CORPORATE SLAVERY IN NEW NETHERLAND

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As every student of American history knows, the first African slaves were landed in Virginia in 1619. What is less well known, however, is the fact that the second colony to import slaves was Dutch New York. Unlike the slaves in Virginia—indeed, unlike those in any other North American colony—the first slaves in New Netherland were not privately owned. They belonged to the Dutch West India Company, a business corporation funded in part by the Dutch government, which owned and operated the province of New Netherland, the territory that encompasses today the states of Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Delaware. Although private ownership of slaves by individual colonists was later permitted, the West India Company remained the largest single slave owner in the colony and developed a form of corporate slavery that was singularly unique in North America.1

The first European immigrants settled in New Netherland in 1624, and within a year or so of their arrival they were joined by a group of Africans. Although the West India Company’s charter authorized it to establish factories along the Gulf of Guinea, these first slaves did not come directly from Africa. They were captured by West India Company privateers preying on Spanish and Portuguese shipping in Latin American waters. A contemporary historian, Johan de Laet, in his Historie ofte Jaerlijck Verhael (History or Yearly Account) reckoned that in the thirteen years between 1623 and 1636 the Dutch captured over twenty-three hundred slaves from the Spanish. The company seemed at first uncertain of what to do with its human prizes. Many were released, but some were later sent to New Netherland to help relieve the colony’s chronic labor shortage. In 1637, when the company captured the Portuguese base of Elmina, in present-day Ghana, it became actively involved in the African slave trade. But the Dutch in New Netherland, like the English after them, preferred “seasoned” slaves—that is, those who had spent some time among Europeans instead of those direct from Africa.2

The first slaves, about a dozen men and their wives, were brought to New Netherland about 1625 or 1626. Some of the women were assigned as domestic servants to various company officials, including the minister of the Reformed Church. The men were employed in various public works construction projects, especially the building of Fort Amsterdam, at the southern tip of Manhattan Island. In later years, after the fort was completed, they were constantly at work repairing and strengthening its fortifications. The slaves were also used to cut timber and burn lime, which was plentiful in the colony thanks to the rich clam beds surrounding Manhattan and Long Island. Instead of sending skilled construc-

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tion workers and artisans to New Netherlands, officials in Holland hoped to save money by training company slaves as carpenters, bricklayers, and blacksmiths, as had been done in its possessions in Brazil and Guinea, but they were disappointed to learn from Director Peter Stuyvesant that in New Netherland there were "no able Negroes fit to learn a trade."  

Besides construction work, the company’s slaves were also employed as farm laborers. Since New Netherland’s early wealth was based on furs, the company originally sought to encourage agriculture so that the colony could provide enough food to feed those engaged in the fur trade and perhaps supply provisions for its sugar-producing colonies in Latin America. This, the company hoped, would eliminate the costly necessity of transporting food three thousand miles across the Atlantic from the Netherland. Consequently, the company reserved part of lower Manhattan for its own use, hiring Dutch farm laborers and, whenever possible, employing its own black slaves to clear the land, fence it, cultivate the soil, and help in the harvest.  

The slaves worked under the direction of a company officer who bore the title "Overseer of Negroes." Appointed by the director in New Netherland, he was responsible for the slaves’ work and served as a regular member of the colonial civil service. While some slaves were assigned individual tasks, the majority worked as a group under his supervision. They may even have been bound together in fetters and chained, since white criminals were sometimes put in irons and sentenced by the provincial court to work alongside the company slaves. In one instance, a convicted felon who had wounded two of the company’s blacks was condemned to take their place in the chain gang (*inde kettingh*).  

Besides working as construction and farm laborers, the company’s slaves were occasionally employed in military service against the Indians. In 1641, during the first of New Netherland’s Indian wars, when Manhattan and the other main settlements were threatened, the Twelve Men, a representative body elected by the colonists, advised Director William Kieft to arm the company’s slaves with axes and pikes to fight the Indians. Although several attacks were launched by company troops and settlers, there is no indication whether any slaves were involved. Almost twenty years later, when Indian warfare broke out at the Esopus, near present-day Kingston, Director Stuyvesant wrote to the vice director of Curaçao, the company’s main slave entrepôt in America, for blacks that were clever and strong men so that they can immediately be put to work here at the Fort or at other places, also if they are fit for it, in the war against the wild barbarians either to pursue them, when they run away or else to carry the soldiers’ baggage.  

