

Slavery and the Slave Trade Built New Amsterdam and New Netherland

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The Dutch New Netherland colony claimed territory that included all or part of the current states of New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Delaware, and Maryland and the West Indian island of Curaçao. Jan Rodriguez was a free Black sailor working for Dutch merchants. In 1612, he was left behind on Manhattan Island to establish trade with the local native population. Rodriguez was the New York region's first known non-native resident.

In 1625, the Dutch West India Company established the village of New Amsterdam on Manhattan Island. The first people of African ancestry in the colony were eleven men who arrived in 1626. They had Portuguese names and were probably captured from either Portuguese or Spanish ships. These men worked for the company and were assigned to clear land, plant and harvest crops, build houses, roads, bridges and fortifications. Two years later, three enslaved Angola women were brought into the colony. At the time, New Amsterdam was little more than a muddy village with thirty wooden houses and a population of less than two hundred people.

During Dutch colonial rule enslaved Africans fortified a wall along a path that would later be known as Wall Street, constructed a road to Haarlem on the northern end of Manhattan Island, helped build Fort Orange in what is now Albany, and worked on farms in the Hudson River Valley. They were so important to the economic development of the Dutch colony that officials passed a series of laws in 1640, 1648 and 1658 to prevent escape and in 1646, the Dutch West India Company promised to provide "as many Negroes" to the colonists as they were "willing to purchase at a fair price." A 1642 Dutch print with the heading "Nieu Amsterdam" shows two large European settlers (a man and a woman) in the foreground, with Africans behind and below, doing the physical labor needed to make the colony economically successful.

In 1647, Peter Stuyvesant, became the Director General of New Netherland. Stuyvesant increased the number of enslaved Africans in the colony and became the largest owner of enslaved African in New Netherland. In 1660, he supervised what was probably Manhattan's first public auction of human beings. The largest cargo of enslaved Africans, 290 people, arrived in New Amsterdam in 1664 on the Gideon, just before the colony was taken over by the British.

Despite these developments, the legal and social status of the first enslaved Africans was not completely resolved while the territory remained under Dutch control. Some Africans were welcomed into the Reformed Church (Protestant) where they were offered education and religious training and allowed to marry and baptize their children. In 1644, eleven enslaved African men petitioned the local government and obtained their freedom in exchange for the promise to pay an annual tax in produce. They each received the title to land on the outskirts of the colony where they would be a buffer against attack from native forces. Black farmers soon owned a two-mile long strip of land from what is now Canal Street to 34th Street in Manhattan. One of the emancipated Africans, Jan Francisco, became a founder of Boswyck (Bushwick) in Brooklyn. – Alan Singer