

On the Lost Records of the West India Company

Richard Brewer, August 12, 2012

Dear Brewer Group (and other interested parties),:

As I indicated in the narrative story of Johannes Brouwer in New Amsterdam that I sent you as a PDF downloadable from the link https://docs.google.com/open?id=0B2w2GtHPfJb_WkNERExUaIFFY2s I took the liberty of making some assumptions that were of the nature of plausibility arguments based on circumstantial inference rather than a solid hypothesis backed by substantial evidence. I assumed, for instance, that Jan does not appear on the ship passenger lists because he had his and his family's passage paid for by the West India Company in Amsterdam (WIC) based on his ability to profitably pursue his Blacksmith trade and thus become an asset to the community. I further assumed that he may have chosen to become an indentured laborer to the WIC in return for his and his family's ship passage. Recall that 'indentured laborer' is a status that applied to white Europeans who were under a voluntary labor contract to an employer in exchange for transportation to the New World, food, clothing, and lodging. The length of the indenture varied, in general from three to seven years.

While personally I am reasonably comfortable with these assumptions (as long as it is realized that they are just that), it had all along been my hope that the records of the WIC for the period of interest, 1656 to 1664, might some day be located back in Holland and we would be able to validate or disprove them as well as obtain specific information on the nature of any such contract. The archives of the Netherlands is said to constitute one of the richest depositories of historical information to be found in Europe. In my ignorance I had even planned to make a trip to Amsterdam myself and attempt to locate on site such West India Company records in the archives.

My plan was totally naive and, as it turns out, would be fruitless. Notwithstanding the obvious pitfalls of searching documents recorded in old 17th century Dutch, I didn't know that the search, in far greater detail than I could hope to accomplish, had already been performed by John Romeyn Brodhead in 1839 under the auspices of the Governor of New York and he had the support of the Netherlands Minister of Foreign affairs, the backing of the King and the head of the Ministry of the Interior.

As Brodhead points out in his Final Report to the Governor, (visit <http://archive.org/stream/finalreportofjoh00brod#page/n5/mode/2up> in particular pages 6 through 10)

"... the records of the Dutch West India Company, which had supervision and direction of the colony of New Netherland, would provide particular details of voyages, discoveries, emigrations, settlements and personal narratives, **which would be of highest interest to the descendants of the early settlers ...**" Just

so! That's us he is talking about more than a hundred years ago, and while he was able to procure an extraordinary amount of material on our Colonial History during his thorough, on-site investigations in Amsterdam, which today has been made available on-line, the pertinent West India Company records I wanted to research, and which he specifically sought, were **found to have been sold at public auction in 1821!** He was able to track down **a portion of the records** sold at Amsterdam to the original buyer, residing in the Hague, and he contacted him but the records he held contained nothing relating to our New Netherland history. As Brodhead put it, "The papers of the West India Company relating to New Netherland prior to 1700, -- which until the year 1821, were easily attainable by the State, ---- are now irrecoverably lost!"

Well, Bummer! But I thought the information valuable and that you might enjoy reading of the search he made. I think it is an interesting story in itself. Along those lines, i.e. lost history and lost documents, I recently began reading "The Swerve: How the World Became Modern" by Stephen Greenblatt (available as an e-book at Amazon) in which he describes how the last surviving manuscript copy of an ancient Roman philosophic epic "On The Nature of Things" by Lucretius, written circa 55 BC and lost for a thousand years was discovered in 1417 and became a seminal document of the emerging Renaissance. If a document can be lost for a thousand years and finally be recovered, in this case hidden away neglected and unappreciated in a monastery, then perhaps, just perhaps, the papers of the WIC are not *irrecoverably* lost, but may someday (hopefully not 1000 years later) pop up, maybe advertised for sale on the internet stimulated by the expanding worldwide interest in genealogy. After all Brodhead said the purchaser had only **a portion of the records** sold at auction. Being an incurably optimistic romantic, I hold out the hope that they may one day show up and so I will continue to search for them -- but do not recommend we hold our breathe.

I just wanted to update you on just how **slim the chance** of refining our knowledge of Johannes in New Amsterdam is. Nonetheless, I hope you have found my use of those assumptions in filling out his early life both tolerable, possible, and useful in seeking to know and understand our ancestor and his times.

Again, with Warmest Regards,

Richard

Your Brewer Surname Project Administrator and "Cousin"