

The Mystery of the Plockhoy Settlement in the Valley of Swans

By Bart Plantenga

"If we be insufferable to the World and they be incorrigible, or unbetterable, as to us, then let us reduce our friendship and society to a few in number ... that we might truly be distinguished from the Barbarous and Savage people..."

- Pieter Plockhoy

"While Plockhoy's plans failed, and in some details were utopian, he must, nevertheless, be considered as one of the heralds of that religious freedom which modern nations accept and cherish" - Irvim B. Horst, "Pieter Corneliszoon Plockhoy: An Apostle of the Collegiants"

It's August 1664, thirteen chaotic months after Pieter Corneliszoon Plockhoy and forty-one Dutch settlers established Zwaanendael [Valley of Swans] along the banks of Delaware Bay, near present-day Lewes, Delaware.

Although home to many swans, it is far too flat to host anything called a valley. Their efforts at creating an ideal community "distinguished from the barbarous and savage people" of typical societies had suffered its setbacks.

England was preparing to wrest control of New Netherland. The end is in sight. But what sort of end? If England's King Charles II,

no admirer of the Dutch, had his way, it would involve strife with some revenge thrown in. He vowed to crush the Dutch to "an entire obedience" if necessary. But James, Duke of York, pre-



The Zwaanendael Museum, Lewes, Delaware, reflects the Dutch influence of its earliest European settlers. Here Plockhoy pursued his dream for a utopian Christian community. (Copyright 2001, Levesse Library, <http://wilmington.deltat.com>)

ferred a more diplomatically pragmatic resolution - if Dutch settlers declare allegiance to England they would be allowed to remain - as English subjects.

Charles gave his brother, James, the northern territories - today's

Northeastern states down to Delaware. Lands previously granted to the Plymouth Company, including Dutch settlements along the Delaware River—long an annoying wedge dividing English colonies—were offered to Charles Calvert, Lord Baltimore's son. This unconcealed land grab of this, in James' words, "sanctuary of discontent and mutiny," would give England dominion over "its" colonies once again - meanwhile ushering in the Second Anglo-Dutch War.

In late August 1664, four English men-of-war, under the command of Colonel Richard Nicholls had triumphantly, if anti-climactically, accepted the Dutch surrender of New Amsterdam. Nicholls then dispatched two ships and some soldiers under the command of Colonel Richard Carr to secure the surrender of Fort Casimir, just down river from present-day Wilmington, and the surrounding New Amstel region.

The outgunned Dutch, realizing that any show of resistance would be suicidal,

refused to abandon their homesteads to join any fight. Instead, they hoped for a peaceful surrender. The Articles of Surrender were rumored to include religious freedom, retention of land and language. But not everyone hoped for that. Alexander D'Hinoyssa,

the flamboyantly corruptible director of the New Amstel region of New Amsterdam and the eventful Peter Stuyvesant in New Amsterdam, tried to stoke up passions for a last stand, but to no avail. D'Hanoyssa and some ragtag followers retreated to Fort Casimir, just down river from present-day Wilmington, to mount a mostly ceremonial sputter of resistance – more vainglorious biography than patriotic effort.

Carr however, was in no mood to negotiate with a gaggle of reprobate resisters and demanded submission or be forced to an "entire obedience." There was a half-hearted show of resistance and so Carr fired two broadsides into the fort, then took it by storm, killing three resisters and wounding ten. The British ransacked Casimir and took prisoners.

Carr, already infuriated by the resisters' impudence, was in no mood to accept any dignified surrender of the surrounding settlements. In a fit of arrogant pique, he pillaged the settlements even though settlers offered no resistance. He seized property, harvest, some 200 sheep, horses, and cows, destroyed a brewery, a sawmill and, it is said, sold the surviving soldiers and Dutch-owned slaves into slavery in Virginia. Most of the rest took oaths of allegiance to the English throne – it was either that or face the consequences. And *Nieuw Amstel* became *New Castle*.

Carr then sailed eighty miles southward to the sad excuse for a fort, Fort Sekonnessinck. This was taken with no resistance.

