

The International Scene

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The Amsterdam Municipal Archives as a Source for the History of the United States of America

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Abstract: The holdings of the Municipal Archives of Amsterdam not only document the history of Amsterdam, but they also constitute an important source for the history of the Dutch colonial experience in North America. Important sources for the history of New Netherland, the seventeenth-century Dutch colony in present-day New York, are found in the notarial archives of Amsterdam; these archives are carefully indexed. Also available in the Amsterdam Municipal Archives are the archives of private institutions such as banks and land companies that provide documentation of finance, trade, and land development in North America.

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THE HOLDINGS OF THE Municipal Archives of Amsterdam can be divided into three categories: the records of public municipal bodies since 1275; archives of private persons, families, and institutions that have been a part of the history of Amsterdam; and the collections in the library and department of prints and drawings (the atlas).¹ These archives and collections give a good view not only of the history of Amsterdam, but also the history of the Netherlands and the United States.

Hudson's voyage of discovery was followed by the establishment of the Dutch colony of New Netherland and the founding of New Amsterdam in 1626 (present-day New York State and New York City). Much is already known about this seventeenth-century colony, but there are important sources for the history of New Netherland that have scarcely been used. This article focuses on sources for the history of the Dutch colonial experience in America and on sources documenting Dutch finance, trade, and land development in North America during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Dutch colonial adventure in North America disappeared in this later period, to be replaced by commerce and financial investments.

Notarial Archives

One of the most important sources for the history of New Netherland is the notarial archives of Amsterdam (1578–1905) which measures 3,000 meters, approximately 2.5 miles. Simon Hart (1911–1981), the former director of the Amsterdam Municipal Archives, took great care to make this rich source accessible for research. The

index that Hart began to these notarial documents refers to names of persons, geographical names—including navigation routes—professions, commodities, and other access points. Because North America was of special interest to Hart, he created a separate card index of documents relating to North American colonial affairs, which contains more than 7,000 chronologically arranged cards referring to approximately 2,200 documents covering the period 1624–64.² Up to the present, 10 percent of this period's documents have been indexed, the total number related to New Amsterdam and New Netherland being estimated at 22,000 items. These documents include information on the material culture, especially the building and textile industries and export products. Recently the North American index has been integrated into the general index, which can be consulted only by permission of, and with the aid of, the staff of the Municipal Archives. Extensive research is often necessary before results are achieved there.

Senior archivist Hans Ernst, head of the archives section of the Amsterdam Municipal Archives, has divided the notarial documents into four categories:

1. Depositions in which the notary recorded the client's statement. The document written from this one-sided statement of fact could be used in a legal case without the client needing to appear in court. These statements tell us about life in the colonies or about incidents during the sea journey. One frequently recorded subject is smuggling.
2. Wills and documents granting power of attorney. Many emigrants had wills drawn before their departure to New Netherland, or they had powers of attorney drawn and witnessed by a notary regarding their af-

¹ J.H. van den Hoek Ostende, P.H.J. van der Laan, and E. Lieveense-Pelser, eds., "De archieven in Amsterdam" (with English summary), in L.M. Th. Hustinx, ed., *Overzichten van de archieven en verzamelingen in de openbare archiefbewaarplaatsen in Nederland* 8 (Alphen a/d Rijn: 1981).

² In the North American index, documents can be found for the period 1598–1825; documents for the years 1624–64 concern not only New Netherland, but also Virginia (tobacco trade) and Canada (fisheries).

