

Isaack de Rasieres to Samuel Blommaert 1628

Mr. Blommaert:

As I feel myself much bound to your service, and in return know not how otherwise to recompense you than by this slight memoir, (wherein I have in part comprised as much as was in my power concerning the situation of New Netherland and its neighbors, and should in many things have been able to treat of or write the same more in detail, and better than I have now done, but that my things and notes, which would have been of service to me herein, have been taken away from me), I will beg you to be pleased to receive this, on account of my bounden service, etc.

On the 27th of July, Anno 1626, by the help of God, I arrived with the ship, *The Arms of Amsterdam*, before the bay of the great Mauritius River, sailing into it about a musket shot from Godyn's Point, into Coenraet's Bay (because there the greatest depth is, since from the east point there stretches out a sand bank on which there is only from 9 to 14 feet of water); then sailed on, northeast and north-northeast, to about half way from the low sand bank called Godyn's Point to the Hamels-Hoofden, the mouth of the river, where we found at half ebb 16, 17, 18 feet water, and which is a sandy reef a musket shot broad, stretching for the most part northeast and southwest, quite across, and, according to my opinion, having been formed there by the stream, inasmuch as the flood runs into the bay from the sea, east-southeast; the depth at Godyn's Point is caused by the tide flowing out along there with such rapidity.

Between the Hamels-Hoofden the width is about a cannon's shot of 2,000; the depth 10, 11, 12 fathoms. They are tolerably high points, and well wooded. The west point is an island, inhabited by from eighty to ninety savages, who support themselves by planting maize. The east point is a very large island, full 24 leagues long, stretching east by south and east-southeast along the sea-coast, from the river to the east end of the Fisher's Hook. In some places it is from three to four leagues broad, and it has several creeks and bays, where many savages dwell, who support themselves by planting maize and making sewam and who are called Siwanoyes and Shinnecoeks. It is also full of oaks, elms, walnut and fir trees, also wild cedar and chestnut trees. The tribes are held in subjection by, and are tributary to, the Pyquans, hereafter named. The land is in many places good, and fit for plowing and sowing. It has many fine valleys, where there is good grass. Their form of government is like that of their neighbors, which is described hereafter.

The Hamels-Hoofden being passed, there is about a league width in the river, and also on the west side there is an inlet, where another river runs up about twenty leagues, to the north-northeast, emptying into the Mauritius River in the highlands, thus making the northwest land opposite to the Manhattas an island eighteen leagues long. It is inhabited by the old Manhattans; they are about two hundred to three hundred strong, women and men, under different chiefs, whom they call Suckimas. This island is more mountainous than the other land on the southeast side of the river, which opposite to the Manhattas is about a league and a half in breadth. At the side of the before-mentioned

little river, which we call “Achter Cal,” there is a great deal of waste reedy land; the rest is full of trees, and in some places there is good soil, where the savages plant their maize, upon which they live, as well as by hunting. The other side of the same small river, according to conjecture, is about 20 to 23 leagues broad to the South River, 12 in the neighborhood of the Sancicans, in so far as I have been able to make it out from the mouths of the savages; but as they live in a state of constant enmity with those tribes, the paths across are but little used, wherefore I have not been able to learn the exact distance; so that when we wish to send letters overland, they (the natives) take their way across the bay, and have the letters carried forward by others, unless one amongst them may happen to be on friendly terms, and who might venture to go there.

