



# Life in New Amsterdam Educator Resource Guide



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## Adriana E. van Zwieten **Families and Children in New Amsterdam**





## Families and Children in New Amsterdam

Imagine what it was like to stroll down the streets of lower Manhattan roughly 355 years ago when it was called New Amsterdam. Envision yourself peeking through the window of a house; chatting with the woman sewing linen caps or the cooper pounding staves into barrels with the help of his apprentice; questioning a ship's captain about his voyage from the Netherlands; observing children in the classroom under the watchful eye of their teacher. New Amsterdam was alive with the voices of its inhabitants: children playing in the streets, workers plying their crafts, and families in their homes.

From New Amsterdam's very beginning in the 1620s, families were the mainstay of its society. They provided shelter, food and companionship — a place of solace and stability in a world that could fluctuate and change at a moment's notice. New Amsterdam's households were either composed of a simple nuclear family of parents and children, or they were more complex including servants, slaves, apprentices, boarders or extended family members, such as a grandparent, aunt or uncle. Each household also provided a place of work where the colony's commodities and necessities were produced. In addition, some households maintained shops with a variety of articles and food for sale or trade.

New households were established by the brides and grooms of European and African origin, who walked to the Dutch Reformed Church in the fort where the minister performed the ceremony and wrote their names in the marriage register. Many of these couples later carried their newborns to the church for baptism, where, again, their names were recorded in the baptismal register along with the baby's name and the names of his or her godparents. Take for example the five children of Anthony Portugues, a slave of the West India Company. In the 1640s, he presented the twins, Anthony and Maria, for baptism and later their younger siblings, Jochem, Magdeleen, and Claesje. Although their mother's name was omitted, the register noted the names of members of Manhattan's African community, who stood as godparents.

If families were the backbone of the city and colony, children were the future. They crossed the Atlantic from Europe and Africa, or they were born in the New World. Unfortunately, New Amsterdam's children left no written record describing their daily experiences, thus we learn of their lives through the writings of adults. In fact, in court records, children often remain nameless and are designated merely as the son, daughter, ward, apprentice, or servant of the adult bringing in, or defending, a law suit. Furthermore, children of African and European origin probably had very different experiences and among African families, enslaved and free, very little is known about the separate activities of their children. We do know about Maria, a young slave girl belonging to the West India Company and about Jochim Anthony Robberts, a young free boy. Maria was the daughter of "Big Pieter" and was indentured by the Company for four years to Nicolaes Coorn, who agreed to restore Maria at the end of service to the Director of the Company "if she be living." Jochim was bound out for three years to Wolphert Webber, a farmer on Manhattan, by his sister Susanna Anthony Robberts, a "free Negress." Webber was charged to teach Jochim reading and writing or to have him taught these skills by another.

A little more is known about children of European background, who were expected to work from about the age of seven. Some were taught the arts and crafts practiced by their parents; others, if the opportunity arose, were apprenticed or indentured to a family friend, neighbor, or some other of the city's residents. Training provided by someone other than a parent required a written or oral contract that might stipulate the term of service or apprenticeship, the intended vocation, the child's age, the recompense, and whether some form of education besides vocational training might be imparted, as was the case of Jochim Robberts. Consider Cornelis Jansen, who was to be taught reading and writing as he learned the art of glassmaking; and Anna Tienemans, who served in Gerrit Cornelissen's household and went to evening school in the winter.

PREVIOUS AND OPPOSITE PAGE (TOP):  
The Castello Plan. New Amsterdam in 1660.  
1916. 29.100.709

PREVIOUS PAGE (BOTTOM):  
*Children playing in the street.* 1980.  
X2010.11.6491

## ABOUT

# Adriana E. van Zwieten

Although I always enjoyed studying the past and listening to family stories about the “old days,” my decision to major in colonial American history was especially sparked by an archaeology course I took in college. Unearthing the walls of an early colonial farm house and the objects once owned by its inhabitants, like pottery, buttons, coins, etc., made the past come alive for me. Furthermore, my Dutch heritage greatly influenced my interest in the history of New Netherland. As a graduate student of colonial American history, my mentor, Dr. P.M.G. “Mike” Harris encouraged my interest in the transfer of culture from the Netherlands to New Netherland, which I first applied to a study of the documents concerning the Orphan Chamber of New Amsterdam and how the city’s officials cared for its orphans. Eventually, the laws of real property as they applied to the city lots of New Amsterdam became the topic for my dissertation. The Dutch documents preserved in the archives of the state and city of New York, many of which have been translated into English, continue to provide a rich trove of resources for future historians of New Amsterdam and colonial New York.

