

NEW NETHERLAND'S NORTHERN FRONTIER IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

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Fort Orange

An historic marker in the Plaza at Albany, New York, has the following inscription:

Fort Orange

Site of West India Company Colony 1624

Here was born Sarah Rapelje, first

White child in New York State, 1625

Fort stood SE by the River.

Questions immediately arise concerning the fort, the West India Company, and especially the kind of country in which little Sarah was born. Briefly, Fort Orange (Albany) was a small settlement of about eighteen families who early made a small fort to protect themselves against the Indians. The West India Company, planned by a far seeing merchant of Antwerp, was a trading and colonizing firm. The kind of country in the region of Fort Orange was one of forests through which a river flowed on its way to the sea. In this wooded area "sunlight, filtering through the hemlock and pine, caught the fleeting shadow of a deer for an instant, then lost it as it slipped without noise into the underbrush. No trail lay at the base of the mighty oak, but one knew that the red man often passed that way. Save for the crying of Gaga, the crow, and the rustling of birches as Oah, the wind, gently blew them to and fro, all was hushed. It was the stillness of the forest. — This stillness was broken by the advance of the white man." (Lloyd, 1951, "Historic Murals in the Cohoes Savings Bank")

White men did come from Europe, sailing in small vessels across the Atlantic and then by way of the Hudson from the south, while some came overland from the north, having first arrived on Canadian shores. These Europeans were Dutch, French, and English. Fort Orange proved to be the Mecca for travellers with many objectives.

Rensselaerwyck

It was in 1623 that Killiaen Van Rensselaer, a pear merchant from Amsterdam and also a director of the West India Company, saw the value of this rich hilly country and bought 700,000 acres (24 miles long and 48 broad). Here the first permanent agricultural colony in New Netherland was established. Both the climate and the soil were conducive to the growth of good crops. On this land lying along the river in the area of present day Albany, Rensselaer, and Columbia counties, the Dutch Manor Estates of Rensselaerwyck were settled. A small number of earlier Dutch emigrants had located on Castle Island below the site on which Fort Orange was later built. They had the misfortune in 1617 of having their settlement swept away by floods and had rebuilt across on the mainland where a stream, known to the Indians as "Tawasentha," emptied into the river. This stream is the present Normanskill. Longfellow wrote of

Tawasentha in his poem "Hiawatha." There was a Treaty of Tawasentha between these early Dutch settlers and the Iroquois Indians which assured the Dutch of a strong ally. Between 1618 and 1799 the treaty was ratified thirty-nine times.

It was to this country that Joris Jansen Rapelje and Catalyntje Trico emigrated in 1623, the latter having come from Paris at eighteen years of age on the first Dutch India Company ship "Unity." They were the parents of Sarah Rapelje. The story is told that year later the Indians presented Sarah with a farm in consideration of her having been the first-born white child in the colony.

Trading with the Indians was a principal factor in the establishment of the West India Company Colony at Fort Orange. In fact this company had a monopoly of trade between Dutch ports and all the coasts of America. Fur was the desired product. Since the Indians did the actual work of trapping it was essential that a friendly relationship be maintained with them if trading was to be successful. A beaver on a shield appears to have been adopted as the provincial seal. However, skins of the otter, deer, and the bear, as well as those of the beaver, are reported to have been exchanged. When evidence of the wealth in the newly settled country reached Europe, Rensselaerwyck grew somewhat rapidly. Fort Orange became the headquarters for trading enterprises in the region nearby and also for the active trade with Indians up the Mohawk River which entered the Hudson at Cohoes.

David Pietersen De Vries

Among the early adventurers to reach Fort Orange was David Pietersen De Vries of Holland, who sailed in his own sloop up the Hudson River from New Amsterdam in 1639. His diary records his seeing a beautiful "valley under the mountains where Indians were planting some corn on some open land." It was on the shore of Castle Island that he moored his sloop and heard from Brandt Peelen, an inhabitant, of the fine wheat grown on the island over a period of ten years without summer fallowing the land. The traveller learned of the abundance of wild strawberries and grapes "as good and sweet as in Holland." He saw enormous wild turkeys, weighing up to fifty pounds, and many partridges, meadow-hens, and pigeons. In the river there were the finest of fish and also plenty of sturgeon that were relished by the Indians. De Vries considered that the colonists of Rensselaerwyck lived "amid nature's richest profusion." He became anxious to see the interior of the country and, with several Indians, he worked his way through the forests to the Mohawk. The Falls of Cohose seemed to him "as high as a church" and the waters "as clear as crystal and as fresh as milk." He referred to the area as "well provisioned with all the necessities of life." But plenty brought about destruction. Hides were sold in great quantities to the tradesmen, and flocks of pigeons, in both the fall and spring, were killed season after season.

