

“Prize” Letter of Hendrick Meesz Vrooman to his relatives in the Netherlands

The devastation and disruption caused by war are unfortunate facts of human history. Throughout the ages, the toll on humans and other living creatures by violent means and disease has been told by numerous tellers-of-tales, poets, and historians. Not only does war seriously disrupt everyday life but also the postal service.

By the mid 1650s, Petrus Stuyvesant had established a letter box in Nieuw Amsterdam. Thus, a transatlantic postal service was born. However, mail being carried on ships were at the mercy of hostile forces. For the Dutch it was three wars with England in the 17th century and one in the 18th. Captured ships were considered prizes or spoils of war, such as were bags of mail.

For over three centuries 40,000 pieces of mail have resided in the archives of the Admiralty Court in London. This incredible source of historical information has recently been digitized and made accessible on the open-source website of the Dutch National Archives.¹ So far, four New Netherland-related letters have turned up. All four were posted around the time of the English takeover of Dutch possession in 1664. They all involve the Vrooman family in one way or the other.

The first letter was written by Hendrick Meesz Vrooman to his mother, sister, and brother Jacob in the Netherlands. Hendrick had just arrived in New Netherland with his five young children. It is presumed that his wife was deceased. Upon arrival, he left his children in the care of his brother Pieter in Beverwijck while he traveled to the new settlement of Schenectady to find work.

The two parts of the Hendrick’s letter were most likely inspired by the arrival of an English invasion force at Manhattan in September of 1664. The first letter dated 5 October 1664 was probably in reaction to hearing the news of the English takeover. Hendrick delivered the letter to his brother Pieter in Beverwijck/Fort Orange. He probably asked his brother to put the letter on the next ship sailing downriver. However, around the 20th of October Hendrick probably heard that English soldiers had arrived at Fort Orange and decided to travel the 19 miles from Schenectady to Beverwijck to see for himself what had happened. He soon realized that the first letter had not started its journey to Leiden but was still at Pieter’s house. As the arrival of 50 English soldiers at Fort Orange was important news, he decided to add another page to the original letter. As Hendrick probably had no paper with him, he wrote on what appears to be a discarded piece of paper provided by his brother that had only “At Schenectady the 24th of Sept.” written at

the top. Hendrick simply inverted the paper and wrote more news for his family in Leiden. He may have been anxious to inform his brother Jacob of the arrival of the English. Jacob had been in New Netherland with his other brother Pieter for several years, living with Jeremias van Rensselaer as a servant. In September of 1663, Jacob returned to the Netherlands. He arrived safely in Leiden and would have received this letter before his return to New Netherland either late in 1664 or 1665. As we now know, Jacob never saw this letter but did return to New Netherland where he died in 1691.

Snechtendeel in New Netherland 1664
the 5th of October.²

Dearest mother and brother and sister³
and friends, I write to all of you to let
you know that I and all my five children⁴
are presently sound and healthy, as long
as it may please God, and I hope that it
is also the same with you. It would be
painful for me to hear if it were otherwise.
Furthermore, I'm letting you know
that Adam and I worked about a month
in the grain harvest. Now, I have been
plowing a month for Korrelaer⁵ at
Snechtendeel and still have a month
more to plow. We have sowed about
twelve *morgens*⁶ of wheat and I still have
about six *morgens* to sow with wheat.
Adam has now been driving the plow for
another farmer for three weeks and has
still five weeks left. Then he will have
earned fourteen *schepels*⁷ of wheat and
I earn about sixteen *schepels* of wheat
monthly. When I'm done with plowing,
I will then scythe or begin to hull barley
at Fort Orange or it could be that I lease
the gristmills from Renselaer,⁸ for I
understand that *Flodder*⁹ shall leave there
for the burghers saw no better day than
when I had the mills. My children are

still at my brother's house and my goods are still there. We received news that a ship has foundered near New Netherland toward the north that had come from Holland as well as an English ship. The skipper and about twenty men were taken off the Holland ship. They had run aground.

Furthermore, I want you to know that three English ships have arrived at the *Mijnatus* with soldiers and have summoned the country. They say that it belongs to their king and that Stuyvesant turned it over by agreement without firing a shot.¹⁰ But the English soldiers say that Stuyvesant and Decker¹¹ had already sold the land over two years ago.¹² On the 28th of September, a hundred soldiers with their officers entered Fort Orange and the guardhouse by agreement, and the English now stand guard. They have made a good agreement, if the English keep it. However, we hope that the Hollanders shall come and take their land back. They made an agreement that ships from Holland would still be allowed to come here with their goods.