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Education was an important part of a child’s upbringing for which New Amsterdam’s city government provided a school and schoolmaster. Girls and boys went to the elementary school at their parents’ discretion for if a future occupation did not warrant reading, writing or arithmetic, there was no societal necessity to attend. Whether or not slave children attended the school is unknown, but as early as 1636, a minister asked the West India Company to send a schoolmaster to the colony from Holland “to teach and train the youth of both Dutch and blacks in the knowledge of Jesus Christ.”

The school’s curriculum included a variety of subjects for which parents paid a quarterly fee (the poor were admitted for free). In 1661, it cost 1.5 guilders to have a child taught the ABC’s, spelling and reading; 2.5 guilders for reading and writing and 3 guilders for reading, writing, and arithmetic. By comparison, carpenters earned two to four guilders a day and a loaf of bread could cost one guilder.

Beginners, perhaps as young as four or five, learned the alphabet and then, in turn, were taught spelling, reading, and grammar, all, of course, in the Dutch language. After about three years, the intricacies of writing with a quill were introduced. This, however, was a separate subject, as was math. Thus, a child who could read might leave school and not learn to write or calculate sums. Pupils were also drilled in Bible verses, the Catechism, the Ten Commandments, and prayers.

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School began at 8:00 am with a pull on the bell for the stragglers. The morning session ended at 11:00 am and the afternoon lessons ran from 1:00 to 4:00 pm. For apprentices and children who worked during the day, evening classes were offered. The school year ran from September through May. Some boys graduated to the Latin School where additional education was imparted, especially the classics in Latin and Greek; girls were barred from higher education, as it was considered unnecessary for their future role in society as servants, wives, or mothers.

Besides work and school, what did New Amsterdam's children do for fun? Unfortunately, fun things are rarely mentioned in the archival record. Undoubtedly, they played the same games as those seen in the paintings, prints, and tiles produced during the Dutch Republic's Golden Age: trundling hoops, spinning tops, jumping rope, playing leapfrog, and skating in winter. However, within the family setting, children probably learned many of the amusements that were prohibited in New Amsterdam on Sundays, like card and ball games, backgammon, ticktack, ninepins, and dancing.

The families that lived in 17th-century Dutch New Amsterdam were in many ways similar to families in present-day New York, even though their traditions and customs came from distant homelands. Their greatest concerns were related to the household: making sure there was a roof over their heads, food on the table, and decent clothing for each member of the family. As children grew, family resources were focused on their futures. While the community supported parents in this endeavor by providing schoolmasters, parents paid the school fees and arranged for additional training. Such knowledge and skills prepared young people for life as adults in New Amsterdam.

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## Biography of Marritje Jans Joncker van Rotterdam

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Marritje Jans Joncker van Rotterdam took her first steps on Manhattan island; but when she was six, she and her three younger brothers were orphans, her father killed in 1643 during the Kieft Indian Wars and her mother dying of some unknown cause in 1645. Put under the protection of guardians, the four orphans were given some "old clothes" and "old linen . . . diapers" from their mother's effects. Other possessions that had surrounded them in their home, like a cupboard, candlesticks, and a looking-glass, were auctioned off. The money raised was used to care for the children and to pay the debts due on their parents' estate. Despite the setbacks, Jans grew to adolescence and at the age of 14 became an apprentice and learned to sew "bonnets, linens and other articles."