Further inland he found Zwaanendaal, near Hoornkik (also spelled Hoornik, Hoersik and Whorekill). On a humid September 4, the Zwaanendaal sentry may have caught a glimmer off the sword of one of Carr's soldiers. No one suspected the worst.

Carr's regiment of wide-eyed, half-drunk, illiterate country boys in threadbare breeches, shabby boots, and makeshift redcoats stood still as a row of bowling pins a few hundred meters away across a field of golden corn, matchlock muskets drawn. Dread hung in the cumbrous air. What now?

Carr, with sword raised, marched his troops into Zwaanendaal in close formation, planes jiggling on their caps to the drummers' fearsome beats. Perhaps further awkwardness ensued as the settlers refused to resist. Carr ordered the settlement's total destruction. Troops plundered provisions and livestock, demolished the colony, leaving only traces of smoldering rubble – ashes to ashes, dust to dust – departing with spoils in tow. Some historians maintain that several settlers were slain, others driven into the wilderness and, as Stuyvesant notes in his diaries they had "demanded good treatment, which however they did not obtain, they wer[e] invaded, stripped bare, plundered, and many of them sold into slavery in Virginia." Rumors arose that some stragglers even found their way back to Holland. Others remained to farm the region as English subjects.

Some believe Carr took it out doubly on Plockhoy's people because they were viewed as enemies of the crown, associated with the hated Levelers and various utopians Plockhoy had befriended during his London days. In Carr's eyes, a bunch of weirdos and seditious heretics, and his mission to root them out was merely extending policies already enacted in England. To this end he followed orders beyond any call of duty.

New Amstel's Sheriff Van Sweringen noted at the time that Carr almost succeeded in "destroying the quaking society of Plockhoy to a nail," and, in essence, erasing it from posterity's pages. Alas, no journalists or photographers were present to document the tragedy. And so little remains of this proud and stripped of colony, country, and purpose. Yet, Plockhoy survived, miraculously reappearing, blind and destitute, with his wife in the Mennonite town of Germantown, Pennsylvania, thirty years later.

Zierikzee

Who was Plockhoy and how did he end up in the *New World* leading a community dedicated to alleviating suffering and social inequality?

Plockhoy was born in Zierikzee around 1625 although no records exist to pinpoint exactly where and when. Zierikzee is a port town of 10,000 inhabitants located in the heart of the Dutch seafaring province of Zeeland. It had been inhabited since 2000 BC but officially founded in 849 and had

become one of Zeeland's "round" cities, today still ringed by remains of fourteenth-century fortified walls that were girdled by water kept in by an outer dike.

Spain had already occupied Holland for sixty years during the Eighty-Year War [1568-1648] when Plockhoy was born. The occupation had ashered in the iconoclastic humanism of Erasmus and Protestantism, which questioned papal authority and other hallowed institutions. Science, logic, and pragmatism threatened traditional orthodoxies. Rampages of iconoclasm – the smashing of Catholic images – by roving bands led by Protestant nobles and Calvinist exiles occurred in Zeeland and throughout Holland. Plockhoy's youth coincided with Zierikzee's heyday, Holland's Golden Age and the ascension of artists like Vermeer and Rembrandt. Holland was a world power and a unique society characterized by a deep estrangement from traditions, making it, arguably, the first modern society.

Zierikzee's ships, loaded with salt, herring, cloth, brandy, lumber, and farm products sailed throughout the Mediterranean and Europe, up to Denmark and the Baltic, connecting Holland with new worlds and old – its fishing fleet ventured as far as Iceland in fish for cod. But they were vulnerable to attack by – take your pick – Spanish, French, or English warships (or Dunkirkers and other privateers hiring on with anyone who would have them) intent on challenging Dutch shipping prowess. Herring boats were escorted by wardships,

but to no avail. William of Orange's provisional government even sanctioned here-pirate, Piet Heys, to commit high seas misdeeds. In true swashbuckling style, he captured Spain's Silver Armada in 1629.