While at the Esopus directing operations against the Indians, Stuyvesant was worried about his wife and children, who remained behind at his farm on lower Manhattan, and asked the secretary of the colony to "let the free and the company’s Negroes keep good watch on my bouwery." Several years later, in 1663, during another outbreak of hostilities at the Esopus, Captain Marten Creigier, commander of the provincial forces, led an expedition of over two hundred men, including seven company slaves, against the Indians. Although the expedition saw
action and sent out numerous scouting parties, there is no record of how the company slaves were utilized—whether as baggage handlers and camp laborers or in a combat role.\textsuperscript{9}

Although the bulk of the West India Company’s slaves worked in and around New Amsterdam (New York City), which was the colony’s capital and the company’s headquarters in New Netherland, small numbers were regularly stationed at various other company posts throughout the province. After the Dutch seized the Swedish settlements on the South (Delaware) River, the commander at Fort Altena, near the present site of Wilmington, asked Director Stuyvesant and his council for at least one slave to assist him in the company’s service. Several blacks also worked at the company’s fur-trading post at Fort Orange (Albany), and some were assigned to the House of Hope, the company’s outpost on the Connecticut River, at the present site of Hartford.\textsuperscript{10}

When the company first imported slaves into New Netherland, it was primarily for the purpose of using them in its own service in order to develop the colony’s agricultural resources and for construction work. But the company lost money in New Netherland and decided, sometime in 1628, to cut down expenses by reducing its own activities as much as possible. The company’s board of directors agreed to leave the colony’s development to private individuals and to the settlers themselves. For example, it permitted large stockholders to establish their own colonies, or patroonships as they were called, and it gave up operating its own farms on Manhattan, preferring instead to lease them to the settlers.\textsuperscript{11}

As the West India Company reduced its operations in New Netherland, it found less need for its own slaves. Although it continued to employ blacks in its service, especially as common laborers in the chain gang, the company found it more profitable to lease or hire them out to the settlers. When the company rented its farms on Manhattan, the new lessees usually acquired not only the land, buildings, livestock, and equipment but also the slaves who had formerly worked there in the company’s service.\textsuperscript{12} At Fort Orange, the company sometimes loaned its blacks to the nearby patroonship of Rensselaerswyck, where on one occasion a company slave was hired to execute a criminal condemned to death by the patroon’s court.\textsuperscript{13}

The company also loaned its Negroes to certain of its officers. Shortly after his arrival in New Netherland, Director Stuyvesant was allowed to use the company’s Bouwery Number One on Manhattan and also the two company slaves who worked there. They were later turned over to him, together with the farm’s other accessories, when the company decided, in 1651, to sell him the bouwery. When Jacques Cortelyou was appointed surveyor general of New Netherland, he was allowed the use of a company slave, but was later required to return him to the chain gang.\textsuperscript{14} The company’s officials in Holland were somewhat disturbed by the fact that so many of its slaves were being loaned out. They were especially irked when Stuyvesant asked them to send him workers. They felt he had had more than enough slaves, if properly managed, to handle any labor problems that might arise in the colony. "We were surprised to learn," they noted sharply, "that altogether too many of these Negroes are employed in private service. . . ."\textsuperscript{15}
The company’s policy of leasing its slaves extended not only to private individuals and company officers but also to local government. In 1661, the magistrates of New Amsterdam asked Director Stuyvesant and his council for a gift of several Negroes for the city. Their petition was favorably received, and the company agreed to grant the city fathers three of its slaves. Like those in the company’s service, New Amsterdam’s blacks were employed primarily as heavy-duty laborers in various jobs in and around the city. They served, for instance, as garbage collectors, hauling off dead animals that cluttered the city’s streets. And when word reached New Amsterdam in 1664 that a British squadron was approaching, the municipal magistrates ordered their slaves to join with those of the company to cut palisades and to strengthen the city’s fortifications.16

