New Netherland: The Dutch in New York

The Dutch people are from the country known as the Netherlands (or sometimes as Holland). In the late 16th century, the Dutch economy was booming and growing. Businesses were doing extremely well and there was lots of money to be made. Their main city, Amsterdam, was the world’s financial center. The Dutch fleet was the greatest in the world. Dutch ships were present in most ports of the known world, and Dutch captains were responsible for discovering Australia and New Zealand.

The Dutch East India Company was the company that was making much of this growth happen. The name “East India Company” meant that they were trying to make money with voyages to the “East,” meaning Asia. They were sending ships all over the world, including the voyage of Henry Hudson. With his crew of the Half Moon, Hudson explored the coastlines of northern North America in search of a Northwest Passage to Asia. His ship made the voyage up what we now call the Hudson River.

Hudson’s voyage helped to change the European attitudes toward the New World. Most explorers regarded America as simply a roadblock that kept them from the riches of the East. However, Hudson found a beautiful landscape, many harbors, fertile valleys and, most importantly, a large number of fur-bearing animals. The New World offered riches of its own, and the fur trade would become very important for a new colony.

In 1621, a new trading firm was established: the Dutch West India Company. This new company wanted to make money from the resources of the “West Indies,” and by that, they meant North America. The West India Company began to develop a fur trade. They established trading posts on the Hudson, Mohawk, Delaware and Connecticut rivers (in modern New York and nearby places). These posts served as centers of trade with Native Americans. Probably the most successful trading post was established at Fort Orange, which is the site of today’s city of Albany, NY.

In 1626, the settlement of New Amsterdam was established at the mouth of the Hudson River. Peter Minuit, the head of the company, “purchased” all of Manhattan Island from the local natives for 60 Dutch guilders, which some have calculated to equal
$24. However, historians now doubt that the Native Americans involved understood the European idea of land ownership.

New Amsterdam’s growth was slow, but the population was diverse from the beginning, meaning there was a wide variety of different kinds of people there. Since businesses were doing so well in Holland, not very many people wanted to leave. Only a small number of Dutch were attracted across the ocean. Instead, people of different nationalities who were searching for new opportunities came to New Amsterdam. From its earliest times, the town was “a melting pot.” One governor counted eighteen different languages being spoken in New Amsterdam. One historian wrote, “No one ever confused early Boston with New Amsterdam.”

This map shows many of the settlements in the New Netherland region. New Amsterdam was named after the largest city of the Netherlands—Amsterdam. It would later be New York City. Schenectady is still called that, but Beverwyck is now the city of Albany.

The seal shown below is the official seal of the colony. What symbol is on it? What does it say about the purpose of the colony?
This picture shows New Amsterdam in 1651. It shows the tip of the island of Manhattan. Lenape Indians are in the canoes in the foreground and Dutch tall ships can be seen in what is now New York Harbor. A walled fort can be clearly seen, and it is surrounded by scattered houses. Can you spot the Dutch-style windmill? Brooklyn can be seen in the background, on Long Island.

This picture is the same spot today, on Google Earth (although from a bit further away).
(If you hold this map with “Longe Island” at the top, then North is on the left hand side, towards the bottom.)
Look at the map on the previous page. Do you see that long straight line across the island, near the compass rose? That line is now “Wall Street.” Find it on the Google Earth image below.

The modern street called “Wall Street” was actually where a wall was built at the edge of New Amsterdam. Today, Wall Street is the heart of the economy of the United States. It is where the stock market is located, where corporations are bought and sold daily.

Dutch control of the New Netherland lasted only about 50 years, but evidence of that time remain. The Dutch villages known as Haarlem and Breukelen would later become parts of New York City, now known as Harlem and Brooklyn. The Dutch
Parliament, was called the States General, or the Staaten. The Staaten gave its name to a part of the colony called “Staaten Eylandt”, which is today known as Staten Island. One large land grant was made to a Swedish sea captain named Jonas Bronck, and his enormous farm is now known as the Bronx. Early Dutch farms, called bouweries, provided the name for the section of the city that would later become the Bowery.

