

Fort Nassau ,1614, courtesy of Len Tantillo



Fort Nassau's Legacy

By Hubert de Leeuw and Tim Paulson, May 17th 2014

One of the chief obstacles to building Fort Nassau in the winter of 1614 was the ground itself. A mini-Ice Age had plunged the northern hemisphere into a deep freeze—the English staged an ice fair on the Thames, even the Bosphorus froze. The ground on Castle Island in January would have been hard as iron.

To sink posts for the fort, Hendrick Christiaensen and his men most likely set fires to soften the turf—a perfect square 58 eight feet on a side, blazing in the wilderness. There couldn't have been a more appropriate symbol for the agreement that made construction possible: the square deal.

Dutch traders had been coming to the region for years, but squabbling and competition was knocking down fur prices and making business almost impossible. Working for the Tweekhuysen Company, Adriaen Block and Hendrick Christiaensen saw a better way forward—to get a charter from the government of the United Provinces and unite these disparate interests in a single company.

They already had a charter from the United Provinces' stadtholder, Prince Maurits of Nassau. But to create a truly united company and win a license from the States General they would have to take things to another level.

Courtesy of the National Dutch Archives



They had to build a fort. A fort would allow for fewer voyages back and forth and a place to store furs. It would become a trading post, a single destination for natives to bring their pelts and a safe haven for Dutch traders who wintered over. Whether they knew it or not, in the process they would also be creating New Netherland.

And yet the Dutch only had a dozen men, and the natives numbered in the thousands. Furthermore the Mohawk to the north and the Mohicans living around the fort were every bit as contentious as the Dutch companies.

Before they could build a fort on native land the Dutch had to be assured they would wake up alive the next day. The natives needed the same assurance. A deal had to be struck, and it was.

Sometime in December of 1613, near a place called Norman's Kill, leaders of the Mohicans and Mohawk met with Dutch traders Hendrick Christiaensen and Jacques Eelkens negotiated an agreement that enshrined the idea of keeping their cultures separate and, at the same time, trading as equal partners—with neither side holding a decisive advantage.

This agreement is commemorated in the Kaswentha principle, represented by a wampum belt with two rows of purple beads against a white background—two rivers down one of which the natives would paddle in their canoes, and down the others the Europeans could sail in their ships. Neither would interfere with each other's beliefs, laws, or customs.