At age 19, after her training, Jans married Cornelis van Langeveldt, a merchant. Together, they had three children, born in their home on Pearl Street in New Amsterdam. After Van Langeveldt's death in 1663, Jans remarried, and she and her new husband, Thomas Laurensen, a baker, had seven more children. Those who grew to adulthood married and produced grandchildren. Jans stood as godmother for her eldest grandchild, Cornelis van Langeveldt.

Although we don't know when and where Marritje Jans died, her life's journey from orphan to apprentice to wife, mother, and grandmother offers a glimpse of a woman's experience in Dutch colonial society. As with so many of the hundreds of inhabitants of early New Amsterdam, Jans' life is revealed only when her name appears in documents like wills, inventories, depositions, court, church, and land records. Nevertheless, such evidence allows us to get some sense of her joys and tribulations.

## Families and Children in New Amsterdam

# LESSON

# 7

## Introducing the Topic

From New Amsterdam's beginning, families were the mainstay of its society. They provided food, shelter, and companionship. Their homes were also places of work where the necessities of the colony were produced. The children of these families would one day become the citizens of the town and while they left us no written records of their experiences, we can piece together details of their lives from clues, such as artifacts used in their homes, images of their town, and legal records. A home might be inhabited by a simple nuclear family made up of parents and their children, or include extended family members such as grandparents, aunts, or uncles. It might also include servants and slaves who worked for the family, boarders who paid a fee to live with a family, or young apprentices who lived with a family and worked alongside them to learn a trade or skill.

New families were formed by weddings at the Dutch Reformed Church inside the fort. Both European and African couples walked to the church, where the minister performed the wedding ceremony and wrote their names in the marriage register. When babies were born, their parents carried them to the church for baptism, where a child's name might be recorded for the first time, along with those of their parents and godparents. Again, this included both European settlers and Africans, enslaved or free.

Children were expected to start working at seven years old. Children might learn the trades and crafts practiced by their parents. If not, they might be apprenticed to a family friend, neighbor, or other city resident. Parents decided how much schooling their children needed, if any. New Amsterdam provided a school and schoolmaster for New Amsterdam's children, where boys and girls beginning as young as four or five might learn the ABC's, spelling, reading, writing, grammar, and arithmetic. They were also taught in the religion of the Reformed Dutch Church through Bible verses, the Ten Commandments, and prayers. When children had playtime, images from 17th-century Netherlands suggest that children engaged in ice skating, jumping rope, playing leapfrog, or playing with spinning tops or trundling hoops.

Less is known about the experiences of African children in New Amsterdam. It isn't known if African children attended school, but we do know that in 1636, a minister wrote to ask the Dutch West India Company to send a schoolmaster to teach religion to both European and African children.

Families were the backbone of New Amsterdam's society, making sure that all their members were cared for, fed, and housed. Children were an important part of the family, both as young workers and helpers, and as the future citizens, leaders, and tradespeople of the colony.

### Essential Questions

What was home life like in New Amsterdam? What individuals made up a household? What activities happened at home? How were the children of New Amsterdam prepared for their futures?

### Vocabulary List

- |             |           |         |
|-------------|-----------|---------|
| - Citizen   | - Shelter | - Wages |
| - Household | - Society |         |



## Introducing the Sources

In this lesson, newly digitized artifacts from the Museum of the City of New York's collection will help students learn about the children of New Amsterdam.

**Nova Amsteldam. ca. 1670. 38.512**



### DOCUMENT BASED QUESTIONS

- What buildings do you recognize from previous lessons and discussions?
- Encourage students to locate the church. As seen in the lesson on *Religious Diversity in New Amsterdam*, the church was located inside the fort. It is the building with the “M”-shaped roof line.
- How was the church important to family life in New Amsterdam?
- Which buildings could be houses? How are they similar to or different from homes in New York City today?
- What individuals would share a house and form a household?