Zierikzee was the West India Company's second principal port after Amsterdam and eventually its ships (including slave ships) sailed to the New World and returned loaded down with pelts or tobacco. Textile salesmen, fishermen, and butter merchants combed Zierikzee's bustling market for bargains while rambunctious sailors on leave killed time with drink and other more sinful diversions. Both Erasmus and Albrecht Dürer noted how annoyingly clagoruous Zierikzee was.

Young Plockhoy's best friend, the physician Galems de Haan, a few years Plockhoy's senior, was to have an enormous influence on Plockhoy's life and writings. The two boys were part of the sizeable Mennonite community that had emigrated from Switzerland around 1570. But now the Mennonites in Holland were undergoing severe sectarian fractures at this time.

De Haan's father was the leader of the Mennonite congregation. Colleagues challenged the Mennonites to stop their internal bickering. Colleagues were basically progressive Mennonites who advocated replacing ministers, creeds, in effect, all organized churches with *collegia prophetica*, meetings in the round where people of various faiths could gather

to read Scripture, sing psalms, and discuss the Bible and contemporary issues. Both de Haan and Plockhoy became ardent Collegiants. They were convinced that these *collegia* were the "only way to abolish all lordly over consciences." The Collegiants broke away – ironically – from the schismatics (a schism of a schism).

In 1646 de Haan moved to Amsterdam to promote his Collegiant ideas. Plockhoy followed two years later at the end of the Eighty-Year War.

Amsterdam

In Amsterdam, the inorthodox de Haan established his medical practice and was elected preacher of *Het Lam* [The Lamb, now the *Singelkerk*] where he promoted Collegiant ideas and struggled for religious freedom in the shadow of Calvinism, Holland's state religion, which attempted to enforce spiritual conformity.

Holland was a trade giant, wages were high, and its ships sailed the world over. Holland's farmers were further aided by England's internal strife that allowed it to underseif English merchants and dominate trade in England's own colonies. Amsterdam's city hall, constructed in Dam Square in 1650, was called the "eighth wonder of the world" and signaled Holland's arrival as a world power and Amsterdam as the financial/trade center of the world – truly the "Empress of Europe."

But Dutch prosperity was most arresting in the arts – specifically

in painting and philosophy. Grotius (Hugo de Groot) was drafting the basic tenets of what still serves as today's international maritime law while the paintings of Steen, Vermeer, Hals, and Rembrandt, signaled the humanistic drift from religious themes, and toward everyday life itself. This was also reflected in a prevailing atmosphere of tolerance and a skepticism of established beliefs. Amsterdam became a center of scientific thought while people of many faiths and philosophies found refuge here: scientists and philosophers considered heretical elsewhere – Mennonites, Jews, Puritans, even Catholics – found clandestine anticas to practice their faith in.

Plockhoy arrived in 1648 and wasted no time installing himself among Amsterdam's intellectual circles, becoming involved in an ad hoc clique of writers, "lovers of the noble art of poetry," and artists known as the Parrassios of

V. [today spelled "I," the name of the river behind Amstelendam].

The Parrassians [or Reformateurs] were not some gaggle of sour academics or blithe band of bohemians but a serious "art school for the promotion of virtue." They gathered frequently in an informal manner around a table in the Sweet Rest, an inn owned by the group's "head poet," the irreverent Jan Zoet, to engage in heated discussions "of political and philosophical import." Other members included renowned artist-Mennonite, Govert Flinck and poets Karel Verkeuse and Jacob Steendam.

They hoped to improve the moral tenor of Amsterdam through the "abolition of various customs," and advance the cause of the poor, which they did by establishing the Oranje-Appel orphanage together with the Mennonites.

Zoet usually commenced the

evening by asking a "meaningful and soul-searching question" like "When a man by marriage is bound to a woman, may he sleep with his maid-servant without transgression?" To this Plockhoy replied "yes," claiming the Bible did indeed condone polygamy. Some of the Parrassian members, including Zoet, agreed. The versified repartees grew robust, perhaps fueled by small measures of gin. Plockhoy's post-friends, Steendam and Verkeuse, offended by Plockhoy's arguments, issued bitter rebuttals. Steendam characterized Plockhoy and his supporters as "patriarchs of polygamy." In 1662 however, the two offered poems to support Plockhoy's elaborate settlement prospectus.

