

The Souls of African American Children: New Amsterdam



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On March 31, 1647, an African father brought his newborn twins to be baptized by a Dutch minister in New Amsterdam's Reformed Church. With other members of the city's sizeable African community serving as godparents, the boy and girl were baptized with the names Adam and Eva. "Emanuel Neger," as he was called in the baptismal register, had chosen to cast his family's lot with the city's Protestant Christians. Though most likely a slave of the Dutch West India Company, Emanuel must have nurtured the hope that he soon would join the ranks of the score of Africans who, after laboring for the company in New Amsterdam

for nearly two decades, had recently been granted conditional freedom.

New Amsterdam had begun [its history](#) in 1626 as a frontier settlement under the control of the West India Company, a Dutch commercial enterprise whose ventures included slave-trading posts in Africa and colonies in Brazil and New Netherland. Occupying the tip of Manhattan Island, New Amsterdam was strategically located, with a harbor that was ideal for ocean-going commerce. Though it had languished during its early years, despite the profits of the fur trade with the natives, by the late 1640s New Amsterdam had taken on the shape of a settled community. Fort Amsterdam, the Reformed Church, and the Stadt Herberg, a tavern that was later converted into the city hall, were surrounded by farms, windmills, warehouses, and private dwellings. Still sparsely populated, it already was distinguished by its diverse array of residents from Europe and Africa.



Fig. 1. Fort Amsterdam

African men and women formed an essential component of the local labor force, though their status as slaves had never been defined with precision or codified in law. Emanuel, along with his fellow Africans in New Amsterdam, had concluded that Christianization would be a potent weapon in their struggle to emerge from enslavement. They turned to Dutch religious rituals to sanctify their marriages and to validate their babies as Christians to enhance their chances for emancipation. Adam and Eva were just two of the more than sixty infants of African origin who were baptized in the city's Dutch church between 1639 and 1655.

Why would clergymen of the Reformed Church use their office to baptize the offspring of men and women claimed as property by the Dutch West India Company, the premier slave-trading company of the seventeenth century? One might expect a Dutch minister stranded in a colonial outpost to exhibit an attitude toward slaves resembling that of Jonas Michaelius, New Amsterdam's first minister, who in 1628 described the Angola slave women he encountered as "thieving, lazy and useless trash." Everardus Bogardus, who was sent to New Amsterdam as a minister in 1633, had earlier served as a *ziekentrooster* (comforter of the sick) on the Guinea coast. While there, he apparently developed a genuine concern for the spiritual condition of Africans that carried over into his dealings with the tiny city's West Africans. In 1636, Bogardus pleaded for a schoolmaster to be sent from Holland "to teach and train the youth of both Dutch and blacks in the

knowledge of Jesus Christ." By 1641, he was convinced that "good hopes exist for the conversion of the Negroes," a judgment corroborated by the elders and deacons who reported that "the negroes living among the colonists come nearer [to the right knowledge of God]" than the Indians. Most important, Bogardus acted on his convictions. During his tenure as New Amsterdam's minister, he routinely married African men and women and baptized their children, and once served as a godparent for an African infant. From October 1639, when the extant church records commence, until August 1647, when he departed for the Netherlands, he baptized thirty-nine children of African descent. Bogardus took pains to welcome Africans into New Amsterdam's Reformed Protestant Church, most likely because he suspected that people with surnames like Angola, Congo, and Portugies had been exposed to Catholic doctrines in the course of their travels in the Atlantic world. He saw it as his duty to counteract these erroneous teachings and adverse influences.

Yet no matter how much credit we assign Domine Bogardus for promoting the Christianization of New Amsterdam's Africans, his actions alone cannot explain the flood of African baptisms in New Amsterdam's church. Over the first few decades of Dutch rule, a procession of fathers (mothers only occasionally were present), accompanied by other Africans who stood as godparents, willingly stepped before a Dutch man of God to cement the good standing of their children in the eyes of the European majority. Certifying their children's membership in the Christian community was a matter of vital concern to the city's adult Africans, who, in essence, were engaged in a tug of war with the Dutch West India Company for control of their numerous children. From the outset, the company had condoned the formation of families by captured Africans, and by 1644, company officials acknowledged that their African slaves "are burdened with many children." As the city's forced laborers wrestled with the tribulations of life in a society that defined them as slaves, they fixed their hopes on the next generation. They aimed to supply their boys and girls with armament to protect themselves from people determined to exact as much as they could from them. Tendering these children for baptism in the Dutch Reformed Church was the central strategy in a multipronged effort to achieve a secure niche for the African American children of this North American Dutch city.

Their primary adversary was the Dutch West India Company, whose officers envisioned Africans born in New Amsterdam as a fresh and continuously available source of labor. Such children would make especially desirable slaves, since they would be acculturated and would have roots in the city. With their kinfolk nearby, they would not pose a risk of flight. Company administrators did not hesitate to exert their authority over these youngsters.