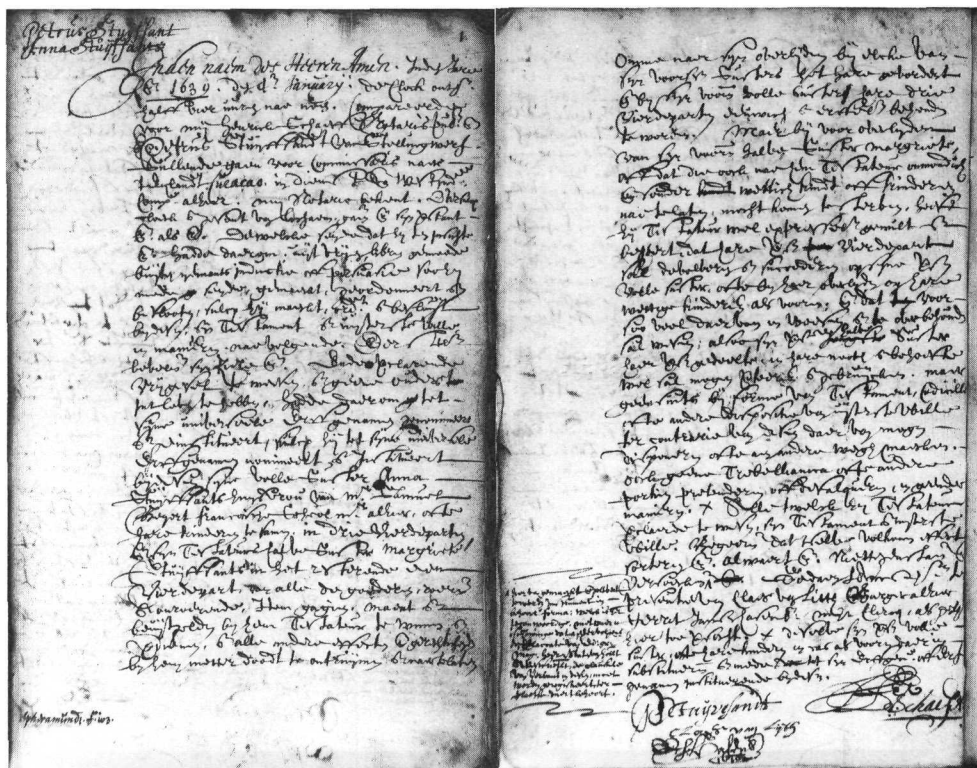


Figure 1. Peter Stuyvesant's will. Notarial Archives, 1377 page 1, Notary H. Schaef, 4 January 1639.

fairs in Holland. For example, Peter Stuyvesant's will can be found in the notarial archives (Figure 1).

3. Contracts, including partnership, indenture, freight, and ship-passage contracts.

4. All other documents in which the notary did more than record what was said. Often, at the client's request, the notary would go to someone's house accompanied by witnesses to read aloud a statement about the client's rights; the response was also recorded. This often concerned letters of exchange on which payment had been refused. Also included in this category are inventories of the estates of former colonists.³

Finance, Trade, and Land Development

The flourishing staple market of Amsterdam was the center of world trade in the seventeenth century. In the Republic of the United Provinces, Amsterdam took a central position, for a large part of the Republic's financial resources was raised by the inhabitants of Amsterdam. As a result, Amsterdam exercised great influence over the decisions of the States General—the federal governmental body. Amsterdam, and the Dutch, were generally more interested

bron voor de geschiedenis van Nieuw Nederland" ("The Amsterdam Notarial Archives as a Source for the History of New Netherland"), *New Netherland Studies* 84 (Amsterdam: Bulletin Koninklijke Nederlandse Oudheidkundige Bond, 1985): 142–50.

³ H. Ernst, "Het Amsterdamse notarieel archief als

in trade than in territorial conquest and the colonization of America. During the Dutch colonial period, all the Dutch trading posts and possessions in America were under the control of the West India Company founded in 1621.

In the eighteenth century, the improved organization of international trade, the developments in shipbuilding, the aggressive competition of Great Britain and France, and innovations in the method of fixing prices and in the commission business made the world's economy less dependent on a central staple market. Countries entered into direct commercial relations with each other, goods were shipped directly from seller to buyer, and the expensive port of Amsterdam could be avoided. The fact that Holland no longer held a monopoly on the carrying trade necessitated a fundamental change in the economic and political position of the Republic.

A small group of Dutch merchants was able to enlarge their banking and commission business. The Dutch exchanged their daring in shipping and industrial investments for the less dynamic venture of making loans to other countries. Dutch capital found advantageous foreign investments, which were estimated at 1,500 million guilders in 1780.⁴ Large advances were made to North America; the first loan was granted in June 1782, for five million guilders. Between 1782 and 1794, eleven loans totaling twenty-nine million guilders were granted by Amsterdam financiers to the United States. One of the most famous loans was related to the American purchase of Louisiana in 1803. Another loan allowed the purchase of land for construction of the new American capital. The Amsterdam bankers increased their investment in American state funds and land, as the com-

modity trade with the United States diminished.

Many items concerning loans to American states and cities can be found in the Amsterdam Municipal Archives. The most important and interesting archives in this context are those of Hope & Co. (1725–1940), one of Europe's oldest banks, and the Holland Land Company (1789–1869). The firm Hope & Co. was the most prominent banking house in Amsterdam. In the period 1770–1815, the firm stood at the top of the international capital market. Hope & Co., which had offices in Amsterdam and London, maintained extensive personal contacts and correspondence with agents of various governments abroad; their archival material, therefore, concerns more than just business matters.

