



Adriaen Block, the discovery of Long Island Sound and the New Netherlands colony: *what drove the course of history?*

by Johan Cornelis Varekamp and Daphne Sasha Varekamp

What drove the course of history 400 years ago? Men and women defending their lives and families against invaders, religious quests, but foremost behind the great voyages of discovery was economic incentive. The exploration and eventual colonization of the eastern Americas took place in the 16th and 17th centuries. After Columbus's trip to the Caribbean and the early Spanish settlement in Florida, several explorers came close to Connecticut including Cabot (UK) in 1497, Verrazano (an Italian working for the French) in 1524, and Gomez (Portuguese working for the French) in 1525. Hudson made several expeditions for the British while trying to discover a northern passage to the Far East. Dutch merchants contracted Hudson's third journey in 1609, and during this voyage he sailed along the east coast, naming modern Cape Cod 'New Holland' as a courtesy to his Dutch masters. He sailed up what is now known as the Hudson River, although he named it the Mauritius River after Maurits van Nassau, the Prince of Orange who ruled Holland at the time. Hudson returned via England to Europe, where he was reprimanded for working for the Dutch. His stories about the beautiful new land, friendly natives, and abundance of beaver pelts reached the Dutch merchants later. Other Dutch and English explorers had already roamed the east coast, because the Hudson River was already known on very early maps as the Northern River, in contrast to the Southern River (Delaware River). Nonetheless, it was Hudson's discoveries that set the stage for the early Dutch settlements in New York and Connecticut.

Adriaen Block, a merchant who had made many previous sea voyages, sailed from Amsterdam to the Americas four times. The general assumption is that Block had already discovered Long Island Sound on one of his earliest trips, but he must have passed Rhode Island to get there. How he named Rhode Island is a matter of controversy, as he might have named Rhode Island 'het Roode Eylant' (Red Island), with the name later being bastardized to 'Rhode Island'. Others, however, think that the Italian explorer Verrazano named



The 1614 'figurative map' of Adriaen Block.

Rhode Island after Rhodos, a Greek island in the Mediterranean. Block's most publicized journey was one in 1613, when he and his colleague Hendrick Cristiaenz sailed with two small boats from Holland to the New York Bight. Tensions developed between the two men about the potential profits of the beaver pelt trade, and more complications arose when a third Dutch ship, under command of a man named Mossel, appeared. Block's ship, the *Tijger*, burned down after an accident, followed by a mutiny by his crew. Part of the crew entered Mossel's vessel, while the remaining men and Block stayed through the winter near Manhattan Island. They built some primitive huts on the island, which were the first western settlements of what later became New York City. They managed to build a new ship, named the *Onrust* ('Restless'; the translation 'Troubles' is rather unlikely) with help from the Native Americans. This new boat, at about 42 feet in length, was much smaller than the *Tijger*, but

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nonetheless Block set out from his winter lodgings to explore eastwards in the spring of 1614. He crossed the narrows in the East River, which he named the 'Hellegat', later recast as Hell's Gate (Hellegat literally means "hole from hell", so Hell's Gate is not that bad a translation). However, it is sometimes (wrongly) translated as "bright passage", as Helle also means 'intense light' in Dutch. The Hell's Gate narrows became a ship graveyard over time, so in 1876 engineers blasted away the most dangerous rocks, reputedly making the largest man-made explosion prior to the Hiroshima bombing.

Block entered Western Long Island Sound from the East River, and ultimately sailed up the Connecticut River for quite a distance. He remarked that sailing up the river was difficult because of strong undercurrents (spring freshet?), but made it up to the rapids of Enfield, where he was forced to stop because the river became too shallow for the '*Onrust*'. He named the river the Versche (freshwater) Rivier, but it was the Indian name that ultimately stuck (Connecticut River or 'long tidal river' in the Pequot language). Block also noted that there were many Native American people living up north growing maize. The Dutch subsequently established a short-lived trading post at the mouth of the Connecticut River (Kievits Hoek, or "plover's corner"), but a fortified post was established near Hartford ('Huys van Hoop' or Hope House), now known in Hartford as 'Dutch Point'. The newest city development along the Connecticut River is named 'Adriaens Landing', although he probably never landed there.