Conservative critics quickly tried to convert Plockhoy's intellectual exercise into a scandalous advocacy of polygamy issue. "It was said that Plockhoy ... assents upon scriptural authority that a man may have as many wives as he can support," one such opportunistic critic blustered.

Plockhoy probably spent much time writing during these years – in Dutch and English – developing into an earnest and tireless enthusiast for social progress. Meanwhile, Parrassian discussions may have turned to the ferment in Oliver Cromwell's England, which seemingly offered many hopes for dreamers like Plockhoy who wrote, "I resolved for awhile ... to leave my family and native country.¹⁷ Maybe he just needed to escape the polygamy controversies. Regardless, by June 1658, he was in London looking for sponsorship

for his ideas for an equitable society.

London & Cromwell

"Looking round about me, where to make a beginning to rectify those evils, I found no better object in Christendom than ... the Lord Protector..."
- Pieter Plockhoy.

The mystery of why Plockhoy thought Oliver Cromwell, anti-rationalist Lord Protector of the Commonwealth with its Puritanical and "reasonable" order, would be sympathetic to him remains largely unresolved. Perhaps it was Cromwell's anti-papist sentiments or the public image of Cromwell's enlightened progressiveness – in 1649 he was the hope of all of Europe's Protestants.

England's dynamic social climate of poverty and hope and dizzying swirl of prophetic schemes and intriguing ideas captivated Plockhoy. Despite Cromwell's Blasphemy Act [1650], pamphleteering radicals and street agitators continued to rail and present petitions to Parliament, who were busy executing Levellers and banning maypoles, theatrical performances, Sunday sports, and Christmas. Meanwhile Ranters ranted against the entire idea of sin; Diggers advocated separation of church and state and equality of the sexes; and female Levellers positioned Parliament for better education and equality for the poor. And then there were the Quakers, Fifth Monarists, and Independents ... basically all of these believed government needed a moral soul. In this context it is

easy to see how, although an uncommon man, Plockhoy was also a man of his time and place.

Plockhoy, however, thought it best to found an idealistic community somewhere removed from the sins of the rest of the world. [It seems he failed to see the inconsistency with his universalist ideas.] Other firebrands held sway over



Foreword by Jan Zoet, 1658. Translation of pieter Zoet, Plockhoy's post-friend, turned political ally, to engage in heated discussions "of political and philosophical import." (From the Mennonite)

Plockhoy's development. Samuel Hartlib, a Polish progressive, was convinced the entire state needed transforming. Gerard Winstanley, of the Diggers, presented Cromwell with plans for communal utopias. Leveller titles Calvert, advocated for the poor and probably published Plockhoy's *A Way Propounded* as well as activist and Christian communitarian, William Wabwyn, who may have aided Plockhoy with the English wording in his pamphlets. They, in turn, were probably influenced by the German utopian, Johann Andreae's [1586-1654] blueprints for a geometrically fortified "republic of workers living in equality."

Plockhoy set to work to win Cromwell's support for his plan. His first letter, dated June 24, 1658, addressed Cromwell as the "Mighty and (as I hope) Prudent Lord." The letter, perhaps written with Hartlib assisting with the English, presented his essential ideas of equality in faith, religious tolerance, and the extension of the Lord's kingdom via the Collegiant's *collegia prophetica*.

In his second letter Plockhoy wrote: "One should leave the world for posterity in a better state than how one found it. I have made this my contribution..." He eventually gained an audience with Cromwell, reporting that "I was heard several times with patience." However, despite a certain decorum, Cromwell may have remained distracted – after all, he was ill with ague or malarial fits, his fragile commonwealth was imploding, and he was worried about the health of his most beloved daughter, Elizabeth.

Then suddenly Cromwell died on September 3, 1658. But Plockhoy remained undaunted. With Parliament back in session in January 1659, he redoubled his efforts sending letters to both Parliament and Cromwell's son – and successor – Richard.