Sister,¹³ with the money that you have left over from the debt that you have collected and from the goods that you have sold, buy all sorts of thread and some cheap edging, gray and black and yellow, and buy mostly gray, and gray yarn, and put it in a package. Brother,¹⁴ write to Jan Betijst¹⁵ to write you back if there are ships sailing to New Netherland and then to write us if it is war or peace with

Holland and England, for we are now expecting you to write back first. I wish you and Jacobes de Backer with his wife and children and Maertgen Lambers with her husband and children and all the friends and good acquaintances a hundred thousand good nights and that it may go well with you. That is my desire.

Heinderick Meessen Vrooman

Praise God above all. At Fort Orange, on the 20th of October 1664.

Because this letter has been fourteen days at my brother's,¹⁶ I'm writing you another letter since I've now come to my brother's with the wagon from *Schnechendeel*. Once again, I write that I and all my children are presently healthy, as long as it pleases God, and it has been a good summer here. There has been a good crop of grain and a good harvesting of the grain. I am still very pleased with the land at *Snechtendeel*.¹⁷ It is the most fertile that I have ever seen in my life, even in Holland. It has been as warm here as it is in Holland in the summer, but there are sometimes very cold nights with a hard frost. Today, news has arrived here at Fort Orange from *Mijnatus*¹⁸ that the English have also gone to take over the South River¹⁹ but as of now they haven't been successful. There is also news that our stock of beer and wine and grain shall decline, as there are about fifty soldiers stationed here at Fort Orange whom the burghers have to feed as a treat. It is very good regarding the Indians. They now have

to be quieter than they have been
before this. Hereby, commending you
to the Lord, may God keep you healthy.

[Inverted at bottom] At *Scnechtendeel*, the 24 Sept.²⁰

[Addressed]

Deliver to Sr. Mister
Jacop Vromans in the Brestret
at the Hogewoers bridges
to place in the hands of
Maertgen Meesen Vrooman
in the *Wijtte Hart*²¹
in Leiden.

To Arijantgen
Heindericks at
Leijderdorp near the
lane of the Ter Does
house.

[Translated by Dr. Charles Gehring, director
New Netherland Research Center
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¹ <https://www.nationaalarchief.nl/onderzoeken/archief/2.22.24>

² One of several spellings of Schenectady; the date is rendered in “new style” i.e., according to the Georgian calendar.

³ Family in Leiden: father, Barthomeus Pieterse Huygens Vrooman; mother, Ariaantgen Hendrix; brother, Jacob Meese; sister, Maertgen.

⁴ Adam 1649, Eve 1651, Johannes 1653, Kathlyntje 1657, Bartholomeus 1659

⁵ Arent van Curler aka Corlaer (1619-1667), manager of the patroonship of Rensselaerswijck and founder of Schenectady.

⁶ A *morgen* equals about two acres.

⁷ A *schepel* equals 0.764 of a bushel of wheat.

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- ⁸ Jeremius van Rensselaer (1632-1674), director of Rensselaerswijck.
- ⁹ Jacob Jansz Gardenier aka *Flodder*, “slovenly,” operator of the gristmill on the Fifth Kil.
- ¹⁰ For a link to the “Articles of Transfer, go to <<https://shorturl.at/kqDIP>>.
- ¹¹ Johan de Decker (1626-unknown), former vice director of Fort Orange.
- ¹² Probably garbled rumors of uninformed soldiers based on boundary adjustments following the 1650 Hartford Treaty.
- ¹³ Maertgen Meese Vrooman
- ¹⁴ Adressed to Hendrick’s brother, Jacob Meese Vrooman, who had just returned to Leiden from New Netherland.
- ¹⁵ Jan Baptist van Rensselaer (1629-1678), the brother of Jeremius van Rensselaer.
- ¹⁶ Pieter Meesse Vrooman, in New Netherland since 1655.
- ¹⁷ In 1661, Arent van Curler and three Mohawk sachems signed a deed for land that was to become Schenectady.
- ¹⁸ One of several current spellings of Manhattan.
- ¹⁹ The Delaware River was called the South River by the Dutch. In 1664, this region of New Netherland was being managed by the city of Amsterdam in the Netherlands.
- ²⁰ See headnote for an explanation of this inversion.
- ²¹ The White Stag, a local inn, serving as a social center.