The island of the Manhattas extends two leagues in length along the Mauritius River, from the point where the Fort “New Amsterdam” is building. It is about seven leagues in circumference, full of trees, and in the middle rocky to the extent of about two leagues in circuit. The north side has good land in two places, where two farmers, each with four horses, would have enough to do without much clearing at first. The grass is good in the forest and valleys, but when made into hay is not so nutritious for the cattle as here, in consequence of its wild state, but it yearly improves by cultivation. On the east side there rises a large level field, of from 70 to 80 morgens of land, through which runs a very fine fresh stream; so that that land can be plowed without much clearing. It appears to be good. The six farms, four of which lie along the River Hellgate, stretching to the south side of the island, have at least 60 morgens of land ready to be sown with winter seed, which at the most will have been plowed eight times. But as the greater part must have some manure, inasmuch as it is so exhausted by the wild herbage, I am afraid that all will not be sown; and the more so, as the managers of the farms are hired men. The two hindermost farms, Nos. 1 and 2, are the best; the other farms have also good land, but not so much, and more sandy; so that they are best suited for rye and buckwheat.

The small fort, New Amsterdam, commenced to be built, is situated on a point opposite to Noten Island; is a gun-shot wide, and is full six or seven fathoms deep in the middle. This point might, with little trouble, be made a small island, by cutting a canal through Blommaert’s Valley, so as to afford a haven winter and summer, for sloops and ships; and the whole of this little island ought, from its nature, to be made a superb fort, to be approached by land only on one side (since it is a triangle), thus protecting them both. The river marks out, naturally, three angles; the most northern faces and commands, within the range of a cannon shot, the great Mauritius River and the land; the southernmost commands, on the water level, the channel between Noten Island and the fort, together with the Hellgate; the third point, opposite to Blommaert’s Valley, commands the lowland. The middle part, which ought to be left as a market-place, is a hillock, higher than the surrounding land, and should always serve as a battery, which might command the three points, if the streets should be arranged accordingly.

Up the river the east side is high, full of trees, and in some places there is a little good land, where formerly many people have dwelt, but who for the most part have died or have been driven away by the Wappenos.

These tribes of savages all have a government. The men in general are rather tall, well proportioned in their limbs, and of an orange color, like the Brazilians; very inveterate against those whom they hate; cruel by nature, and so inclined to freedom that they cannot by any means be brought to work. They support themselves by hunting, and

when the spring comes, by fishing. In April, May and June, they follow the course of these, which they catch with a drag-net they themselves knit very neatly, of the wild hemp, from which the women and old men spin the thread. The kinds of fish which they principally take at this time are shad, but smaller than those in this country ordinarily are, though quite as fat, and very bony; the largest fish is a sort of white salmon, which is of very good flavor, and quite as large; it has white scales; the heads are so full of fat that in some there are two or three spoonfuls, so that there is good eating for one who is fond of picking heads. It seems that this fish makes them lascivious, for it is often observed that those who have caught any when they have gone fishing, have given them, on their return, to the women, who look for them anxiously. Our people give the same report; it is the same with them when they eat a great deal at one time, as can be shown by the shirts.

As an employment in winter they make sewan, which is an oblong bead that they make from cockle-shells, which they find on the sea-shore, and they consider it as valuable as we do money here, since one can buy with it everything they have. They string it, and wear it around the neck and hands; they also make bands of it, which the women wear on the forehead under the hair, and the men around the body; and they are as particular about the stringing and sorting as we can be here about pearls. They are very fond of a game they call Senneca, played with some round rushes, similar to the Spanish feather-grass, which they understand how to shuffle and deal as though they were playing with cards; and they win from each other all that they possess, even to the lappet with which they cover their private parts, and so they separate from each other quite naked. They are very much addicted to promiscuous intercourse. Their clothing is almost naked. In the winter time they usually wear a dressed deer skin; some have a bear's skin about the body, some a coat of scales, some a covering made of turkey feathers which they understand how to knit together very oddly, with small strings. They also use a good deal of duffel cloth, which they buy from us, and which serves for their blanket by night, and their dress by day.

The women are fine looking, of middle stature, well proportioned, and with finely cut features, with long and black hair, and black eyes set off with fine eyebrows. They are of the same color as the men. They smear their bodies and hair with grease, which makes them smell very rankly. They are very much given to promiscuous intercourse.

