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The Animal Fleet to New Netherland

In April 1625, the directors of the West India Company contracted for 103 head of stallions and mares, bulls and cows, for breeding and multiplying as well as a number of sheep and pigs. The directors had decided to send out an “animal fleet” in 1625: a convoy of three vessels, two of which were especially equipped to transport farm animals that could be used for working the land, and especially for their all-important milk. Also on board were farm tools, seeds, and other things necessary for developing agriculture in New Netherland, probably including cuttings for growing fruit trees.

The animals were to be transported in two ships specially equipped with individual stalls for them, attended by crew members assigned to their care. Each stall was furnished with a layer of sand three feet deep, to give the animals a firm and absorbent base to stand on. Suitable quantities of oats, hay, and straw were loaded on board, and a special deck was installed for the storage of barrels of water that could be pumped up as needed for the animals. In addition, six well-established households were aboard, together with a number of single persons, for a total of 45 new colonists. One imagines that for the colonists the voyage must have been like living inside a crowded barn for six weeks or so. Think of the smells and sounds, at such close quarters!

Amazingly, only two of the animals died during the passage—an impressive tribute to the planning and management of the enterprise. Upon arrival in New Amsterdam that summer, the animals were initially landed at Nooten Island (now Governors Island) but after one or two days it became apparent that the pasture there was not sufficient for them, and they were ferried to Manhattan. But then a more serious problem arose when twenty of them died. The exact cause was not immediately apparent but the prevailing opinion was that in grazing on the uncultivated land they must have eaten something something harmful. In the middle of September 1625 the cattle were moved up the Hudson River to the region of Fort Orange (present-day Albany), where they were able to pasture upon lush grass.

Although the cattle thrived and multiplied, they were on average smaller than cattle of the same breed raised in the Netherlands, and their level of production continued to be less than had been hoped for. Partly this was attributed to their hay, which was considered to be less nutritious, and partly to the fact that the heifers were generally bred after only two years, instead of being

allowed to mature longer, as in the Netherlands—the colonists were anxious to enjoy the profit from their multiplying.

The directors of the West India Company were balancing competing programs of running a fur-trading operation, versus making serious efforts to establish a colony. Clearly the profits for the moment were in furs. Permanent settlement would strengthen the Dutch claim upon the territory, but colonization was an expensive, long-term undertaking—there was no Potosí or Eldorado in New Netherland, and the WIC needed to pay its shareholders reasonable returns. The compromise solution that the directors eventually settled upon was to encourage colonization through contracting with private investors (“patroons” in Dutch) who would be willing personally to bear expenses and risks in the hope of future returns. This will be discussed in a later article.

Francis J. Sypher
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