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Image Courtesy of the Nationaal Archief, The Hague

The Schagen Letter

Pieter Jansz Schagen's letter of November 1626 to the States General of the Dutch Republic announcing the purchase of Manhattan, and other news. The original manuscript is in the National Archives (Nationaal Archief) of the Netherlands, at The Hague. Thanks are due to the Nationaal Archief for providing the high-resolution digital image used with this article.

Translation:

dated the 5th
received the 7th November 1626

High and Mighty Lords:

Yesterday the ship *The Arms of Amsterdam* arrived here; it sailed from New Netherland, from the Mauritius River, on the 23rd of September. The report is that our people there are doing well and living in peace. Also, their wives have had children there. They bought Manhattes Island from the Native People for 60 guilders worth of trade. It is 11000 morgens in extent. They had sown all their grain by mid-May and reaped in mid-August. From the harvest they are sending samples of summer-grains, namely wheat, rye, barley, oats, buckwheat, canary-seed, beans, and flax.

The cargo of the aforesaid ship is:

7246 beaver pelts
178½ otter pelts
675 otter pelts
48 mink pelts
36 lynx pelts
33 minks
34 muskrat pelts
Many oak timbers, and nut-wood.

Herewith, High and Mighty Lords, may you be commended to the mercy of the Almighty.

In Amsterdam, on the 5th of November, in the year 1626.
Your High-Mighty's obedient

P. J. Schaghen

Original Dutch:

dato 5
recep. 7 november 1626

Hooghe Moghende Heeren

Hier is ghister t'Schip t'*Wapen van Amsterdam*
aengekomen ende is den 23^{en} septem. uyt Nieu Neder
=Lant gezeylt uyt de Rivier *Mauritius*. rapporteren

Dat ons volck daer kloec is en vreedigh Leven hare Vrouwen hebben ooc kinderen aldaer gebaert hebben t'eylant *Manhattes* van de wilde gekocht, voor de waerde van 60. guld. is groot 11000 margen. hebbende alle Koren half Meij gezeyt, ende half augusto gemeyd. Daer van zeyndende munsterkens van zomer-koren, als taruw, Rogge, garst, haver boucweijt, knarizaet, boontjens en vlas.

Het Cargasoen van tvsz schip is

7246 bevers vellen
 178 1/2 otters vellen
 675. otters vellen
 48. Mincke vellen
 36. Catlos-vellen
 33 Mincken
 34 Ratte vellekens.
 Veel eycken balcken, en Noten-hout.

Hier mede
 Hooghe Moghende Heeren, zyt den Almogende
 in genaden bevolen.

In Amsterdam den 5^{en}. novem a^o 1626.

*Vwe Hoo: Moo: Dienstwillighe
 P. J. Schaghen*

This famous letter was addressed to the governing assembly of the Dutch Republic, the States General (*Staten Generael*), which had authority over the Chartered West India Company (*Geoctroyeerde Westindische Compagnie*), the organization responsible for the colonizing venture in New Netherland.

Pieter Jansz Schaghen (1578–1636) was on the board of directors of the WIC, and was also a member of the States General. In private life, he was a merchant and grain dealer, so he had professional expertise concerning the grain samples that he mentions in his letter. Schaghen was a highly cultivated man, known as a good musician and composer, and as a published poet.

As a WIC director, Schaghen was writing to tell the States General the great news of the thriving success of the new colony, which had begun around 1624, after an initial period when the Dutch maintained trading posts in New Netherland, following Hudson's explorations in 1609.

The ship *Het Wapen van Amsterdam* (“The Arms of Amsterdam”) had sailed from the Netherlands earlier in the year, arriving at Manhattan on July 27th. Then on September 23rd the ship sailed from the Mauritius River—an alternate name for the North River or the Hudson River. The Dutch had named it after Prince Maurice of Orange (Maurits van Oranje) (1567–1625), *stadhouder* or feudal lord of several Dutch provinces. Mauritius was the Latinized form of his name.

The vessel made a relatively speedy trip back across the Atlantic, following the prevailing western winds, and after a six weeks’ voyage reached Amsterdam on November 4, 1626. The people on board brought news that things were going well at the colony and that children had been born there—a prime indication of good health, and an excellent sign for the future.

The fact that the settlers had planted and harvested shows that they were strong and able to work amid favorable soil and weather conditions. The summer grains were typical European food crops, and flax was useful both for making linen from the fibers, and for oil from the seeds.

Their peaceful situation indicated that they were getting along well with one another, and that they were satisfied with the management of the colony and had no quarrels with the WIC. Furthermore, they had peaceful relations with other people in America, principally the Indians, but also the English, who were rivals with the Dutch for control of territory in North America.

Another positive news item was that the colonists had established the WIC’s title to the territory by purchasing it from the Indians for “the value of 60 guilders”—that is, trade goods equivalent to 60 guilders. Typical goods would have been useful items of European manufacture not otherwise available to the Native Americans: textiles, especially wool blankets; metal utensils, such as hatchets, knives, pots, and kettles; and decorative glass beads.

At the time there were various silver guilders in circulation, of different value; however, the guilder was also used as money of account. In the 1840s, when Schaghen’s letter first came to public attention, American historians such as E. B. O’Callaghan applied the current exchange rate of 40 US cents to one 19th-century Dutch guilder to arrive at the equivalent sum of \$24.00. This well-known figure is misleading in several ways: first of all it does not accurately represent values in the 17th century; and secondly it has little relation to present-day dollar values.

But the most seriously misleading thing is that the Dutch and the Indians had different conceptions of land transactions. To the Dutch, purchase meant exclusive and permanent possession and occupation. To the Native Americans, it was a question of permission to use the land for the time being. The Dutch were well aware of this difference; nevertheless, according to Dutch law, the transaction provided a legal basis for their territorial claim. It seems likely that an official document of conveyance was drawn up and signed by both parties, Dutch and Indians; but it has evidently not survived, and Schaghen’s letter is the only known record of the event.

The only way to get a real idea of the value of historical monetary amounts is in terms of the contemporary economy; in the mid-17th century one

merchantable beaver pelt was worth around 7 or 8 guilders. So the value of the ship's cargo was far greater than the amount of the purchase of Manhattan. The beaver pelts alone would have been worth 50–60,000 guilders, not to mention the other pelts and the valuable hardwood timbers.

American beaver pelts were in demand because European beavers had been hunted nearly to extinction. The reason they were so valuable is that there was a tremendous vogue for luxury hats—for both men and women—made from beaver fur. By a complex, labor-intensive process, the most suitable fur was shaved off the beaver skins and processed into felt, which was shaped into large, expensive, high-fashion hats. The reason that portraits at the time often show people with hats on is that a stylish hat was a rich status symbol.

Hardwood timbers were valuable because the Netherlands had few forests, but as a maritime nation the Dutch needed timber for shipbuilding. Timber was also used in building houses, windmills, and bridges. The main source was the Baltic area. New Netherland would offer an alternative source of timber.

The stated size of Manhattan Island, 11,000 morgens, would equate to around 23,000 acres, which is about the actual size of Manhattan, although since 1626 the area has been extended by landfill along the shores. The figure shows that the Dutch had made an accurate survey. For comparison, the size of Central Park is nearly 843 acres; so the island is about 23 times as large.

A practical reason for Schaghen's writing this letter as soon as the ship arrived, was to give WIC investors, one of which was the States General, confidence that the substantial funds they had put into the West India Company were secure and were going to yield revenue and increase in value. As of 1623 the general investment in the WIC was over seven million guilders, so there was a lot at stake, and the letter brought excellent news.

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