The company’s decision to grant its slaves to New Amsterdam and to loan them to private individuals reflected its efforts to reduce its own activities in New Netherland in order to minimize its costs. The company discovered that slave-owning was not inexpensive. Its blacks had to be fed, lodged, clothed, and cared for. Sometime between 1658 and 1660, the company’s physician on Manhattan proposed that it establish a hospital for sick soldiers and slaves. Stuyvesant and the council accepted his suggestion, hired a matron, and erected a hospital on Bridge Street in lower Manhattan, the first in New York City. The slaves’ costs and expenses were sometimes passed on to the company even though it loaned them out, and they were no longer under its direct control. Thus, when it granted the city of New Amsterdam three of its slaves, the company was expected to continue providing for their maintenance and subsistence.17

After the company was forced out of Brazil, one of its richest colonies, its losses multiplied and it tottered on the edge of bankruptcy. Short of cash, it paid off some of its debts with slaves. When the vice director of Curacao left the company’s service and stopped off at New Netherland, Stuyvesant was advised by officials in Holland that he could draw his back pay in company slaves. Stuyvesant followed this same policy in paying off a company debt to the van Rensselaer family by sending a company slave to their colony of Rensselaerswyck. And on several occasions, he offered to pay for supplies and provisions for the company’s troop detachment with parcels of slaves. He even sought to negotiate loans for the colony by pledging company slaves as surety. Stuyvesant had enough blacks to meet these obligations since the company sent New Netherland a steady stream of slaves, mostly from Curacao. Many were sold to private settlers and some retained in the company’s service.18

In dealing with its slaves in New Netherland, the West India Company adopted a dual approach. Those that it acquired for resale to the settlers were handled as chattel and bought and sold for purely economic gain. On the other hand, those it retained in its own service were treated differently. They were, by and large, considered employees of the company, and the company extended to them certain basic rights, benefits, and privileges that were not granted to slaves owned by private colonists. Slaves that did not live up to company standards, though, were sold. In 1656, Director Stuyvesant ordered the sale of two blacks, “one being lazy and the other a thief.”19
Despite their servile status, company Negroes in New Netherland enjoyed certain basic human rights. They were admitted to membership in the Dutch Reformed Church although it usually required intense religious instruction and a confession of faith from adult converts. Company slaves were married in the church at New Amsterdam, and their children were baptized there too. The company recognized these slave marriages and sought to keep slave families together. Even when the company sold its blacks to private settlers, it encouraged the new owner to keep slave families intact.20

Unlike slave owners elsewhere, the company granted its slaves some fundamental legal rights and the protection of the law. They were permitted to testify in court, sign legal documents, and bring action against white settlers. In one instance, a company slave sued one of the most prominent citizens in the colony. And in another case, a white settler was convicted and fined for damaging some property belonging to a company slave although the only witnesses against him were two other slaves.21

When the first company slaves arrived in New Netherland about 1625, they were promised monthly wages somewhat comparable to that of white laborers. A decade later, the new director of the colony, Wouter van Twiller, unaware of this promise and uncertain how to handle the slaves’ demand for money, forwarded their petition for pay to company officials in Holland.22 Although there is no record that the company ever again promised wages to its slaves, they found various means of earning money. Some blacks, after completing their daily labor for the company, secured part-time employment in their off-duty hours. One slave gave the company’s chief agent at Fort Orange power of attorney to collect wages that were due him while working for a colonist at the patroonship of Rensselaerswyck. At another time, a company slave was given cash and clothing by the officials of Rensselaerswyck in return for having served the patroon, on and off, for several years.23 As a result, some slaves acquired capital and purchased cattle and livestock. And others were even granted small plots of farmland by the company.24 On one occasion, the slaves complained to the director that their work for the company interfered with their own work. Instead of discouraging their moonlighting, the company approved of what they were doing since it freed it, to a certain extent, of the responsibility of supporting their families.25