That same month, Plockhoy published his pamphlet, *The Way to the Peace and Settlement of These Nations ... to awaken Public Spirits* and foster interest among English citizens. The pamphlet, signed "Pieter Cornelius van Zuik-Zee, a lover of truth and peace," consisted of the two



Debitaire or Lemo-Lemage ("Original People") were among the first Indians to come in contact with Europeans (Latin, English, & Swedish) as early as 1600. Plockhoy had personal/familial relations with the natives but the "Original People" were recorded by the chronicler of the time. (Credit: Culture in Mennonites, published by the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada.)

Cromwell letters and one written to Parliament on the subject of the *collegia profetica*, which encompassed his (and Hartlib's) esoteric vision of religious tolerance and an all-embracing universal church which would finally empower the disinherited.

Plockhoy's ideas, however, got lost in the hellfire that followed the Commonwealth's disintegration. Still this did not discourage him. Plockhoy was never content with mere what-if pipe dreams. He wanted action, concrete results as his ideas drifted from religious to social activist to "give ear to the poor." There is evidence, however scant, that Plockhoy and his circle convinced some "well affected persons" to initiate the development of three cooperative communities to "promote so good and pious a work." Demott offered 100 pounds each to bring the "little commonwealths" to fruition. Some evidence hints that the commonwealths were developed — one each in London, Bristol, and Ireland, with plans for more on the mainland.

In 1660, Richard Cromwell's tensions hold on power vanished and he fled England, making way for Charles II, who succeeded the throne on May 29, 1660 and commenced a vigorous campaign to suppress opponents. Times had soured for Plockhoy's ilk. Charles showed no great disposition to the Dutchman's fancies. But Plockhoy seemed unwilling to accept this and remained in England until late 1661. This must be probably witnessed the gruesome events surrounding Cromwell's corpse. Royalists had

not forgotten Cromwell's beheading of King Charles I in 1649. They exhumed Cromwell's body from Westminster Abbey and dragged his corpse through London's streets. On the anniversary of Charles' beheading, Cromwell was hung in a public square for a day. Then they lopped off his head and impaled it on a pole, paraded it around London, before sticking it on a spiked Westminster fence to horrify passersby — for 25 years!

If this did not open Plockhoy's eyes to the (lack of) writing on the wall, then what would? Yet, somehow he remained indomitable and undaunted. London had made him an articulate pamphleteer. Upon returning to Amsterdam in late 1661, he continued his quest of converting his ideas into reality — unaware that fate in the person of Charles II would again interfere with his plans some three years later, 3000 miles away.

Preparations in Amsterdam

... *that* ... Plockhoy ... agree to depart by the first ship ... to the aforesaid colony ... to reside there and to work at farming, fishing, handicrafts, etc. ... [so] that provision may thereby be made for others to come."
 - Contract signed by the Amsterdam Magistrates and Plockhoy on June 6, 1662

Plockhoy wasted no time switching his sights to Amsterdam's magistrates, the Collegie of XIX, who had assumed management responsibilities of New Netherland from the West India

Company. Between November 1661 and May 1662 he wrote them seven letters outlining his settlement proposals. Plockhoy's fourth letter of January 1662, included 117 articles to be used to govern his settlement.

Would the restructured remains of the West India Company, formed in 1621 to promote trade and colonization in North America, be interested in such utopian ventures? Though it had sent settlers as early as 1624, its patroonship system, which encouraged stockholders to become landlords, failed to inspire much colonization because it actually preferred for profits to a stable colony. The company's Delaware Bay colony, chartered to exploit whaling, never developed for that very reason. By 1640, the West India Company had developed a more pragmatic policy of religious tolerance and a charter that made emigration more attractive to humbler recruits to spur colonization. Still these endeavors met with little success, attracting few Dutch recruits who saw little opportunity for bettering their lot.

On April 20, 1662, Amsterdam's magistrates agreed to fund Plockhoy's plans to settle a colony along Delaware Bay, in Zwaanendael. A little utopia in the name of profit seemed like a good investment at this juncture.