Adriaen Block became well known because of his adventures with the *Onrust*, and because of his sailing and navigational skills. We know little about him as a man: a small mural of him by the artist Reginald Marsh



The 'Blaeu map' of 1635. North is pointing to the right on this map!

can be found in the U.S. Customs House in New York City, created in the mid 1800's. Since no original image of Block could be located, Marsh ultimately copied a portrait of Maximilian II from a Rubens painting. Burned timbers of the *Tijger* were found in southern Manhattan during digs for the subway in 1916, and the anchor of Block's boat was found during the construction of the World Trade Center. The 9/11 terrorist attacks burned the buried remnants of the *Tijger* possibly for the second time, as if the attack was motivated to stamp out the very roots of the city.

Block made an early map of the Long Island Sound region (the 'figurative map' published in 1614) showing Long Island Sound as an estuary and Long Island as a true island and showing for the first time the words 'New Netherlands' on it. Earlier maps had connected the tip of Long Island with Rhode Island and did not show the Sound. A famous map, drawn after data collected by Adriaen Block is the Blaeu map titled 'Nova Belgica and Anglia Nova', the former because many Walloons from South Belgium were among the early settlers in the New York region.

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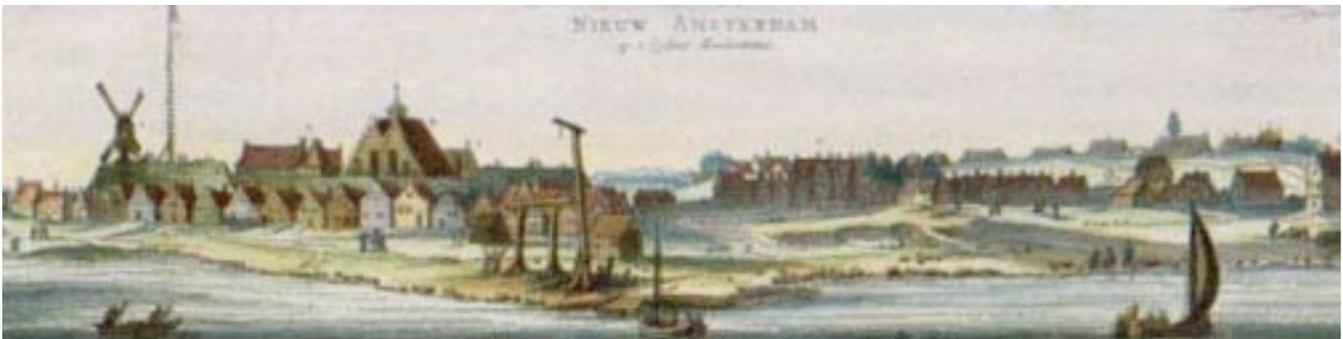
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The New Netherlands colony

The Dutch subsequently settled on Manhattan Island and western Long Island, and colonies were also established further north along the Hudson River. The main focus of the Dutch presence in this part of the world was trading, especially for beaver pelts. The larger colonial settlements were initially there in support of the trading, although later some larger farms were started along the Hudson (e.g. Rensselaerwijck). Land was bought from local native chiefs and relations between natives and Dutch may have been initially good, but deteriorated over time. The Dutch recognized the importance of Wampun (shell-based money of the native Americans) early on and traded with it between local tribes.

The British settled in Plymouth in 1620 and their arrival on these coasts was driven by a longing for religious freedom and a quest for a land of their own.

in the Spice Islands in eastern Indonesia (Banda Islands), where the local population was annihilated and replaced by natives from other islands that were more friendly towards the Dutch colonizers. The spice trade was of major importance to the Dutch trading empire of the East India Company (VOC) and ultimately the Dutch held on to six of the seven Banda Islands. The British were dug in on the seventh island, Run, near Banda Island and kept attacking the spice-laden ships that left from the beautiful natural harbour of the Banda Islands. Fighting wars on various fronts ultimately became too much for the small Dutch nation and with the final version of the Treaty of Breda in 1667, the Dutch traded the New Amsterdam colony and surrounding lands for the full ownership of the Banda Islands as well as ownership of Surinam in South America. The Indonesian islands were at the time of greater commercial importance than New Amsterdam



Early New Amsterdam on Manhattan

Initially, the Dutch and British were on amicable terms, but the British drive for new land and influence quickly became an issue. The 1650 treaty of Hartford put all the land 50 Dutch miles west of the Connecticut River in Dutch hands, which included New Amsterdam, and everything to the east was New England and belonged to the British. Long Island was Dutch in the west (now Nassau County, with its many villages with Dutch names) and British in the east (Suffolk County). The war of Kieft, an early governor of the New Amsterdam colony, led to a massacre of the Long Island native Americans, while competition between British and Dutch reflected the ongoing Dutch-British wars in Europe.