The firm of Abraham van Ketwich and Dirk Jan Voombergh held another prominent position in the financial world. It acted as an intermediary on behalf of borrowers and lenders of money as did Hope & Co. and took care of the administration of transactions, issuing certificates to all sorts of funds.

The archives of the Holland Land Company are very special; they include approximately 1,500 maps of New York and Pennsylvania (Figures 2–3). The Holland Land Company archives have been arranged by W. Chr. Pieterse, the present director of the Municipal Archives of Amsterdam. Pieterse created an English-language inventory of the collection.⁵ Some of the collection has been microfilmed for the Library of Congress.

The Holland Land Company originated in 1789 when four Amsterdam firms instructed an agent, Theophile Cazenove, to

⁴As late as 1780, the Amsterdam bankers held some 40 percent of the British debt and had loaned France about twenty-five million guilders.

⁵W. Chr. Pieterse, "Inventory of the Archives of the Holland Land Company, Including the Related Companies and Negotiations Dealing with the Purchase of Land and State Funds in the United States of America 1789–1869" (Amsterdam: Municipal Archives of Amsterdam, 1976), 9.

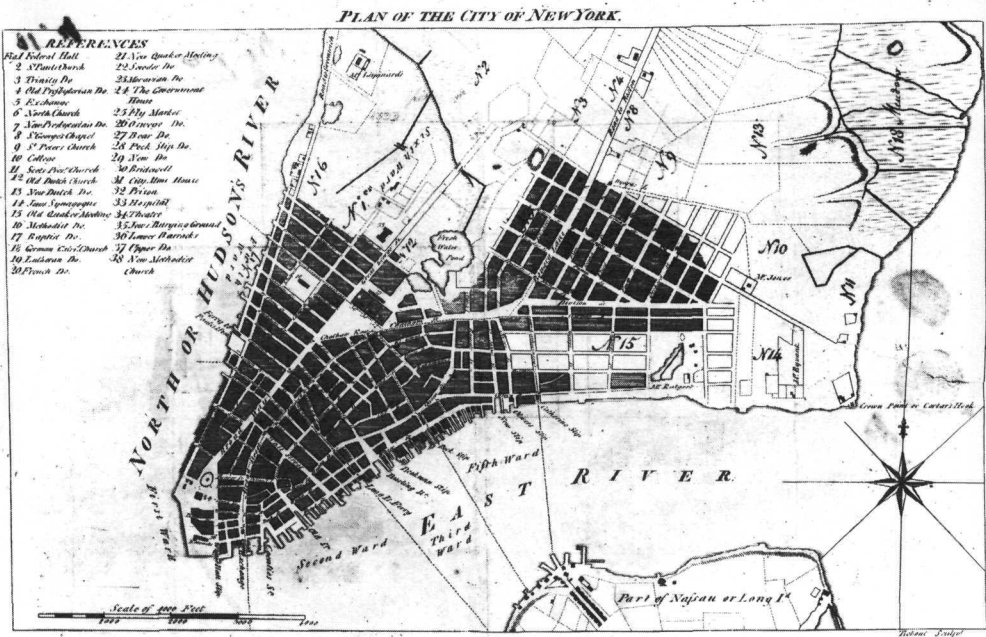


Figure 2. Plan of the City of New York, ca. 1794.

keep them informed of the financial developments in America and to invest for them. This resulted in the purchase of stock in such ventures as the South Carolina Funded Debt and the Massachusetts Deposit and in the Pennsylvania Population Company. From 1791 the Club of Four also followed Cazenove's advice to buy land in America. After several mergers, the Club of Four, now six firms, became a stock company calling itself the Holland Land Company. The firms involved were Willink, Stadnitski, Van Staphorst, Van Eeghen, Ten Cate, and Vollenhoven and Schimmelpenninck. The Van Eeghen firm was chosen as director of the company. With the formation of the Holland Land Company, almost all American land purchased by Dutch proprietors was under the control of stock companies.

