

ONE A NEW LAND

By ten and twenties the settlers came in 1624 and 1625, pitching on the inhuman waves in frightfully vulnerable vessels.

Two months it took to follow in the wake of the English explorer Henry Hudson, three if the winds failed. Hudson had sailed, in 1609, on behalf of the Dutch East India Company, so the Dutch claimed the territory and named their colony New Netherland. The Dutch provinces were the melting pot of Europe, and the settlers were themselves a mix of peoples. The colony stretched across a huge swath of North America, covering all or part of five future states: New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Pennsylvania and Delaware.

The ships arrived at what would later be New York Harbor.

“We were much gratified on arriving in this country,” one settler wrote home. “Here we found beautiful rivers, bubbling fountains flowing down into the valleys ...”

TWO PETER MINUIT

He had grown up speaking German, but his ancestry was French, so his name was pronounced in the French way - Min-wee.

He had no military training, but he was an individualistic, take-charge sort who would alter the course of history by sheer force of will.

Peter Minuit married and settled in the Dutch city of Utrecht, but then, learning of a venture to the New World, went to Amsterdam in 1624 and asked the West India Company for a posting to New Netherland. He shipped out with one of the first groups of settlers. The director must have been impressed by his wits and energy, for the company ordered the colony’s leader, Willem Verhulst, that “He shall have Peter Minuyt ... and others whom he deems competent thereto sail up the river as far as they can ... in order to inspect the condition of the land ...”

THREE THE ISLAND

Peter Minuit arrived at a colony in turmoil. Some 150 miles upriver from the harbor, several Dutch soldiers were killed by Mohawk Indians. The settlers panicked.

In 1626 they found their leader, Verhulst, guilty of mismanagement, removed him from power, and voted Minuit their new commander.

Minuit’s first decision would change history. He saw that the settlers were spread out too thinly, across 300 miles of wilderness. The original idea had been to use Noten Island (later Governor’s Island) as a capital, but it was too small.

Manhattan - after the Indian word for “hilly island” - was large enough to support a population. It lay in a world-class harbor, at the mouth of a great river, that gave access to the interior.

Manhattan was, in short, a fulcrum between the deployed continent of Europe and the raw landscape of North America, it was the perfect island.

FOUR THE “PURCHASE”

Every reader of history knows the story. Peter Minuit bought Manhattan Island in 1626 from a group of Indians for 60 guilders worth of goods, or as a 19th century historian calculated it, 24 dollars. Of the thousands of transactions in which native Americans sold parcels to Europeans, only one is legend. It’s clear why this sale lodged in the cultural

memory: the absurd price. It is the most dramatic illustration of the long process of stripping the natives of their land. In fact, the Manhattan Indians had no concept of permanent property transfer, but saw the agreement more as a treaty of cooperation. The Dutch would be allowed to use the land, but the Indians would remain as well - and indeed they did throughout the life of the colony. The so-called purchase price was for them a token of alliance, which Minuit would have understood.

FIVE THE BIRTH CERTIFICATE

There was an actual deed for the sale of Manhattan, but it vanished long ago. Fortunately, a Dutch official was on the dock in Amsterdam in 1626 when a ship from Manhattan arrived. The letter he wrote to his superior is, in effect, New York's birth certificate:

High and Mighty Lords,

Yesterday the ship the Arms of Amsterdam arrived here. It sailed from New Netherland out of the River Mauritis on the 23rd of September, they report that our people are in good spirit and live in peace. The women also have borne some children there. They have purchased the Island Manhattan from the Indians for the value of 60 guilders. It is 11,000 morgens in size. They had all their grain sowed by the middle of May and reaped by the middle of August. They sent samples of these summer grains, wheat, rye, barley, oats, buckwheat, canary seed, beans and flax.

The cargo of the aforesaid ship is:

7246 Beaver skins

178 ½ Otter skins

675 Otter skins

48 Mink skins

36 Lynx skins

33 Minks

34 Muskrat skins

Many oak timbers and nut wood

Herewith,

High and Mighty Lords, be commended to the merry of the Almighty,

In Amsterdam, the 5th of November Anno 1628

Your High and Mightiness' obedient,

P. Schaghen

SIX NEW AMSTERDAM

Under Peter Minuit, the settlers of the little city of New Amsterdam worked quickly. By about 1627 they had 30 wooden houses constructed along "The Strand," [Dutch Girl: the Dutch word 'strand' means 'beach' in English] facing the bluffed shore 500 yards across the water of what soon be called "Breuckelen." The one stone building was the West India Company headquarters, where pelts were stored. There were two windmills: one for grinding grain, the other for sawing lumber.

Minuit also oversaw the construction of a fort. It was built mostly of heaped earth; it began to crumble even before it was finished. Indeed, the ramshackle state of Fort

Amsterdam would be an issue right up until the moment, in 1664, when Peter Stuyvesant, standing on its unsteady ramparts, surrendered to the English. The fort's outlines are apparent in the "footprint" of the old Customs House just opposite Battery Park.

SEVEN MANHATTAN

As settlers explored their island, they found it wondrously varied: high hills, charging streams, ponds, stands of chestnut, poplar and pine. A brook flowed from the highlands in the area of 59th Street and Fifth Avenue, about where the Plaza Hotel stands, to empty into a small bay on the East River.

"The ground in the flat land near the river is covered with strawberries," one settler noted, 'which grow so plentifully in the fields, that one can lie down and eat them.'

The Manhattan Indians called the path that ran the island's length the Wickquasgeck trail. The Europeans could follow it northward to hunt in the forest at the island's center. As it was the most prominent road on the island, when the Dutch widened the path they referred to it as the Gentlemen's Street or the High Street. The English, of course, called it Broadway.

EIGHT THE MIX

The Manhattanites were so focused on survival in the 1630s that they might scarcely have noticed the changes. More sails appeared in the harbor, bringing more varied faces. Ebony faces from the highlands of Angola. Arab faces. An Italian, a Pole, a Dane. Something was happening that was quite unlike the development of the English colonies of Virginia and New England. Their island was a node on the Atlantic shipping circuit, held together by Dutch notions of free trade and tolerance, and it flourished. Products flowed in, bound for Europe. Slavery increased too, so that in 1664 there were about 300 slaves in the colony. In 1653, New Amsterdam became an official Dutch city. The tavern was rechristened as City Hall. Roads were paved with cobbles, brick houses replaced wooded ones. People of different backgrounds - Swedish-English, French-Dutch, German-Danish - intermarried to an extent unheard-of elsewhere. A new kind of society was forming.

NINE MINUIT'S LEGACY

The English took over the Dutch colony in 1664, and New Amsterdam became New York. But the Dutch roots still thrive. Peter Minuit and his compatriots set Manhattan on course as a melting pot and business hub. The settlers weren't motivated by lofty ideals. There was a policy of tolerance, but also refusal to adhere to it. Their society didn't have the neat outline that spawned the Puritan myth in New England.

Yet what the settlers planted here may matter more now than ever.

The terrorist attack that destroyed the World Trade Center and shook the world in September 2001 struck not only the center of American finance but also the few acres of lower Manhattan that were once New Amsterdam. The fact that the one grew out of the other ought to be proof that the idea of tolerance remains a thing of power. Developing it, showing that it could work, was the messy genius of the first Manhattanites.

- Russell Shorto, from *The Island at the Center of the World*