They have a marriage custom amongst them, namely, when there is one who resolves to take a particular person for his wife, he collects a fathom or two of sewan, and comes to the nearest friends of the person whom he desires, to whom he declares his object in her presence, and if they are satisfied with him, he agrees with them how much sewan he shall give her for a bridal present. That being done, he then gives her all the Dutch beads he has, which they call Machampe, and also all sorts of trinkets. If she be a young virgin, he must wait six weeks more before he can sleep with her, during which time she bewails or laments over her virginity, which they call Collatismarrenitten. All this time she sits with a blanket over her head, without wishing to look at anyone, or anyone being permitted to look at her. This period being elapsed, her bridegroom comes to her. He in the meantime has been supporting himself by hunting, and what he has taken he brings there with him; they then eat together with the friends, and sing and dance together, which they call Kintikaen. That being done, the wife must provide the food for herself and her husband, as far as breadstuffs are concerned, and she must buy what is wanting with her sewan.

For this reason they are obliged to watch the season for sowing. At the end of March they begin to break up the earth with mattocks, which they buy from us for the skins of beavers or otters, or for sewan. They make heaps like molehills, each about two and a half feet from the others, which they sow or plant in April with maize, in each heap five or six grains; in the middle of May, when the maize is the height of a finger or more, they plant in each heap three or four Turkish beans, which then grow up with and against the maize, which serves for props, for the maize grows on stalks similar to the sugar-cane. It is a grain to which much labor must be given, with weeding and earthing-up, or it does not thrive; and to this the women must attend very closely. The men would not once look to it, for it would compromise their dignity too much, unless they are very old and cannot follow the chase. Those stalks which are low and bear no ears, they pluck up in August, and suck out the sap, which is as sweet as if it were sugar-cane. When they wish to make use of the grain for bread or porridge, which they call Sappaen, they first boil it and then beat it flat upon a stone; then they put it into a wooden mortar, which they know how to hollow out by fire, and then they have a stone pestle, which they know how to make themselves, with which they pound it small, and sift it through a small basket, which they understand how to weave of the rushes before mentioned. The finest meal they mix with lukewarm water, and knead it into dough; then they make round flat little cakes of it, of the thickness of an inch or a little more, which they bury in hot ashes, and so bake into bread; and when these are baked they have some clean fresh water by them in which they wash them while hot, one after another; and it is good bread, but heavy. The coarsest meal they boil into a porridge, as is before mentioned, and it is good eating when there is butter over it, but a food which is very soon digested. The grain being dried, they put it into baskets woven of rushes or wild hemp, and bury it in the earth, where they let it lie, and go with their husbands and children in October to hunt deer, leaving at home with their maize the old people who cannot follow. In December they return home, and the flesh which they have not been able to eat while fresh, they smoke on the way, and bring it back with them. They come home as fat as moles.

When a woman here addicts herself to fornication, and the husband comes to know it, he thrashes her soundly, and if he wishes to get rid of her, he summons the Sachem with her friends, before whom he accuses her. And if she be found guilty, the Sachem commands one to cut off her hair in order that she may be held up before the world as a whore, which they call perochque; and then the husband takes from her everything that she has, and drives her out of the house. If there be children, they remain with her, for they are fond of them beyond measure. They reckon consanguinity to the eighth degree, and revenge an injury from generation to generation unless it be atoned for; and even then there is mischief enough, for they are very revengeful.

And when a man is unfaithful, the wife accuses him before the Sachem, which most frequently happens when the wife has a preference for another man. The husband being found guilty, the wife is permitted to draw off his right shoe and left stocking (which they make of deer or elk skins, which they know how to prepare very broad and soft, and wear in the winter time); she then tears off the lappet that covers his private parts, gives him a kick behind, and so drives him out of the house; and then "Adam" scampers off.

