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Published in: The Swedes and the Dutch were made for each other: 400 years of Swedish-Dutch relations

Citation for published version (APA):

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Neighbors in America: New Sweden and New Netherland

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Introduction

The story of the Dutch and the Swedes in the New World is the paradoxical story of joint venture and rivalry. As both peoples were building up neighbouring colonies on America’s east coast, their competition, at times, led to armed conflicts on the spot. Palisade fortresses controlling the Delaware River waved the Swedish yellow blue colours on the one side, and the red white and blue of the Dutch strongholds on the other. In a way, and on a very small scale, that power balance resembled the tensions of the Sont in the Old World. However, in the vast and largely unknown territory of America, both colonizing countries were extremely fragile. Neither of them could bring up populations strong enough to create a local new world economy, or even face the threats of hostile native tribes. Moreover, the Delaware colonies were well behind on the surrounding English colonies of Virginia and New England that were much stronger. Eventually, after thirty years of Swedish-Dutch joint colonizing in competition, the English would take control of the whole Delaware area and both colonies were integrated in the British overseas empire. Still today, though, it’s not hard to find places around Philadelphia and the Delaware riversides that bear witness to the initial phase in American colonial history when Sweden and the Netherlands neighboured on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean.
Replica of the Kalmar Nyckel, the icon of the shared Swedish-Dutch history on the Delaware River}
The beginnings

New Sweden was a stretch of land along the west bank of the Delaware River that was colonized by the Swedish crown over a period of 16 years, from 1638 to 1654. Its ties with the motherland were expressed in places names like New Gothenborg (near present day’s Philadelphia) or Fort Christina (Wilmington). Some of the new communities had Finnish names like New Vaasa, Finnland or New Kolsholm, since Sweden recruited quite a few of its settlers from the far North. As for its own people, the mother country did not succeed very well in propagating the colony. Moreover, not too many Swedish traders and merchants seemed to have been interested in taking the risk of investigating in the overseas colony. So, who in Sweden felt the urge or was intrinsically interested, at all, in the American exploit? Who was responsible for sending over the first expedition of the ships Kalmar Nyckel and Gripen to the Delaware River mouth? And how did the Swedes know where to go, anyway, in the New World?

The overseas colony of New Sweden was suggested to the Swedish crown by a band of Dutch merchants and trading company investors. They had been involved in the American adventure for some time now, with investments and settlements along the Hudson River and on Long Island, north of the Delaware area. That was New Netherland, then, with the heart of the colony based on Manhattan. The island had been purchased from the native people at the value of sixty guilders, and right at the point of present day’s Brooklyn Bridge was a fortified place referring to its Dutch origins: New Amsterdam.

Quite a few of the prime investors in New Netherland were not happy with the way the Dutch colony developed. In fact, it made slow progress, and returns from investments were low or even negative. The bad start of New Netherland was largely due to the protectionist policy of the Dutch West India Company (WIC). They claimed a trading monopoly for the territory, and exerted austere controlling over commercial activities and settlements. Heavy taxes and high local prices frustrated economic development. Any private initiatives from outside the company were banned systematically. New Netherland under WIC regime, it seemed, had no chance of becoming a prosperous and populated colony on the long term. Bad management even led to a first bankrupt of the Dutch West India Company in 1636.

The internal conflicts over the colony’s policy caused some of the Dutch investors to abandon the New World enterprise and give up any Hudson River hopes. Alternatives for overseas investments were plenty, for example in Dutch Brazil. Yet, a few of them held on to their North American dreams and looked for a new construction to get their share without being troubled by the WIC. They turned their eyes towards the Delaware River, or South River, at the southern limits of the New Netherland territory. Some hundred kilometres south of Manhattan and well away from the grip of the Company, there was a second chance for colonizing in the New World, with Europeans mainly absent, abundant natural resources and fertile grounds waiting to be worked. Also, native American tribes provided trading opportunities.
This group of Dutch merchants had good reason for setting their eyes on the South River enterprise. In the early years of New Netherland, they had already given some efforts in purchasing lands there, and had, in fact, been busy to build up the colony Swanendal there, its name referring to the abundance of birds. As pioneers, a population of thirty colonists had been dropped at the mouth of the river and lived in and around a palisade fort as early as 1631. However, this first European settlement on the Delaware River turned into a horror scene when in the subsequent year the natives launched a furious attack and eradicated the whole community of invaders in their lands. Not a single soul survived and the South River of New Netherland remained virtually virgin land until, by March 1638, the ships Kalmar Nyckel and Grippen found their way to the river mouth.