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**Sarah Rapalje's chair. 1650–1670.  
45.151**

- This chair belonged to Sarah Rapalje, the first girl born in New Amsterdam.
- Sarah or other members of her family might have sat down to dinner in this chair. Sarah might have sat here as she sewed clothing for her family or held and cared for one of her 15 children.
- Often, the children of a family would sit on stools or benches, and chairs with backs like this one would be reserved for the heads of the household.
- It is made of wood, with leather nailed to the back and seat. The wood has been identified as mahogany, a tropical species.
- Wood was easy to find in New Netherland, but mahogany would have to be imported, either as the raw material or as a finished article of furniture.
- Chairs such as this one could have been imported on ships by merchants, or possibly brought along as a treasured possession when settlers first came to New Amsterdam.



**OBJECT BASED QUESTIONS**

- What do you think this object was used for?
- What do you think it might be made of? Is this material easy to find in New Amsterdam?
- Where could Sarah Rapalje have gotten this chair?
- Why might a family want to buy or to keep a chair that came from the Netherlands, rather than buying one that was made here of local wood?
- Ask students if they can draw a connection with another artifact they have studied (e.g. the portrait of Katrien van Cortlandt, or the tile, if students have studied them in the lesson on the **People of New Amsterdam**)
  - Katrien's portrait shows her sitting on a similar type of chair.
  - The man with the axe on the tile could be preparing wood to be made into furniture.



### Forks. 17th century. 36.411.1

- These two-tined steel forks with bone handles belonged to Peter van Nest and Judith Rapalje, who lived in New Amsterdam in 1649. Judith Rapalje was the sister of Sarah Rapalje.
- One of the most important functions of a family or a household was ensuring that all its members had food and shelter.
- Objects similar to these were imported from the Netherlands, arriving on a wooden ship to be stored in a warehouse or merchant's home until it would be sold by a merchant or trader in New Amsterdam.



### OBJECT BASED QUESTIONS

- What are these used for?
- What do you think they might be made of?
- Where could Judith and Peter have bought their forks?
- What connections can you draw between these artifacts and other artifacts we have examined? You may refer to the **wedding pillow cover**, **portrait of Katrien van Cortlandt**, the **white linen ruff**, the **tile**, and the **pewter flagon** from previous lessons.

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## Further Reading: Marritje Jans Joncker van Rotterdam

Have students read Adriana E. van Zwieten's biography of Marritje Jans Joncker van Rotterdam (or read it out loud to younger students). How does her story relate to the images and artifacts we've seen?

- What are some of the possessions owned by Marritje's family? What happened to them?
- What other artifacts have we examined that might also be examples of household possessions?
- How was Marritje trained for her future?
- What other education might Marritje and other New Amsterdam children have received?
- What could children do for fun?

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## Activity

The children who lived in New Amsterdam left little direct evidence of their own experiences. If a child in New Amsterdam had kept a journal, what might he or she have recorded about his or her home, family, daily life, education, and plans for the future?

Have students work in small groups to brainstorm ideas about these questions, drawing on the artifacts and discussions from this lesson and those on other topics, such as **People, Trade, Slavery, and Religious Diversity** in New Amsterdam. Ask them to imagine their lives if they lived in New Amsterdam, and to consider the following questions:

- What family members and other individuals make up your household?
- What belongings are most important to you in your everyday life?
- How does your family make its living?
- What will be your future career? Will you be an apprentice? How will you prepare for it? What subjects will you need to study in school?

Have students use these ideas to write a journal entry describing a day in their life as a young resident of New Amsterdam.

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## Contemporary Connections

**How do New Yorkers today connect with the families of New Amsterdam?**

- Many streets in New York City today are named for Dutch families. For example, Rapelye Street in Brooklyn is named for the Rapalje family, whose chair and forks are part of the City Museum's collection.

**Some New Amsterdam families' homes still exist today and are open to the public. Many of our city's parks and neighborhoods are named for the families who lived in New Amsterdam.**

- Examples of these families include the Van Cortlandt, Wyckoff, and Lefferts families. Place names in Queens, the Bronx, and Brooklyn reflect these family names.

**Investigate your neighborhood. Are there streets, buildings, parks, or other infrastructures named for people? Choose one to research further.**