In the countryside outside of New Amsterdam, things were different. The Dutch needed to attract settlers to the area in order to control it. To accomplish that task, the West India Company created a “patroon system”. Patroons were large landowners, though the name is almost never used outside of the New Netherlands. A person became a patroon if he could bring fifty adults to the colony to settle there. The patroons became the land owner and the settlers were his tenants. Eventually, the land owned by a patroon would be called the manor, and the patroon’s big house was the manor home.

The patroon system put large blocks of land and political power in the hands of a few patroon families, but it left nothing for everyone else. The patroons were almost like princes, or feudal lords on their manors, but land ownership was denied to common workers, who became tenant farmers. One of the most famous patroonships lay along the Hudson River. It was run by Kiliaen Van Rensselaer, a Dutch diamond merchant. His land was so big that today it is two separate counties-- Rensselaer County and Albany County. The effects of the patroon system lived on in New York into the early 19th century.

The manors of the patroons operated like self-sufficient villages, so each manor could supply itself with almost everything the people needed. Each manor would have its own mill to grind flour from wheat and grains. A sawmill made lumber for furniture. Skilled craftsmen like blacksmiths made tools for the manor. The patroon was the manager or boss, and was almost like a prince because of the power that he had over the settlers that he had brought.

This patroon society was remembered in Washington Irving's book A History of New York. “Diedrich Knickerbocker” was the fictional character who was supposed to have written the book. Because of Irving’s book, “Knickerbocker” has become a symbol of New York City. (What is the name of one of the NBA teams from New York?) Irving was also responsible for the short story of “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” which told the story of the Headless Horseman, and the legend of Rip Van Winkle (Notice his Dutch name), which are both set in the
In 1647, Peter Stuyvesant was sent to New Amsterdam to replace an unpopular governor. In addition to being the governor, Stuyvesant might be best remembered today because of the fact that he had a wooden leg. Previously Stuyvesant had served the Dutch West India Company, and lost his leg during an unsuccessful attack on the Portuguese. He wore a wooden peg leg after that. He was called “Old Silver Leg” because he used a stick of wood that was covered with silver bands.

Stuyvesant was also known for his hot temper. He also had a bossy style that some people did not like. The Dutch were generally a very tolerant people because they were willing to allow different kinds of people and different points of view and they allowed people of many different religions to live in their country. However, Stuyvesant was very strongly against certain religions including the Protestant group called Quakers, and he was also against Lutherans and Jews. He was also known for his hot temper. Washington Irving’s character of Diedrich Knickerbocker was a fan of Peter Stuyvesant. He wrote,

If, from all that I have said, thou dost not gather, worthy reader, that Peter Stuyvesant was a tough, sturdy, valiant, weather-beaten, mettlesome, obstinate, leathern-sided, lion-hearted, generous-spirited old governor, either I have written to but little purpose, or thou art very dull at drawing conclusions.

Stuyvesant did accomplish some things that helped the colony. Since the original city of Amsterdam had canals, he had a canal dug in New Amsterdam. This wide area later became the street known as Broad Street and Broadway, which is now famous for its theatres. In 1655, he took over the small colony that Sweden had started. This area is now part of the states of New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

Patroons were having a hard time attracting people to live on their land if they weren’t going to get any rights after they moved. In 1664, there were only about 8,000 white people in the whole colony. Meanwhile, the English colonies were growing far
faster than the New Netherland. The English settlers were expanding into the New Netherland, forcing the Dutch out of New Hope in the Connecticut Valley and establishing new settlements on Long Island. In 1664, James, Duke of York and brother to English King Charles II, claimed the entire region between the Connecticut and Delaware rivers. English troop ships arrived in New Amsterdam harbor and prepared for battle. Stuyvesant was hobbling around while shouting orders to the citizens to defend the colony, but could not motivate them. The colony was captured without a shot fired. New Netherland became the property of the Duke of York. He decided to re-name New Netherland after the place where he was the duke-- York, in England. New Netherland became New York, and the Duke of York would later became King James II of England.

There are many traditions in our culture left by the Dutch. In addition to the place names mentioned, there are many foods that come from the Dutch culture. Crullers (for doughnuts) and coleslaw are both Dutch foods. Bowling is a game that was first played by the Dutch. Perhaps most prominent of all, the Dutch story of *Sinterclaas* became an important part of the basis for our stories and traditions about Santa Claus.