The beneficiaries of the 1644 law that gave conditional freedom to the company's longest serving male slaves and their wives were confronted with an excruciating dilemma. Though placed "on the same footing as other Free people . . . in New Netherland," and granted plots of land on the outskirts of the city that enabled them to become productive agriculturalists who could easily pay the mandatory annual tribute of wheat, maize, peas, or beans, and a fat hog to

the company, they were compelled to honor the law's proviso that their children "at present born or yet to be born shall be bound and obligated to serve the Honorable West India Company." The motives of the company officers who crafted the law were transparent. They sought to relieve themselves of the burden of supporting aging slaves, yet wished to reserve the right to command the labor of young and vigorous African youth. But the African parents, whose dreams for their baptized sons and daughters had rested on the indeterminacy of their status, could not reconcile themselves to a principle they regarded as illegitimate.



Fig. 2. Map of New Amsterdam

Their hopes may have been raised in 1649, when critics of the provincial administration, in the course of a lengthy Remonstrance to the Directors of the Dutch West India Company, complained that the children of the emancipated Africans "have remained slaves, though it is contrary to the laws of every people that any one born of a free Christian mother should be a slave and be compelled to remain in servitude." The response from Amsterdam was anything but comforting. Company officials minimized the impact of the law—they boasted that only three children currently were in the service of the company and emphasized that these slave children were treated as Christians. More importantly, they implicitly upheld the principle of commandeering the labor of the children of the former company slaves, even as they condoned the release of more laborers from bondage in succeeding years. New Amsterdam's free Africans had no alternative but to try and capitalize on the liberties they had gained to weaken the power of Europeans over them and their progeny. Their task was made more difficult by the influx of immigrants from Europe and the emergence of a consensus that slavery was the appropriate status for people of African origin.

In the 1650s, as the second generation reached maturity, New Amsterdam attained both stability and prosperity. Regulations on subjects ranging from sanitation and fire prevention to observance of the Sabbath were imposed by Director-General Petrus Stuyvesant, bringing order to the burgeoning community, while improving the conditions of everyday life. Commercial opportunities expanded as

local merchants engaged in trade along the North American coast, in the Caribbean, and over the ocean to Europe and Africa. A merchant elite emerged and, with the backing of small traders and artisans, successfully pressed for a city government that would promote local interests and temper the authoritarianism of company rule.

New Amsterdam's incorporation as a municipality in 1653 accelerated its transformation into a city consciously modeled on Dutch prototypes. Its houses with the gable end turned toward the street and tiled roofs were only the most visible manifestation of the cultural heritage that was selectively reproduced in the colonial city. Once installed, New Amsterdam's Burgomasters and Schepens, as representatives of the merchants and artisans, set about implementing their conception of Dutch urban life. The streets were surveyed, canals were dug, a weigh house built, and court procedures elaborated. Most important, city leaders gained Stuyvesant's approval to institute the Burgher Right, which restricted the privilege of conducting business to local property owners. The civic customs of Amsterdam, modified to suit local conditions, had taken root in what municipal leaders deliberately called the City of Amsterdam in New Netherland.

The enhancement of the power of Euro-Americans under burgher government did not bode well for New Amsterdam's Africans. Now, not only company officials but also individual slaveholders and city officials were in a position to make decisions that would shape the course of young Africans' lives. African parents did not wish to yield control over their children's lives to Europeans, but, as one mother learned in 1661, her little girl was vulnerable and she lacked any means to protect her. Ten-year-old Lysbet Anthony admitted to the Burgomasters of New Amsterdam that she had been stealing from her mistress, the wife of Domine Drisius. Given the option of chastising her own child or having a public servant do it, Lysbet's mother, Mary, chose to do it, and, with the assistance of another African woman, "severely punished and whipped her daughter with rods in [the] presence of the [city] Magistrates." To inflict physical harm on her daughter while Dutch officials looked on with satisfaction must have been unbearable for this mother, who could not shield her child from the pain and public humiliation.

Well aware of the unpredictability that shadowed the lives of non-Europeans in the Dutch city, free Africans attempted to safeguard their children through labor contracts, such as the one made by Maria Portugies for her daughter to be a household servant, and apprenticeships. Susanna Anthony Roberts, a free African acting as guardian of her minor brother, negotiated an apprenticeship agreement for him that mandated that he be taught reading and writing. Unable to write herself, she yearned to equip her brother with the tools of literacy.

