A Ship,
A Map,
A Fort, and
A Deal:
The Origins of the Dutch-American Trade Relationship

by Hubert de Leeuw and Timothy Paulson

The year 2014 marks a critical milestone in the history of trade relations between the Netherlands and the United States.

Starting in 1610, Dutch fur traders Hendrick Christiaensen and Adriaen Block made a series of voyages to the Hudson Valley. They were after furs, of course, but their deeper objective was to create a business deal—an agreement strong enough to win their employers, the Vogels/Van Tweenhuysen Company, a charter from Prince Maurits of Nassau, the United Provinces' Stadtholder, that would grant them exclusive trade rights in the region.

To achieve their mission they would need to map the entire region, forge a trade agreement strong enough to bring together conflicting native groups, and build a trading post on the doorstep of these potential enemies. Within a year they accomplished all of this, creating the first center for free world trade in the Americas in 1614—Fort Nassau, located in what is today the port of Albany, New York.

Defying the odds, they accomplished all these things and more. In the fall 1614 Holland's States-General drew up a charter uniting Holland's small, competing fur trading companies into what would become the first Dutch-American corporation—the New Netherland Company.

In the 400 years that followed, this business relationship has gone from swapping trade goods and furs with America's Native American communities to creating tens of billions in annual trade and generating hundreds of thousand jobs—all the while strengthening the unique friendship between the Kingdom of the Netherlands and the United States. (For more info see: economicties.org)

Last summer, in the Two Row Wampum Belt commemoration, hundreds of people of the First Nations paddled canoes down the Mohawk and Hudson Rivers, side-by-side with non-native "allies". On a pier in the Hudson River, before the group marched across the city to the United Nations, the Consul General of the Netherlands in New York Rob de Vos greeted the paddlers to acknowledge both the treaty and Holland's debt to the Native American communities, without whom the early trades would not have survived. (For more info see short video clip: youtube.com/user/TworowDutchview)

The bargain the Dutch struck four centuries ago over beaver pelts has grown in a quantum leap to US-NL exports of 47.5 billion dollars in 2011 alone, balanced against Dutch exports of $33 billion—making the Netherlands a top ten trading partner of the US.

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In 1614, Dutch traders overcame every obstacle, working with Native American communities to lay the foundation for a center of trade used by every nation on earth, a single spot where even old rivalries are laid aside for the sake of mutual and sustained prosperity. Today, this heritage is embodied in the North- American-European Free Trade Agreement, the biggest such agreement in history.

This agreement didn't just appear out of a blue sky, but rather has its roots in 1613 and the creation of the trading post at Fort Nassau, which also laid the foundation for New York City, and in many ways shaped the development of the United States.

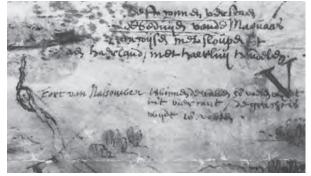For more about the origins of the Dutch-American relationship, visit: newnetherlandbeginnings.info

Consul General of the Netherlands Rob de Vos with leaders of the Two Row Wampum Belt Campaign, August 9, 2013, New York City. Photo credit: NNC Inc./Videos For Change

Fort Nassau, 1614, courtesy of Len Tantillo, lftantillo.com

In the winter of 1613-14, Adriaen Block's Onrust became the first ship built in North America. Photo credit: NNC Inc./Videos For Change

Enlargement of the location (Today's Port of Albany, NY) and description of Fort Nassau on the first detailed map of New York region called "the 1614 Map on Vellum" or sometimes referred to as the "1614 Adriaen Block map". Photo credit: National Dutch Archives