The most important benefit accruing to company slaves was the promise that if they worked hard and faithfully for the corporation, they would ultimately be released from bondage. In 1644, a group of eleven company slaves, probably among the first in the colony, petitioned Director Kieft for their freedom. They asserted that when they were brought to New Netherland eighteen or nineteen years before, they had been given assurances that they would be set free. Director Kieft honored this pledge and freed them together with their wives. Henceforth, proclaimed the director and council, they were “free and at liberty on the same footing as other free people here in New Netherland. . . .” As part of their freedom dues, they all received plots of farmland on Manhattan in the area west of the Bowery and between present-day Canal Street and Astor Place, which became the first free black community in New York.26
In return for their freedom, they each had to agree to deliver annually to the company one hog and twenty-three bushels of corn, wheat, or vegetables. They were also obliged to serve the company as paid laborers if their services were ever needed. In addition, although they and their wives were free, their children and any born in the future were still bound as slaves to the company. Failure to comply with these terms, they were warned, would result in the forfeiture of their freedom.\(^27\)

Although these conditions may appear harsh, they were never rigidly enforced and were later modified. No former slave, for instance, was ever compelled to work for the company. (The only exception occurred during the First Anglo-Dutch War when all the settlers, black and white, were required to work on New Amsterdam’s fortifications.) And none ever forfeited his freedom. In 1646, when the second recorded manumission took place, the company significantly moderated its terms. The new freeman was required to furnish the company with only eight bushels of wheat as the price of his freedom. There were no other conditions.\(^28\)

In regard to the children of manumitted slaves, the director and council apparently found that it was too expensive and burdensome to support them. One of them, a young girl, was leased for four years to a settler on condition that he provide her with food and clothing.\(^29\) By 1650, only three of the free Negroes’ children were still in the company’s service.\(^30\) In some cases, the slave children, although legally owned by the company, were reared by their parents, and when they reached maturity their parents petitioned for their manumission. In 1661, for example, two free Negroes, a husband and wife, appealed to Director Suyvesant that they had adopted an orphaned child of one of the slaves freed in 1644, raised and educated him, and now requested his freedom. Suyvesant and his council approved their petition.\(^31\)

Although the company apparently decided not to press for the enslavement of the children of its former slaves and later freed most of them, there was one exception to this liberal policy. In 1663, a Negro petitioned Director Suyvesant for the manumission of the orphaned daughter of two former company slaves. Instead of simply freeing the girl as he had done in similar cases, Suyvesant required the petitioner to provide the company either with another slave in her place or with her cash value, three hundred guilders. Unable himself to raise so much money, he appealed for help, and one of the orphanmasters of New Amsterdam agreed to put up the money for the girl’s freedom.\(^32\)

In the years following its first manumission, the company had no fixed policy concerning emancipation or conditions imposed on freed slaves. These decisions were based largely on the needs of the company and the judgment of the director and council. In one case, the company leased a slave girl to a settler and gave him authority to manumit her if and when he wished.\(^33\) In 1662, Suyvesant freed three women slaves on condition that one of them do housework for him each week. A few months later, he freed “an old and sickly Negress” who had been in the company’s service for over thirty-five years. Shortly afterward, in December 1663, about eight or nine slaves, possibly the last blacks remaining in the com-
pany's service, were granted "half liberty." This probably meant that, like medieval serfs, they were required to spend some of their time working for the company. On September 4, 1664, just a few days before he surrendered New Netherland, Stuyvesant granted these blacks full freedom, realizing that, as company property, they would be forfeited to the English and lose their freedom.\textsuperscript{34}

The English conquest of 1664 marked the end of forty years of corporate slavery in New Netherland. But while it lasted, it provided a unique example of slavery in the New World. The West India Company's blacks received special consideration and were treated more as employees than as slaves. Their family units and marriages were sanctioned by the church and recognized by secular authorities; they could bring legal action in court and bear witness against whites; they held part-time jobs and moonlighted on company time; they owed personal and real property; and most acquired their freedom as a reward for loyal and faithful service to the company. Although the company was primarily a business enterprise seeking revenue and profits, it exercised a remarkable degree of corporate responsibility toward its black workers. As it reduced its operations in New Netherland, the company found certain aspects of slave-owning financially unprofitable, and this may have accounted, in part, for its lenient policy toward its blacks. Perhaps the company's liberal policy also reflected a well-planned corporate effort to develop work incentives in order to extract maximum efforts from its black labor force. But profit and loss statements and labor productivity charts cannot alone explain the basically humane way it treated its slaves. Perhaps the company's attitude toward its blacks reflected, to some extent, the view of one seventeenth-century Dutch dominie who noted that although Negroes "are slaves they are nevertheless people and ought not to be brought by us because of their slavery to a worse condition but to a better one."\textsuperscript{35}