Having managed to extricate themselves from slavery, the members of New Amsterdam's free African community kept a watchful eye on the enslaved children still embedded in the interstices of the society, and, at opportune moments, contrived ways to liberate them from the control of Euro-Americans. Anthony

Matysen, a free African, had made a contract with ferry master Egbert Van Borsum to rear "his negro's child," which involved Matysen's wife nursing the baby. The deal had been consummated by Van Borsum's wife, who had "bargained with [Matysen's] wife for the child for one year at least, and has not refused her payment of what she promised her in the presence of other negroes." Matysen went before the city court in March 1655, claimed that he had not been paid by Van Borsum, and "request[ed], therefore, that the child be declared free, when [sic] he promises to rear the same at his own expense." Anthony Matysen was the father of four children baptized in the Reformed Church between 1651 and 1655, but it was not just parental affection for the infant entrusted to him and his wife that explains why they invented a pretext for adopting the baby and raising it as a free person. Their commitment to the future of the city's African community played a major part as well.

Though the court ruled against Anthony Matysen, they did take his suit seriously. Perhaps the fact that Matysen had baptized his twin sons with the Old Testament names Abraham and Isaac elevated his standing among New Amsterdam's Christians. By the time Matysen brought his case against Van Borsum, free Africans were certain that the best way to narrow the distance between themselves and the city's Europeans was to identify themselves as Christians. Two separate petitions composed in the 1660s by free Africans who wished to secure the freedom of a boy and a girl, each on the verge of adulthood, made a point of identifying the parties as Christians. When Domingo Angola requested the manumission of Christina Emanuels, a company slave, he mentioned that she was the baptized orphan daughter of Manuel Trumpeter and Anthonya his wife. Emmanuel Pietersen and Dorothe Angola, a free couple who wished to adopt Dorothe's godson, also framed their petition in a way that established their credentials as Christians. They noted that Dorothe had stood "godmother or witness at the Christian baptism of a little son of Kleyne Anthony of Angola, begotten by his wife Louwize [both free Negroes]" and that after the boy's parents died, she had, "out of Christian affection," adopted and reared him as her own child.

Claiming ties to the Christian community gave Africans leverage as they pressed for greater control over the lives of the city's African children. Skeptical of the Dutch West India Company's rationalization for holding the children of Christian mothers in bondage, they sensed that the enslavement of baptized individuals rested on a flimsy foundation. With good reason, they had come to believe that the path to freedom ran through the baptismal font of the Reformed Church. Anxious to perpetuate the practice of baptizing Africans initiated by Everardus Bogardus, they found that, after 1655, access to the ritual that had emboldened them was foreclosed to their offspring. New Netherland's Reformed ministers, following church dictates, had inaugurated a policy of restricting baptism to people knowledgeable in the faith. This clerical decision may well have been influenced by the growing aversion of the burghers to participating in a biracial religious community.

Yet African parents continued to seek baptism for their infants. In the 1660s,

the forty enslaved workers who resided at Director-General Stuyvesant's bowery north of the city at times importuned Domine Henricus Selyns, who had been hired by the devout Stuyvesant to preach at his chapel every Sunday night, to baptize their children. Selyns's refusal to do so was grounded in church policy—the "negroes . . . lack of knowledge and faith"—but the minister felt impelled to impugn their motives, stressing "the material and wrong aim on the part of [these Negroes] who sought nothing else by it than the freeing of their children from material slavery, without pursuing piety and Christian virtues." Discovering the mainspring of their actions did not deter Selyns from spreading Christian gospel among these people "whose country of origin is the Negro-Coast." He engaged in private and public catechizing, which, he claimed "bore little fruit among the old people, who do not understand, but gave more hope with regard to the young, who have improved reasonably well." The old people, he neglected to mention, had managed to grasp the centrality of baptism to the prospects of freedom.

Selyns's injunctions against baptizing slave infants did not prevent Judith Stuyvesant, the director's wife, from proceeding with the baptism of African children in her own household. But the imperatives of slavery as an economic institution trumped the pious designs of Mrs. Stuyvesant. An official on Curacao, the great slave-trading entrepôt of the Dutch West India Company, apologetically wrote Petrus Stuyvesant of the "serious mistake that has been committed here in the sale of your Slaves; especially of the little children, since with great forethought on the part of Madam Stuyvesant . . . they were presented at the baptismal Font."

Should the sad fate of Judith Stuyvesant's baptized slave children stand as the symbolic end of the contest over the souls of New Amsterdam's African American children? Only if we believe that the African men and women who were shrewd enough to name their babies after figures from the Old Testament would stop searching for ways to deliver their heirs from slavery.

Further Reading:

On African Americans in New Amsterdam, see Graham Russell Hodges, *Root and Branch: African Americans in New York and East Jersey 1613-1863* (Chapel Hill and London, 1999); Ira Berlin, "From Creole to African: Atlantic Creoles and the Origins of African-American Society in Mainland North America," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d series, 53 (1996): 251-88; and Joyce D. Goodfriend, "Burghers and Blacks: The Evolution of a Slave Society at New Amsterdam," *New York History*, 59 (1978): 125-44. For background on New Amsterdam, see Oliver A. Rink, *Holland on the Hudson: An Economic and Social History of Dutch New York* (Ithaca and London, 1986).

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