Plockhoy signed the agreement in early June and agreed to present "the names of 25 persons, who will agree to depart by the first ship ... to the aforesaid colony ... to reside there and to work at farming, fishing, handicrafts, etc.,

and to be as diligent as possible not only to live comfortably themselves, but also that provision may thereby be made for others to come." In exchange, Plockhoy negotiated a 25-year tax exemption for his colony, the right to much of the profits and to choose as much territory as they could develop and protect, plus the right to make their own laws. Amsterdam's magistrates offered loans of 100 guilders to each man. Women and children traveled free.

His 84-page *Korte Verhael van Nieuw Netherlant*, ("Brief Account of New Netherland..."), published in October, bundled the seven letters in one pamphlet and announced his intention to found a settlement for "the many poor and needy families." In a Plockhoy tried to allay the fears of more conservative parties who thought his insistence of communal equality would mean a loss of individuality. He also reassured sponsors that although his experimental community would be based on moral concerns, it would still be profitable and competitive in the marketplace.

His collaborative and not so brief *Kort en Klaer Ooversey*... ("Brief and Concise Plan...") sounded more like a travel brochure meant to lure settlers to a mythical land of limitless abundance. "New Netherland is the flower, the noblest of all lands ... birds obscure the sky, so numerous in their flight, the animals roam wild ... fish swarms in the waters and exclude the light..." Poems by old Patuxson friends, Steendam and Verloove, encouraged Plockhoy and assured sponsors that his ideas were sound. [Steendam who

had lived in New Netherland, 1650-1660, wrote glowing reports from the New World, touting its many virtues — "the purity of the air..." — making him, arguably, not only the New World's first poet but also its first publicist.]

Plockhoy zealously set about recruiting the right people from four categories — "Husbandmen, Handicrafts people, Mariners and Masters of Arts & Sciences" — idealists with skills befitting the project. He offered attractive inducements and the thrill of adventure. In September, provisions were collected and a ship secured. His efforts produced underwhelming results, however; he had hoped against hope to enlist 100 families but only managed to persuade twenty-four, many of whom likely came from his old friend, De Haan's Collegiant Church.

Finally on May 5, 1663, the *St. Jacob* filled "with their baggage and farm utensils" set sail. On July 28 they approached land after an uneventful voyage — as much as over two months on the open sea can be. The colonists waded ashore and stood huddled together on the banks of Delaware Bay, gazing in awe at the marvelous land with "all kinds of necessities and small articles ... as for agricultural purposes and clothing, etc. also two half bags of hops, goats for the people..." at their feet.

Arrival in Delaware

"... in such places as are separate from their own where we may with less impediment or hindrance love one another, and mind the

wonders of God."
 - *Pieter Plockhoy, A Way Propounded...*

"... the air, land, and sea are pregnant with her bounty"
 - *Jacob Stenskov*

The Dutch have a saying: mother poverty is the bride of dreamers. Plockhoy was a dreamer, simultaneously impoverished by circumstances and enriched by the hope of his dreams. The New World offered plenty of room for the dreams dreamt by spiritual dissidents, but such dreams can swiftly sour.

Plockhoy and his followers trudged up the sandy shore off Cape Henlopen, near Hoornskill, negotiating their way through driftwood, dragging provisions, farm implements [trenching gages, single-wheel ploughs] — their muskets and wheel-lock pistols loaded and ready. They took frequent pause to gaze gradually inward — bogs, lush with reeds and never-before-seen flowers and a trail meandering further inland.

It was like a Henri Rousseau canvas' dense, mysterious, primeval forests of towering oak and pine; clearings and banks holding profuse bouquets of flora and wild fruits; cypress near water, willows in the swamps; and wild fauna — bears, foxes, beavers, eagles, and unknown creatures — in unbelievable abundance. Fish — halibut, mackerel, bass — filled inlets with their silvery flopping bodies like his prospectus had promised or the fertile imaginings dripping off a florid pen. It was by no means an empty canvas of a wilderness. However, it was a vast tapestry of



Philadelphia: Learn to map the location of Zwanzendael, Ploekhey's settlement on the 1595 map of Hans Holbein the Younger. (Image: CPC Production, www.CPCProduction.com)

whereconcerned native tribes

The colonists settled inland near present-day Lewes. They had already missed the spring growing season and still had to clear land – felling trees, hewing the stumps – for winter crops and begin construction of their “little commonwealth.”

