



ANOTHER FIRST FOR THE DUTCH

By Peter Douglas



Jan van Riebeeck

If you've read in previous editions of the *Mercurius* how Dutch explorers were the first Europeans to set eyes on those other "New Worlds" of Australia, Tasmania, and New Zealand, then it should come as no surprise that it was also a Dutchman who established the first permanent European settlement in another southern land—South Africa. The Dutchman was Jan van Riebeeck, and the settlement became Cape Town.

In March 1647, the *Nieuwe Haarlem*, a ship of the Dutch East India Company (VOC), ran aground near the Cape of Good Hope. The stranded crew built a small fort and it was almost a year before they were rescued. The Lords Seventeen (*De Heeren XVII*) of the VOC had two of the merchants write of their experiences, and out of this report came the recommendation that the VOC should open a trading area at that remote location. The VOC Lords were interested, for it was a time of tension between the Netherlands and England, and they saw the Cape as a strategic area to take over, both to forestall such a move by a rival European merchant company and to establish a crucial victualling station for the re-provisioning of ships on the long haul to the Indies.

Jan van Riebeeck (1619-77) joined the VOC in 1639 and held a number of posts, including assistant surgeon in Batavia. He also served in Japan and took charge of the VOC trading post in Tonkin (now Vietnam), a position that he was called back from

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because he was conducting trade for his personal benefit. Van Riebeeck was on one of the ships that rescued the stranded merchants of the *Nieuwe Haarlem*, and in 1651 he sailed again to the Cape. This time he was charged by the Lords with setting up the initial Dutch settlement in the future South Africa. It was made clear to Van Riebeeck that he was not establishing a colony, for the VOC had no desire for the conquest and administration of this new territory. He was just to raise the flag, improve the anchorage, and set up a fortified trading station for the convenience of ships passing that way. The need to re-supply was vital on such long voyages, and eventually the cape settlement would be familiarly known as *De Indische Zeeherberg* (*Tavern of the Indian Ocean*) or just the “Tavern of the Seas.”

Van Riebeeck landed at the future site of Cape Town on April 6, 1652. There were five ships in his fleet, though only three arrived on this date: the *Dromedaris*, *Reijer*, and *Goede Hoop*. The *Walvis* and the *Oliphant* arrived later, having had to deal with 130 burials at sea, a horrific statistic that dramatically shows the perils of such a voyage. First of all, van Riebeeck constructed a fort with a moat and earthen walls, and laid out a large garden for the production of fruit and vegetables, and began trading for livestock and meat with the indigenous Khoikhoi.

The first winter was hard; nineteen of his men died, and supplies dwindled as gardens washed away. It became apparent that the local natives were unable to provide sufficient supplies, and, far from being able to provision ships, van Riebeeck’s people found themselves short of food. He thus petitioned the VOC to release several company servants from their contracts to become farmers (free burghers), and twenty-acre plots were allocated along the Liesbeeck River in 1657. The enclosure of land led to conflict with the natives, who were pushed farther and farther back. Growth was slow, and it was difficult to find adequate labor, a deficiency that prompted the importation of slaves from Indonesia and Madagascar, a fateful move that led to the distinct multi-racial

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character of the present city, for many of these slaves were the ancestors of the “Cape Coloreds.”

Things improved, and by 1659 *De Kaap* was producing enough fresh foodstuffs to supply any ship during its stay. Van Riebeeck remained the leader until 1662, at which stage the settlement numbered 134 officials, 35 free burghers, 15 women, 22 children, and 180 slaves. The settlement that van Riebeeck founded grew to become Cape Town (Kaaopstad), now South Africa’s third most populous city (about 3 million) and provincial capital of the Western Cape.

So from van Riebeeck’s modest community there grew a great city, a country, and a language—Afrikaans, which has its roots in the 17th century Dutch language spoken by the settlers. The dialect also became known as “Cape Dutch,” the early form of Afrikaans spoken at the Cape, and a term also used to describe the inhabitants of South Africa’s Western Cape (as opposed to the nomadic pastoral Trekboers, who moved away from the Cape starting in the 1690s). It is also the name of a style of architecture typical of houses, farmsteads, wine estates, and public buildings of the 17th and 18th century on the Cape.

For those who enjoy “trivia,” Van Riebeeck reported the first comet discovered from South Africa, on December 17, 1652. However, it was more than likely not “discovered” by him, but his report is the only one to survive.

Van Riebeeck eventually returned to the East Indies and died in Batavia on January 18, 1677. He is immortalized in an imposing statue on Heerengracht Street in Cape Town; it stands on the spot where he was thought to have landed in 1652. It was sculpted by John Tweed and donated to the city by that famous British-born South African businessman, mining magnate, and politician, Cecil Rhodes (1853-1902).