



New Netherland Institute
Exploring America's Dutch Heritage

NEW AMSTERDAM IS OLD HAT

By Peter Douglas



Seal of the City of New Amsterdam

For readers of the *Mercurius* there's probably only one association evoked by the name "New Amsterdam," and that's "Nieuw Amsterdam," the Dutch settlement that became New York City. Although the name has not been in official use for more than three centuries, since the English took over the Dutch city, for some reason it seems to have created a strong emotional response, for there were and are quite a lot of other New Amsterdams in various guises all over the world. Here are a few.

New Amsterdam, settled in 1815, is a town in Harrison County, Indiana, on the Ohio River, and is part of the Louisville KY metropolitan area.

New Amsterdam (or Nieuw Amsterdam) is one of the largest towns in Guyana, population 30,000. It is situated 62 miles from the capital, Georgetown.

Nieuw Amsterdam is the capital of the Commonwijn District in Suriname (formerly Dutch Guiana), a coastal town near the mouth of the Suriname River just across from the country's capital, Paramaribo.

Nieuw-Amsterdam is a village in the province of Drenthe in the northeast of the Netherlands. In 1850 a group of Amsterdam investors bought a tract of peat land and

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named it after their own city, Amsterdamschveld, or “field of Amsterdam.” The settlement that was built near these lands in later years was called Nieuw-Amsterdam.

New Amsterdam was the original name of the city of Buffalo, New York, in the early 1800s. It owes its origin to Joseph Ellicott (1760-1826), a Quaker surveyor, city planner, and land office agent. Ellicott was a meticulous and industrious man, plain in habit, frugal in expenditures, and orderly in his business practices, credentials that suited the needs of the Holland Land Company, a consortium of six Dutch banking houses that purchased, between 1794 and 1794 over five million acres of land west of the Genesee River, including the present site of Buffalo. The settlement that Ellicott laid out there was at first called New Amsterdam, which Ellicott persisted in calling the place, but the inhabitants preferred the name Buffalo Creek, which was later shortened to Buffalo.

New Amsterdam, or Île Amsterdam (Amsterdameiland) is a French island in the Indian Ocean. It was discovered in 1522 by Sebastian del Cano on one of Magellan’s ships, but its name derives from the visit by Anthony Van Diemen, who was to become Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies. En route to Java in 1633, he named the northernmost of the two islands after his ship, the *Nieuw Amsterdam*.

In addition to being one of Van Diemen’s ships, *Nieuw Amsterdam* is perhaps best known in nautical circles as the name of the 20th century 758-foot Dutch passenger liner, built in Rotterdam for the Holland America Line. It was christened by Queen Wilhelmina in 1937 and completed in 1938. This *Nieuw Amsterdam*, the second of three Holland America ships with that name, is considered by many to be the Line’s finest ship. It was her interiors and the magnificent service and cuisine that made this ship what it was: the greatest in the Dutch merchant fleet. The ship’s décor was completely done in the modern Art Deco-style, with very clean and bright surfaces. One of the ship’s centerpieces was the main restaurant, which was adorned by numerous Murano glass light fixtures and columns covered in gold leaf. Tinted mirrors, ivory walls, and

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satinwood furniture all contributed to create the luxurious atmosphere. She was broken up in Taiwan in 1974.

New Amsterdam was the name of a short-lived 2008 television series in which the main character is John Amsterdam, a New York homicide detective, who is immortal. He was a Dutch soldier in 1642 when he stepped in front of a sword to save the life of a Native American girl during a massacre. The girl in turn rescued Amsterdam by weaving an ancient spell that conferred immortality upon him. This resulted in Amsterdam spending three and a half centuries marked by loss as his friends grow old and die while he remains alive.

The New Amsterdam Theatre, built in 1903, is located at 214 West 42nd Street in New York City. In 1913 Florenz Ziegfeld brought his “Follies” to the New Amsterdam.

New Amsterdam is the name of a branch of the New York Public Library, on Murray Street, appropriately located downtown, near City Hall Park.

Then there’s New Amsterdam Records, the New Amsterdam Symphony Orchestra, the New Amsterdam Brewing Company, the New Amsterdam Singers, and the New Amsterdam Bar and Grill (which is actually in Knoxville TN, not NYC) and the Café Nieuw Amsterdam in Bordeaux. The name also appears in that of a hotel, a band, a tour company, a magazine, a dance troupe, a fencing academy, and on and on. And it’s the title of a song by Elvis Costello. Little did those 17th century Dutch know what they'd started.