Reverend Johannes Megapolensis

For some time Killiaen Van Rensselaer, the patroon of the Colony of Rensselaerwyck, had felt the need of a clergyman "for the edifying improvement of the inhabitants and Indians." After an approval of his

request for a "good, honest, and pure preacher" the Classis of Amsterdam selected Reverend Johannes Megapolensis. (His original name was Johannes Mecklenburg.) The pastor was to serve the colony for six years, providing he was satisfactory to the patroon. On August 4, 1642 Rev. Megapolensis, then thirty-nine years old, arrived in New Amsterdam (New York) with his wife and four children, and thirteen days later he preached his first sermon in the patroon's storehouse to an audience of about one hundred. During Preacher Megapolensis' first year he familiarized himself with the language of the Indians and won their respect and confidence. "Sometimes ten or twelve would attend (his Church Service), each smoking a long tobacco pipe." He wrote that he had, at one time, eight at once lying and sleeping upon the floor near his bed. It was due to these good relations with the Indians that Megapolensis was able to rescue Father Isaac Jogues of the Society of Jesus from their hands.

Dominie Megapolensis, "a man of thorough scholarship, energetic character, and devoted piety," remained as pastor of the colony for seven years. During these years he roamed the forests and trekked along the streams, accompanied by Indians who knew the wilderness well. In his letters to Holland he tells of the life in this new country, so very "mountainous, with some rocks . . . so exceedingly high that they appear to touch the clouds." He refers to the "finest fir trees the eye ever saw," and to the oaks, alders, beeches, elms, and willows, the abundance of chesnuts, hazelnuts, and large walnuts of several sorts. On the hillsides he saw thickets of bilberries (blueberries) everywhere, and on the flat land near the rivers strawberries covering large areas. Grape vines were plentiful along the roads and creeks.

Megapolensis, like De Vries, remarked about the large number and size of the turkeys, and about the partridges, heath-hens, and pigeons that "fly in flocks of five thousands, and sometimes ten, twenty, thirty, and even forty and fifty are killed at one shot." Swans, geese, ducks, widgeons, teal and brant which were taken by thousands upon the rivers in the spring of the year were also observed by this naturalist-pastor.

In August of 1649, Reverend Megapolensis left Rensselaerwyck, intending to return to Holland. However, the "urgent solicitations of Governor Pieter Stuyvesant prevailed upon him to remain as pastor of Fort Amsterdam where he lived and labored until his death twenty years later."

Nicolaes Janszoon van Wassenauer

Nicolaes Janszoon van Wassenauer was a publisher in Amsterdam who compiled information about the New World. One early volume he dedicated to the West India Company. In it he described the abundance of animal and plant life in New Netherland much as De Vries and Megapolensis had in their writings. However, he did refer to the quantity of tobacco that was grown, and also, to his surprise that "storks have not been found there, since it is a marshy country." His reference to birds can be summed up in his own words: "In their waters are all sorts of fowls. Birds fill also the woods so that men can scarcely go through them for the whistling, the noise, and the chattering. Pigeons fly wild. Ravens,

eagles, sparrow-hawks, and vultures are numerous and quickly shot or knocked down by the natives." In 1650 Wassenaer wrote: "Of birds this country is by no means without its share. There are great numbers of birds of prey, as eagles of two kinds, the bald-headed, which has the head, tail, and principal wing feathers white, and the common kind, hawks, buzzards, sparrow-hawks, crows, chicken-hawks, and many others. — There is also a bird which has its head like a cat and its body like a large owl, colored white. We know no name for it in the Netherlands but in France it is called Grand duc and is esteemed very highly. (Great barred owl — not white but of a light ash color.) Other birds are turkeys, partridges, curlews, wood and water snipes, pheasants, heath-hens, cranes, herons, bitterns, pigeons, quails, merlins, thrushes, shore-runners, also small birds that sing but are unknown to the Dutch, and water fowl that include swans, three kinds of geese (gray, bernicles, and white-headed), ducks, widgeons, divers, coots, cormorants, and several others."

Louis Armond Lahontan

In 1666, Louis Armond Lahontan was born in the little village of Lahontan, France. His father was the second baron of Lahontan. When Louis was eight years old his father died and he inherited the title of Le Baron de Lahontan et Hesleche. Though a baron he joined at seventeen a detachment of French marines leaving for New France (Canada). Soon he became an officer and a favorite of Frontenac. His first winter in Beaupre found him hunting in company with the Indians, acquiring the dialects of the tribesmen, and visiting their villages in sledges and on snowshoes. A year and a half later he again "spent pleasantly with inhabitants and tribesmen in hunting and fishing which he describes with the gusto of a true sportsman and a close observer of nature." He succeeded in finding months at a time in which to fulfill his urge for adventure among the wilds of southern Canada. He always had with him thirty or forty Indians who were expert hunters and well acquainted with the places in which to find game. One of his important contributions to Ornithology was his description of the drumming of the grouse. Lahontan had watched this flapping of wings and had listened to the humming noise which he claimed could be heard three-quarters of a mile from the bird.

Since Louis Lahontan wandered south into what is New York State today, it may well be supposed that his travels touched upon the northern frontier of New Netherland. Certainly the birds that he mentioned as visitors of southern Canada were many that De Vries and Megapolensis listed. In his additional descriptions, one of the "nightingale" fits perfectly that of the Bluebird and that of his "nectar-sucking Fly-like Bird" can belong to none other than the Hummingbird. He probably saw Snow Buntings from his brief mention of "White Ortalans" that were seen only in winter. Baron Lahontan was a first-rate observer of bird behavior and his accurate descriptions have proved invaluable to naturalists ever since his time. He spent the latter years of his life wandering about Europe, writing and publishing accounts of his earlier travels. He died in 1715.

42 Continental Avenue, Cohoes