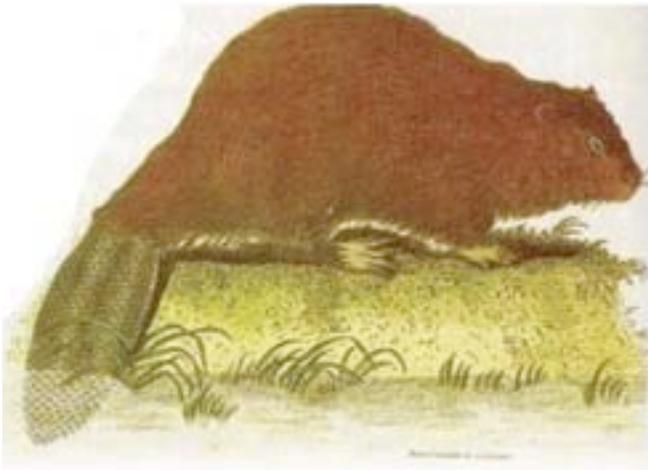
This area was not the only location where the Dutch and British clashed. A long-term war was waged

and the release of the latter to the British was the beginning of the retreat of the Dutch from their American adventures. In 1673, the Dutch tried to re-occupy the New York colony one more time, but it did not last more than a few months.

In 1984, one of us (JCV) worked on the volcanology of the Banda volcanic arc. Banda Island, white coral-sand beach with the black smoking Gunung Api volcano in the back, the green jungle with little huts where the modern Indonesian natives live, with some overgrown Dutch forts: this was traded for what is now New York City! Today he navigates the rocks in the Narrows of Long Island Sound during research cruises, contemplating what drove the course of history in these two different places that are irrevocably linked through

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The *Castor Canadensis* or North American beaver.

their past. Part of the Dutch heritage we may find in the nickname of Connecticut as the Nutmeg State. The nutmeg was the prime fruit of the Banda Islands, where the hard pit was ground to obtain nutmeg powder, whereas the fruit was eaten in dried form. Is the nutmeg symbol a reflection of early Dutch influences?

Global climate change as a driver for Dutch colonization?

Looking at the exploration of the Americas within the context of global climate change provides some new insights. The Vikings, who visited New Foundland and possibly New England, could travel along northern routes (Iceland, Greenland, New Foundland) because they were there during the Medieval Warm Period, when there was much less ice around the northern islands and overall elevated temperatures. A substantial town existed on Greenland, which was abandoned in the late 1300's when the climate deteriorated once again. Why could Hudson never find a northern passage? Because the early 1600's were the coldest part of the Little Ice Age, a period from 1300 to 1800 known in Europe for its severe winters, and all northern waters were covered by ice. The motivation for Dutch settlement in the Americas was trading, but was it worth sailing many thousands of miles back and forth in small ships just to trade some beaver pelts? Why was there such an enthusiasm for the importation of beaver pelts in Europe, where this animal had been driven into extinction in the 16th century. Fur-lined coats (especially beaver pelt) were well-suited to keep the middle and

upper classes warm in winter and the beaver fur was much more than a fashion statement – they were a bare necessity in the severely cold climate of the times.

The magnitude of the beaver pelt trade started at more than 10,000 pelts per year in southern New England and may have reached 80,000 pelts/year in the mid 1600's. This created a beaver pelt glut in Holland and England and the price of beaver furs dropped during the second half of the 17th century. When the Dutch gave up the New Netherlands colony, most likely their original reason for being there (beavers!) had become less profitable and everyone could see that the supply of beavers was not open-ended. Indeed, in the early 1700's the price for beaver pelt had dropped strongly and the beavers were becoming rare as well.