\textsuperscript{1}Among the basic studies of slavery in New Netherland are E. B. O'Callaghan, ed., \textit{Voyages of the Slavers St. John and Arms of Amsterdam, 1659, 1663; Together with Additional Papers Illustrative of the Slave Trade under the Dutch} (Albany, 1867); A. Judd Northrup, \textit{Slavery in New York}, State Library Bulletin, History No. 4 (Albany, 1900); Edgar J. McManus, \textit{A History of Negro Slavery in New York} (Syracuse, 1966), ch. 1; Gerald Francis De Jong, "The Dutch Reformed Church and Negro Slavery in Colonial America," \textit{Church History}, XL (December 1971), 423–36.


*Ibid.*, 112–13; IV, 14, 354; Stokes, *Icon.*, IV, 120. One of the first Overseers of Negroes, Jacob Stoffelsen, after retiring from the company’s service, became a prominent citizen of the colony. Although illiterate, he was twice elected by the settlers to serve on representative bodies (The Twelve Men and The Eight Men) and later went into business in New Amsterdam. Morton Wagman, “The Struggle for Representative Government in New Netherland,” Unpublished Ph.D., Dissertation (Columbia University, 1969), 284–87.


TypNYColMSS, IV, 220–21.

*NYCD*, I, 415; TypNYColMSS, IV, 125; Stuyvesant to Matthias Beck, February 17, 1660, *NYCD*, XIII, 142–43.

Stuyvesant to Cornelis van Ruyven, March 18, 1660, ibid., 152, 328, 331, 338.

*NYCD*, XII, 364; A. J. F. van Laer, ed., *Van Rensselaer Bowier Manuscripts* (Albany, 1908), 835–36 (hereafter cited as VRBMSS); TypNYColMSS, IV, 97; *Calendar*, 185–86; *NYCD*, I, 343.

Bachman, *Pelttries or Plantations*, ch. 5.

VRBMSS, 232, 276, 278; *NYCD*, XIV, 139; TypNYColMSS, I, 123.


*NYCD*, XIV, 86; TypNYColMSS, III, 216; *Calendar*, 197.

West India Company to Stuyvesant, December 19, 1656, *NYCD*, XIV, 373.


*Calendar*, 162.


TypNYColMSS, I, 123; IV, 62, 208–09.

Their petition, dated November 19, 1635, is reprinted in Stokes, *Icon.*, IV, 82.

TypNYColMSS, I, 123; VRBMSS, 835–36.

TypNYColMSS, IV, 208–09; Stokes, *Icon.*, IV, 265–66; VI, 78, 100, 105–06, 123.

TypNYColMSS, IV, 212–13.

Ibid.; Stokes, *Icon.*, IV, 97; IV, VI, *passim*.

TypNYColMSS, IV, 213.

Ibid., 342; *NYCD*, XIV, 201.


“Dutch Records in the City Clerk’s Office, New York,” *Year Book of the Holland Society of New York* (1900), 131–32; Stokes, *Icon.*, IV, 211; *Calendar*, 222.

Stokes, *Icon.*, IV, 230; *Calendar*, 256, 264. Under Roman Dutch Law an orphanmaster was a magistrate assigned to look after the rights of orphans. Although there is no way of determining why Stuyvesant acted differently in this case, it may have reflected some irregularity in the petitioner’s request or in his conduct. This may have been the reason, since although the petitioner referred to
himself as a free Negro in his petition of December 6, 1663, he did not receive his certificate of manumission from the company until April 17, 1664.

33TypNYColMSS, III, 209.
34Stokes, Icon., IV, 223–24, 230, 241; Calendar, 242, 246, 256, 269.
35The Reverend Johannes Overney at the Dutch East India Company’s colony at the Cape of Good Hope, cited in De Jong, “Dutch Reformed Church and Negro Slavery in Colonial America,” 428.