Tricot) sailed on the *Eendracht*, and it seems very likely that Philippe du Trieux and his wife Susanne du Chesne and two children were on the *Nieu Nederlandt*.² Also, Jean Monfort and his wife Jacqueline Moreau; and Ghislain Vigne or Vigné and his wife Adrienne (or

Ariaentje) Cuvilje (or Cuvellier) came over at this early period, but it is not clear which ship they sailed on. All of these couples were Walloons.

Among early immigrants to North America, one often hears of “Huguenots and Walloons” as if the two terms were parallel; but the expression is confusing because it mixes two different concepts. “Huguenot” primarily refers to members of a religious group—French Calvinist Protestants. They were subject to religious persecution in France, where Roman Catholicism was the official religion. But “Walloon” is a cultural and geographic term, and refers primarily to inhabitants of the southern region of the Spanish Netherlands, bordering on northeastern France.

In the northern part of the Spanish Netherlands, most people spoke Netherlandic—essentially the same as the language of the Dutch Republic. By contrast, inhabitants of the southern region of the Spanish Netherlands spoke a language known as *Waaals*, closely related to French. These people, who had close cultural affinities with France, were called *Walen* (plural of *Waal*), a Netherlandic term literally meaning “foreigners” (from the point of view of people in the north), and the region was known as *Wals-landt* (or *Waaalsland*). From these terms come French *Wallon*, and English *Walloon*.

Spain was militantly Catholic and applied a rigorous policy of religious uniformity in its possessions. Inhabitants of both regions of the Spanish Netherlands were under compulsion to follow Catholicism. However, in both regions there were a number of people who continued, in spite of persecution, to adhere to Calvinist Protestantism. They had powerful motives for emigrating, and many of them—both Dutch-speaking and *Waaals*- or French-speaking—left the Spanish Netherlands to live in the Dutch Republic, where Calvinist Protestantism was firmly established.

One group of Walloons who had fled to the Dutch Republic had been considering migrating to Guiana, in South America. Their leader, Jesse de Forest, went there in 1623 with a number of men—heads of families (*pères de familles*)—to look for an appropriate site for a settlement. Their interest focused on the Wyapoko River, near Brazil, but after about a year of exploratory activity, de Forest died, on October 22, 1624, and the others soon returned to the Netherlands and gave up the Guiana project. Meanwhile, certain other Walloons in the Netherlands decided to emigrate to New Netherland. By and large, these were people who had lived in agricultural regions and were experienced in farming and in rural skills and trades, and so were well-qualified to be colonists in New Netherland. Several Walloon families sailed on the *Eendracht* and on the *Nieu Nederlandt*. Later on, in the 1630s, three of Jesse de Forest's children, Hendrick, Rachel, and Isaack, also settled in New Netherland.

The families who arrived in New Netherland on the *Eendracht* in 1624 were sent to three separate locations: the Connecticut River (*Versche Rivier*, “Fresh River”), where a settlement was begun at the site of present-day Hartford; the Hudson or North River (*Noord Rivier*), where they established Fort Orange (now Albany); and the Delaware River (*Zuijdt Rivier*, “South River”), where Fort Wilhelmus was built. Also, a group of men were stationed on Nooten Island (now

Governor's Island, off Manhattan). Around May or June the *Nieu Nederlandt* arrived, bringing additional settlers.

The settlers' first activities at each location would have been building a fort and temporary houses for themselves, and planting the first of their crops. They would also have established friendly trading relations with local Native Americans, so they could obtain food and other supplies until their own communities were built up to an effectively productive level.

Back home in the Netherlands, the WIC, upon receiving good reports about the first efforts of the colonists, decided to send more settlers in the following year, as well as an "animal fleet"—two ships specially equipped for bearing horses, cows, sheep, and hogs, as well as farm implements, so that the colony could become self-sufficient in food production, and would not need to be supplied from the Netherlands with foodstuffs or with manufactured goods to trade to the Native Americans for food.

At the same time, the WIC directors ordered the colonists to be moved from their several locations and consolidated at the lower end of Manhattan Island. The reasoning seems to have been that the settlers would be more productive if they combined efforts in using the farm animals and implements that were being sent. Manhattan was decided upon because of its fine harbor, protected situation, and central location in relation to the other three colonial posts, which would continue to be occupied, but mainly by traders and militiamen for the moment, rather than by families of settlers. In the summer of 1625 construction began on Fort Amsterdam at what is now the Battery, in lower Manhattan. It was presumably around this time, more or less, that an agreement was made with the local Native Americans by which the Dutch were permitted to establish their settlement on Manhattan—the famous "purchase" of Manhattan for which we do not have a specific date (the year is often stated as 1626).

By the summer of 1626, as reported in the Schaghen letter, the colonists had been so successful in farming that they were raising crops of "summer-grains, namely wheat, rye, barley, oats, buckwheat, canary-seed, beans, and flax," and they had evidently also had children.

This article began with a question about the first settlers "Who were they . . . What were they like?" By good fortune we have two "interviews"—depositions—made by Catalina Trico about the early settlement of New Netherland. In the first of these, dated in New York on February 14, 1685, she states before Governor Thomas Dongan that she is about 80 years old, and that she came to New York around 1623 or 1624 (she arrived in March, so the year would depend on the calendar in use, whether English—with the new year beginning on March 25—or Gregorian, as used by the Dutch, with 1624 beginning on January 1). She says that during the passage "four women were married at sea," and after arrival and staying for about three weeks in Manhattan, those couples went to settle at the Delaware River.³

Her second deposition was made at her house on Long Island on October 17, 1688, when she was about 83 years old. She states that she sailed to New Netherland on "a ship called the *Unity*" (*Eendracht*), and says, as related before, that some of the group went to the Delaware River. In addition, she describes

how her group went to Albany (Fort Orange), where they built a small fort and huts of bark to live in. The skipper of the ship, Adriaen Joriszen (Thienpont), established excellent trade relations with the local Native Americans, and she says that during the whole time she lived there, the “Indians were all as quiet as lambs and came and traded with all the freedom imaginable.” She adds that she then moved to Manhattan, where she lived for many years before relocating to Long Island. Her daughter Sarah Rapalje is said to have been the first child born to early settlers in New Amsterdam.

Clearly, the depositions for the most part are not word-for-word transcripts of what Catalina Trico said, but condensed paraphrases by the clerk who was writing down the statement. But one would also infer that the facts convey the essence of her statements, and that perhaps one or two actual phrases of hers were given as well, such as her statement that the Native Americans were “all as quiet as lambs” and traded with “all the freedom imaginable.” In these words I hear the characteristic expressions of a person of a lively, imaginative turn of mind—in them the voice of Catalina Trico seems to echo down through the centuries like the sound of a phonograph record from long ago, to tell us what it was like for her living on the frontier and trading with the Native Americans in the earliest days of settlement in New Netherland.

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1. See the introduction by Brodhead in *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New-York*, procured in Holland, England and France, by John Romeyn Brodhead, and edited by E. B. O’Callaghan, 15 vols. (Albany: Weed, Parsons and Company, 1853–1887), vol. 1 (1856), pp. xxv–xxvi.
2. See the article by Harry Macy, “375th Anniversary of the *Eendracht* and *Nieu Nederland*,” *NYG&B Newsletter*, vol. 10, no. 1 (Winter 1999), pp. 3–4.
3. Both texts quoted (spelling modernized) from texts in E. B. O’Callaghan, *The Documentary History of the State of New York*, 4 vols. (Albany: Weed, Parsons & Co., 1849–1851), vol. 3 (1850), pp. 49–51.