Additional archives relating to loans, trade, and land purchase in the United States contain items concerning federal funds in general (1788-1834); the Louisiana Pur-

chase (1805); the purchase of land for the construction of the new capital (1793-1854); loans to the states of Illinois, Maryland, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Virginia (1789-1884); land development in the states of Georgia, New York, Pennsylvania, and Virginia (1789-1884); loans given to the cities of Alexandria, Georgetown, Mobile, New York, and Washington (1829-1881); loans to the Illinois Central Railroad (1886-1887), the Chicago Rock Island and Pacific Railroads (1869), and the Union Pacific Railroad (1875-1877); the North American Trade Society (1783-1792); and North American tobacco interests (nineteenth century).

Unfortunately, non-Dutch speakers have difficulties using this material. Without some knowledge of Dutch paleography, research in archives dating before 1800 is difficult. Although most of the documents are in Dutch, some portions of the Holland Land Company, Hope & Co., and the notarial archives collections are in other languages.

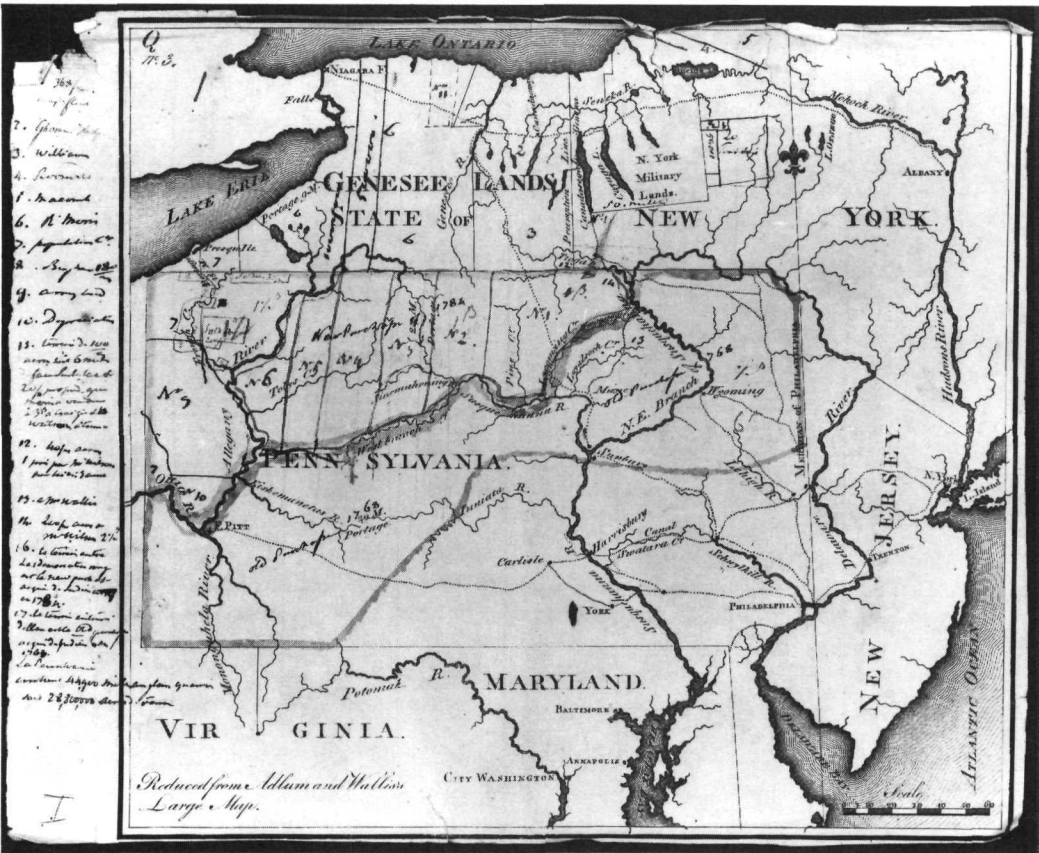


Figure 3. Map of the Middle States, reduced from Adlum and Wallis's large map (London, ca. 1792).

The location of the documents is also a problem for American researchers. The material could be microfilmed, or English summaries of important documents could be published, such as the series of summaries published in *Studia Rosenthaliana*, a journal for Judaic studies, of the notarial records concerning Portuguese Jews to 1639.

Conclusion

The “Dutch period” in the history of North America influenced the holdings of the Municipal Archives of Amsterdam. The

notarial archives are the most extensive unpublished source outside of the United States for the history of New Netherland and are especially important as a source for economic and social history. Hart’s index of the notarial documents relating to North America is of great help in using this collection. Archives of such private institutions as Hope & Co., Ketwich and Voornbergh, and the Holland Land Company are especially important to the documentation of finance, trade, and land development in the United States.