



New Netherland Institute  
Exploring America's Dutch Heritage

## THE DELFT THUNDERCLAP OF 1654

By Peter Douglas



Since the start of the Eighty Years War, the Dutch army had been keeping central stores of gunpowder within the city walls of Delft. In the late morning of October 12, 1654, the city was rocked by an explosion in the Doelenkwartier, between Geerweg and Doelstraat in the northeast section of the

city. The magazine, used for storing ammunition for the defense of the city, had blown up. It contained some around 40 tonnes (80,000 to 90,000 pounds) of black powder stored in barrels in a former convent. The cause is not known, but the keeper of the magazine, Cornelis Soetens, went inside with a visitor. Half an hour later the magazine exploded.

This was not the first time, nor was it to be the last, that such an explosion devastated a Dutch city. There were explosions in Bredevoort in 1646, Heusden in 1680 (both caused by lightning), Maastricht in 1761, Amersfoort in 1787, when Our Lady's Church was being used as a powder magazine. In Leiden in 1807, the vessel *Delfs Welvaaren*, moored in the Steenschuur canal in the middle of the city and laden with 38,000 pounds of black powder, blew up. Such was the force of this explosion that the ship's anchor was found 900 meters away. And in modern times, unconnected with any war, there was the notorious *Vuurwerkkramp* at Enschede in May 2000, when an explosion in a fireworks factory left 22 dead and 947 injured.

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The magazine explosion in Delft in 1654, known to history as “*Der Delftse Donderslag*,” (The Delft Thunderclap), was the equivalent of some 22.5 tons of TNT, and was heard as far away as Texel on the North Sea, 150 km distant. A quarter of the city was destroyed and many of its inhabitants were killed and injured in the nearby residential area. It was dramatically said at the time that a hundred cannons aiming at the city could not have caused more damage. Two hundred houses were razed, and another three hundred damaged. Large trees were sheared off to stumps, and the stained glass and roof of the Nieuwe Kerk were destroyed. It's fortunate that many of the citizens were out of city at the time, either at the Schiedam market or at a fair in The Hague. In an age of deep religious conviction, some naturally believed that it was the end of the world, with the gates of hell opening and God's wrath raining down on the town.

Although the number of casualties is unknown, it is estimated that the explosion caused at least a hundred deaths and injured thousands. Among the dead was one of Delft's most famous painters, Carel Fabritius (1622-54), who died of his wounds sustained in the disaster.

There is a grim painting by Egbert van den Poel (1621-64) that gives us an abiding image of the devastation. In the distance against the horizon the two major churches of the ruined city, the Oude and the Nieuwe Kerk, stand relatively intact. Between them is the Town Hall tower. The church on the extreme right is the chapel of the Hospital of St George in Noordeinde. To the right of the picture is the area where the gunpowder had been stored; all that remains are a crater filled with water, some burnt trees, roofless houses, and piles of rubble. In the foreground, people are busy helping the wounded and comforting each other. Two men crossing a bridge on the left of the picture carry a basket containing the few belongings they have managed to salvage. The painting, now in the National Gallery, London, and what it depicts, is made more poignant when we know that the artist's son was killed that day.