Dutch and Swedes on a joint mission

The Dutch key player responsible for stirring up the Swedes to go there, was the Amsterdam merchant Samuel Blommaert. It seems he played a dual role in the Swedish-Dutch adventure, as he was one of the Dutch West India Company’s high directors in Amsterdam and a WIC investor in New Netherland from its very first hour. In fact, Blommaert was the same entrepreneur who had invested in the ill-fated Dutch settlement of Swanendal on the same spot, before. With the Swedes, he tried his luck in the New World once more. This time, however, he operated as a dissident to the Dutch West India Company, and privately engaged the Swedish Crown with good experience and knowledge of the area, and some glowing prospects.

Samuel Blommaert, as so many other Dutch people in the seventeenth century, was far from a stranger to the Swedes. In fact, he had friends in Stockholm’s highest places. The Swedish-Dutch metal business was the key to his network. As an entrepreneur he was involved in the iron and copper industry while, with consent of the Swedish crown, he owned a ‘messingwerck’ or brass factory in Nacka, outside Stockholm. At the same time, he was Chancellor Axel Oxenstierna’s eyes and ears in the Dutch Republic. At a structural income of 1000 rycxdaelders per year, he provided the Swedish crown with most valuable information on metal trading opportunities and prices. In a profitable relation, Blommaert made money for Sweden and Sweden made money for Blommaert.

Among the many treasures of Swedish-Dutch relations, the National Archives in Stockholm also keep Samuel Blommaert’s correspondence with Axel Oxenstierna over the period 1635-1641. The transcriptions of these letters are now available in the Digital Library of Dutch Literature (http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/bij005190801_01/bij005190801_01_0005.php). These Blommaert letters testify to the great efforts the Dutchman took to win over the Swedish Chancellor for the New Sweden project. They picture a land of opportunities, and offer detailed information on the region and the best places to settle: it was a chance in a lifetime. Also, they introduce the appropriate ‘man on the ground’ to the Swedes for setting up their colony. This man, according to Blommaert, had invaluable experience in establishing a colony and negotiating a modus vivendi with the natives. His name was Peter Minuit, another Dutchman.
involved in the American adventure. In fact, he is the legendary WIC representative who had purchased Manhattan from the native Americans. His memory is alive in Minuit Plaza on Manhattan, today.

Peter Minuit, governor of New Netherland from 1626-1632 and governor of New Sweden in 1638

For some reason, Peter Minuit too had come into conflict with the Dutch West India Company and their rigid colonial policy in America. As New Netherland’s governor he had been pushed to leave and return to patria in 1632. So, when Blommaert was envisioning a Swedish colony on the Delaware River, could he come up with any better commander than this man, who was loaded with information, maps and valuable data of the region, and who knew what life in the New World was all about. He was an expert in the ways and manners of the native people, even mastered their languages. Minuit, in short, had been there and done that for the Dutch, and, most of all, he had learnt from failures caused by the Dutch West India Company’s bad New World policy.

In an annex to Blommaert’s letters, Peter Minuit himself, too, addressed Chancellor Oxenstierna (who evidently understood his writings in Dutch) and stated that if the Swedes were willing to provide finances, men and materials, he was set and ready to lead the expedition to the region in America between Virginia and New Netherland, blessed by good climate, that he knew of very well, in order to establish a colony to be called New Sweden: ‘om een voyage te doen naer de Virgines, Nie-Neederland en andere plaetsen, daeromtrent seekere plaetsse my wel bekentelijk sijn, van zeer goet climaet, dewelcke genoemt soude worden Nova Sweedia’ (dated Amsterdam, 15 juni 1636).

Neighbours

The prospects these Dutchmen offered to Swedes, were convincing. Two Swedish ships, guided by Minuit, set sail to the New World in 1638. As he had
done for New Netherland on Manhattan, Minuit, on arriving with the Swedes in the Delaware region, applied the same tactics in claiming a territory and negotiating a place to live with the native people of the region: he offered valuable goods and made them sign a charter. The main difference, though, was that this time he proclaimed the lands New Sweden, in the name of the Swedish crown. He selected a favourable position at the point where the Minquas Kill (or Christina River, as he would call it) enters the Delaware River in order to build the palisade key stronghold, Fort Christina. In three months time Minuit did the job, again. He set sail for the Old World to go and pick up a second wave of emigrants, leaving his first colonists in the protection of some thirty soldiers. That's how New Sweden on the Delaware was realized in a Dutch-Swedish enterprise.