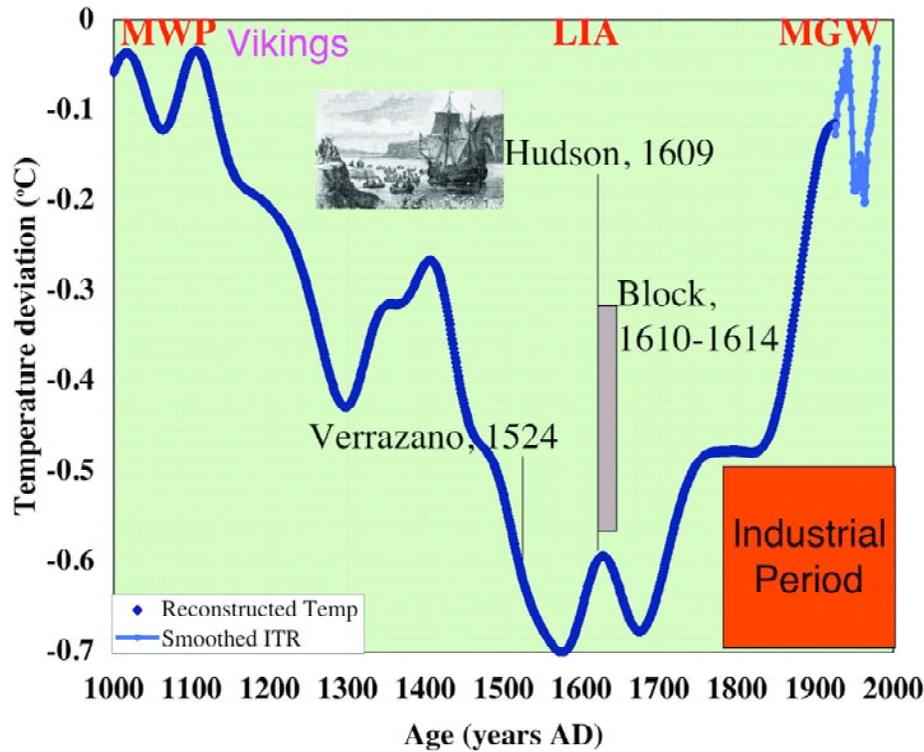
Although this was a period of retreat for the Dutch trading empire, e.g., they gave up their Brazilian holdings to the Portuguese (half of Brazil was initially governed by the Dutch), the reason that they swapped Manhattan for the British holdings in the Indonesian spice islands may also reflect that their commercial interests in the Americas were waning and that the writing was on the wall for the beaver pelt trade. The demand for beaver pelts decreased strongly in the early to mid 1700's, and the British governor of New York remarked at the time that 'it barely paid anymore to ship them to Europe'. This was possibly a shift in fashion in Europe, but it was also a time that the climate became warmer and thus the need for fur diminished.

The beaver pelt trade also fueled a thriving hat-making industry in Europe by making felt from their fur. Again, one can argue here that in this cold period in Europe comfort came before fashion. The technique of felt-making involved impregnating fur with mercury nitrate, which then led to mercury poisoning of many hatters. This has led in turn most likely to the term 'mad as a hatter' referring to the nervous disorders associated with mercury poisoning.

After the beavers returned in modest numbers to Connecticut and the Hudson River Valley in the late 1700's, Danbury became the New Worlds center of the hatmaking industry, although rabbit fur took over as the main ingredient for felt. Today we still find traces of mercury from the Connecticut 18th and 19th century hatmaking activity in the sediments of Long Island Sound, which closes the circle back to Adriaen Block, the fur trader from Holland who started it all.

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Time line of the exploration of the US east coast with reconstructed temperature record. The blue line shows the temperature as a deviation from the mean temperature during the period 1961-1980. The abbreviations MWP (Medieval Warm Period), LIA (Little Ice Age) and MGW (Modern Global Warming) refer to the climate episodes of the time that are well recognized in Europe from historical and physical data (ITR=instrumental temperature record).

The Dutch fur trading also had dramatic environmental impacts. Large beaver populations modify a watershed significantly through dam-building, with retention of water, sediment and organic debris. Once the beavers were locally almost driven into extinction in the mid to late 1600's, we would expect that the beaver dams slowly decayed and collapsed. The paleo-environmental record of the Connecticut River and the sediments in Long Island Sound carry evidence for such changes in the mudlayers that were deposited over time. A sediment core taken in Long Island Sound close to Old Saybrook (the old 'Kievits Hoek' of the Dutch settlers) shows an early record with

steady sedimentation followed by a layer of plant debris and a gap in time, suggesting vigorous water currents that possibly caused modifications in the mouth of the Connecticut River. The top sediments were deposited from the 1800's up to modern times. We can interpret this layer of organic debris as a deposit from the 17th century as the result of the collapse of the beaver population and their landscape modifying activities. The enhanced river water flow could be the combined result of the dwindling number of beaver dams and the beginning of the human landscape modifications such as cutting of old growth forest and creating agricultural land.

All these connections show us the interrelations between the resources of the land, the course of history, the impact of humans on the water and land, sometimes through intricate webs, which in this case all revolved around the innocent beaver, which never knew the role it played in history.

The course of history was driven by the actions of the men and women of the time, but strongly influenced by the physical environment, such as climate. In our own time of modern global climate change, our actions today will again define tomorrow's history.

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