Tensions Ploekhey had not anticipated arose immediately. He had envisioned friendly relations with the natives but the local Algonquins were mystified by Ploekhey’s claims to the land. A letter written to the Amsterdam magistrates reported that the natives “had declared they never sold the Dutch any land to inhabit.” The land had already been sold several times over to the Swedes (at least once) by passing tribes who probably had little claim to it.

Most notable among Ploekhey’s neighbors in this sparsely populated area were the Leni Lenape and Nanticoke tribes. They were portrayed as tall, athletic, trustworthy, and curiously relaxed. They settled local waterways where they fished, farmed, and hunted. According to Dutch scholar, Claes Wassenar, who, in the 1630s, wrote: “There is little authority known among these nations. They live almost all free.”

Although Amerigo Vespucci was said to have visited Delaware’s shores first, Dutch Captain Cornelius May [Cape May is named after him] is given credit for “discovering” Delaware Bay. Forty years before Ploekhey’s arrival he built Fort Nassau, at the site of Gloucester, New Jersey. Traders arrived to pursue their fortunes in furs. Swedes and Finns arrived at 1638, but the first

permanent Delaware settlement was Pieter Sweden colony and Fort Christina on the site of present day Wilmington in 1638. Later, Lord Baltimore settled nearby and used native tribes to harass Dutch and Swedish settlers with an eye on an eventual English conquest. By the 1640s, several hundred Dutch (Saxons) or “people from the sea,” to the local tribes), Finnish, and Swedish settlers fished in the Delaware Bay region. Stuyvesant built Fort Casimir in 1651. It quickly became a powder keg of jealously guarded Swedish settlements, raging Dutch outposts, and skeptical

Indians. Murders were involved but were quickly avenged. Dutch and English merchants regularly filled vessels with guns, alcohol, cloth, and trinkets to trade with Indians for pelts and furs.

Zwanzendael was first settled in 1630 when Dutch captain, David de Vries, brought Cornelis Jacobs of Hoon with thirty-two settlers – mostly French-speaking Walloons – tools and cattle, to start a whaling and farming settlement. However, local Leni Lenape destroyed the settlement after a misunderstanding involving a stolen coat of arms. Upon de Vries’s return he found only some charred vestiges and bleached bones. Retaliations only made things worse.

In 1656, the West India Company sold the Delaware region to the City of Amsterdam, which estab-

lished a colony at Fort Casimir called New Amstel. In 1658, the Dutch finally established a permanent trading post there called Sakonnessick, although the rebuilding of the fort near Horemkil could not proceed from lack of settlers in the area. It was not until 1639 that D’Hinnoyosa established the town here, idly promising it would become a great prosperous, sin-free, diked city. Today the Zwanzendael Museum, modeled after Hoon’s city hall, commemorates both the Hoon and Ploekhey endeavors.

By the time Ploekhey arrived, relations with the locals had thoroughly spoiled. Although Ploekhey was not the first settler, his colony of “universal Christian brotherhood” based on moral principles was so unique that it left them estranged from their neighbors. Ploekhey had been intent on avoiding the mistakes of the Puritans who had used their spiritual beliefs to justify wronging the natives from their chosen land, and those of traders and hucksters inspired only by profit and power. Bar unforeseen circumstances forced Ploekhey to focus on agriculture, a comprehensive criminal code, and more extensive defenses, including the institution of sentry duty. Ploekhey also discovered, to his disillusionment, that he had to coerce others into rotating decision-making responsibilities and new tasks. Eventually however, the settlement succeeded in its endeavor to survive – just in time to suffer its dramatic demise.