Swedish and Dutch settlements in the mix along the Delaware River

In the decade to follow, ties between the Dutch and the Swedes gradually grew looser. First of all, the Dutch founding father Peter Minuit was never to return to New Sweden, as he died in a raging storm on the way from America to Europe.
Also, the Swedish crown, after the joint start up, worked out the ambition to make New Sweden a fully Swedish enterprise. At a total sum of 18000 guilders, the Dutch interests and investors, including Samuel Blommaert, were all bailed out in 1641. Moreover, the Dutch West India Company in New Netherland grew agitated about the dissidents’ act that had caused a rival settlement to be nested at the borders of New Netherland and jeopardized their monopoly. Once in while, they sent official protests to the Swedes, whom they considered to have invaded ‘their’ territory. Also, they started mirroring the Swedish settling of the South River by building Dutch counter places in the area. Yet, these actions were far from intimidating, as the Company was too low on finance to risk any armed conflict. The general policy, it seems, was to prefer a peace with the Swedes as neighbouring colonists, in respect to the threats of Indian wars and English intrusions. And so, the wide Delaware River got speckled with Swedish and Dutch settlements: Fort Elsenborg on the one side facing Fort Casimir on the other, Fort Nassau facing New Gothenborg and Gripsholm, Dutch brick stone houses mixed with Scandinavian block houses. For a decade, the power balance in the New World accorded to the relations between Sweden and the Dutch Republic in Europe: competitive nations that stood strong together.

The grand final

The Swedish-Dutch Delaware competition, however, soon came to its zenith and got decided in an armed outcome. Perhaps triggered by the Dutch West India Company’s major troubles caused by the Brazil wars in 1654, New Sweden took the bold step to try and incorporate the Dutch settlements on the South River. Fort Casimir was prime target. The strategic Dutch fortress controlling all Swedish traffic in the river mouth, was taken in June of that year and renamed Fort Trefaldighet.

Doing so, however, the Swedish had launched a boomerang. As fortunes in Dutch Brazil turned for the worst and the colony in South America was lost definitely in this year, North America became all the more important. The Company’s focus was redirected now, and New Netherland’s position was protected and strengthened at any costs. The Swedes were to pay dearly for the armed capture of Fort Casimir. Having a casus belli it took WIC governor Peter Stuyvesant just one year to re-conquer the fortress. Moreover, he invaded all Swedish settlements on the South River and put the entire area including the Swedish and Finnish population under Dutch control.

With a sole Dutch dominance over the Delaware River, the influx of newcomers as organized by Sweden, came to an end in 1655. Now, the Dutch were facing their everlasting problem in colonisation projects, again. Where to recruit potential colonists? Without settlers from Sweden, how could the area be further populated if hardly anyone wanted to be a servant to the West India Company and go to New Netherland? In an ultimate attempt to face the problem of under-population, the Company then decided upon a unique experiment in colonial history: the South River was handed over to the City Government of Amsterdam. Any former WIC restrictions, rules, taxes were discarded and replaced by favourable city privileges and protection. Dutch and Swedish colonists in the
entire Delaware area were allowed to operate in a civil society based on Amsterdam’s values so that here, for the first time, a dream of freedom could be realized in America. Amsterdam, bulking in wealth, offered good conditions, cheap fares and a fairly democratic regime, that secured all settlers from the infamous exploitations as known from the Company era before. Newspaper advertisements and special emigration brochures with maps and propagandistic descriptions allured more and more settlers.

Promising as it was, however, the ambition to build up a strong New World society and transform the South River, including the Scandinavian communities, into a thriving and free colony, proved to be a measure of too little and too late. Another decade after, in 1664, everything turned upside down, again. The English colonial power that had ominously enclosed the area from its very first settling moments, became a reality: British naval vessels first took Manhattan and subsequently entered the Delaware River and overruled all previous protagonists there. Swedes, Finns and Dutch were all integrated in the British continuum on the East Coast from Virginia to New England. Consequently, the city of Philadelphia became one of America’s main ports for immigrants, where great numbers of Quakers came to the New World.

And so, after the first failure of a Dutch WIC settlement at the mouth of the river in 1631, and the rather successful colonisation that started in the Dutch Swedish cooperation in 1638, and with a gradually growing European population under Swedish governors or Dutch Company rulers and finally under Amsterdam’s City government representatives, now once more new neighbours came to settle and create another version of the land of the free, especially in the adjacent territory of Pennsylvania. As for Delaware, the story of its first European years when Swedish and Dutch settlers joint in competitive co-colonisation, is unique cultural heritage and perhaps still contributes to the peculiar and rather idiosyncratic character of America’s smallest state.