Charles Calvert, of England’s Virginia and Maryland territories, came to camp around the Delaware colony, one month after Ploekhey’s arrival. Everyone knew he coveted the Delaware

into the oblivion of the surrounding countryside on that fateful day in August of 1664. On September 8, Stuyvesant surrendered New Netherland to England.



A plaque dedicated to Ploekhey, “A Pioneer of Christian Civilization in America,” 278 years after Ploekhey’s dream was shattered, the Amsterdam Society of Ploekhey’s Dream donated the plaque to the city hall of Zwettley, where it now hangs. (Dutch: Zwettley.nl)

colony, and yet, a temporary, if strained, reprieve was negotiated between Dutch, English, Swedish and Indian factions. Meanwhile, to the north, James offered generous terms of surrender to the Dutch, because James preferred the profits of an intact colony to the spoils of a mined one.

In March 1664, King Charles II, no fan of the Dutch “surfers” who had attempted to extradite him back to England from exile as part of a treaty between Holland and Cromwell, set out to enhance the eminence of his crown with the second Anglo-Dutch War [1664-1667]. His glory of conquest and glory would come at the expense of the Dutch colonies, among them the peaceful Zwanzendael settlement.

Stench, smoke and all traces of the settlement all but dissolved

The Last Years

Ploekhey was so thoroughly forgotten – his memory so thoroughly obliterated by the Zwanzendael skirmish – that twenty-five years later, in 1688, a certain brazen, Abraham van Akkeren, translated Ploekhey’s work into Dutch and took full credit for the plagiarized texts – with no mention of Ploekhey. However, the translation was so abominable that no one paid it any

mind. Gone was the dynamic enthusiasm of Ploekhey’s prose and Ploekhey was shoved ever further into the shadows of history.

Ploekhey’s life after 1664 is nebulous at best. One source notes that in January 1682 Ploekhey was ordered by the town of Leves to build a home to certain specifications within a year or relinquish his rights to his plot of land and be fined ten pounds. By May, he had become an English subject but was unable to meet the deadline and was forced to flee.

Ploekhey, by then old, blind, and destitute, did not disappear into total obscurity. He and his wife tramped around, only to arrive seemingly out of nowhere thirteen years’ later in 1694, in Germantown, Pennsylvania. This Mennonite community, the first

permanent Mennonite congregation, took up a collection for the Ploekhoys. Two neighbors built them a small house and planted a garden on half an acre of land on the "end street of town" (presently Washington Lane in the Germantown section of Philadelphia.)

Ploekhoj is last referred to in John Kipsbaven's will, who bequeathed twenty shillings to Ploekhoj. The couple lived out their last days in peace perhaps regaling their neighbors daily with fantastic tales until his death somewhere between 1695 and 1700.

Ploekhoj did receive some posthumous honages. The American historian, Samuel

Pennypacker, discovered Ploekhoj's writings in 1899. Dutch Socialist historian, H.P.G. Quack, wrote enthusiastically about him in 1911. Socialist John Dowse declared him the father of socialism in the 1930s and French historian, Jean Seguy, wrote an extensive account of Ploekhoj in the propitious year of 1968. But it has mostly been left to a few Mennouite historians - Leleand Harder and Irvin Horst - to keep his memory alive. Horst in a 1949 article on Ploekhoj said, "While Ploekhoj's plans failed, and in some details were utopian, he must, nevertheless, be considered as one of the heralds of that religious freedom which modern nations accept and cherish." When asked why Ploekhoj continues to founder in obscurity, despite his

contributions, Zierikzee town archivist, L. Hekwerdt, could only shrug his shoulders, the same shrug most people have offered since the seventeenth century whenever Ploekhoj's name has come up.

Ploekhoj continues to occupy little more than a footnote in most history books. It is as if history has no room for the likes of a Pieter Ploekhoj who sacrificed everything for his "little community" based on old ideals. Curiously, this made him a man centuries ahead of his time. ♪

— Bob Plasinger (rumpant@rockall.nl currently lives in Amsterdam where he is a freelance editor and writer of various fictions and nonfiction. He is also a radio-caster at two independent radio-stations in Amsterdam.