It would seem that they are very libidinous; in this respect very unfaithful to each other; whence it results that they breed but few children, so that it is a wonder when a

woman has three or four children, particularly by any one man whose name can be certainly known. They must not have intercourse with those of their own family within the third degree, or it would be considered an abominable thing.

Their political government is democratic. They have a chief Sachem whom they choose by election, who generally is he who is richest in sewan, though of less consideration in other respects. When any stranger comes, they bring him to the Sachem. On first meeting they do not speak; they smoke a pipe of tobacco. That being done, the Sachem asks, "Whence do you come?" The stranger then states that, and further what he has to say, before all who are present or choose to come. That being done, the Sachem announces his opinion to the people, and if they agree thereto, they give all together a sigh, "He!" and if they do not approve, they keep silence, and all come close to the Sachem, and each sets forth his opinion till they agree. That being done, they come all together again to the stranger, to whom the Sachem then announces what they have determined, with the reasons moving them thereto.

All travelers who stop over night come to the Sachem, if they have no acquaintances there, and are entertained by the expenditure of as much sewan as is allowed for that purpose. Therefore, the Sachem generally have three or four wives, each of whom has to furnish her own seed-corn.

The Sachem has his fixed fine of sewan for fighting and causing blood to flow. When any are

Coming out of the river Nassau, you sail east-and-by-north about fourteen leagues, along the coast, a half league from the shore, and you then come to "Frenchman's Point" at a small river where those of Patuxet have a house made of hewn oak planks, called Aptuxet, where they keep two men, winter and summer, in order to maintain the trade and possession. Here also they have built a shallop, in order to go and look after the trade in sewan, in Sloup's Bay and thereabouts, because they are afraid to pass Cape Malabar, and in order to avoid the length of the way; which I have prevented for this year by selling them fifty fathoms of sewan, because the seeking after sewan by them is prejudicial to us, inasmuch as they would, by so doing, discover the trade in furs; which if they were to find out, it would be a great trouble for us to maintain, for they already dare to threaten that if we will not leave off dealing with that people, they will be obliged to use other means. If they do that now, while they are yet ignorant how the case stands, what will they do when they do get a notion of it?

From Aptuxet the English can come in six hours, through the woods, passing several little rivulets of fresh water, to New Plymouth, the principal place in the district Patuxet, so called in their patent from His Majesty in England.

New Plymouth lies in a large bay to the north of Cape Cod, or Malabar, east and west from the said point of the cape, which can be easily seen in clear weather. Directly before the commenced town lies a sand-bank, about twenty paces broad, whereon the sea breaks violently with an easterly and east-northeasterly wind. On the north side there lies a small island where one must run close along, in order to come before the town; then the ships run behind that bank and lie in a very good roadstead. The bay is very full of fish, of cod, so that the Governor before named has told me that when the people have a desire for fish they send out two or three persons in a sloop, whom they remunerate for their

trouble, and who bring them in three or four hours time as much fish as the whole community require for a whole day: and they muster about fifty families.

At the south side of the town there flows down a small river of fresh water, very rapid, but shallow, which takes its rise from several lakes in the land above, and there empties into the sea; where in April and the beginning of May, there come so many shad from the sea which want to ascend that river, that it is quite surprising. This river the English have shut in with planks, and in the middle with a little door, which slides up and down, and at the sides with trellis work, through which the water has its course, but which they can also close with slides.

At the mouth they have constructed it with planks, like an eelpot, with wings, where in the middle is also a sliding door, and with trellis work at the sides, so that between the two [dams] there is a square pool, into which the fish aforesaid come swimming in such shoals, in order to get up above, where they deposit their spawn, that at one tide there are 10,000 to 12,000 fish in it, which they shut off in the rear at the ebb, and close up the trellises above, so that no more water comes in; then the water runs out through the lower trellises, and they draw out the fish with baskets, each according to the land he cultivates, and carry them to it, depositing in each hill three or four fishes, and in these they plant their maize, which grows as luxuriantly therein as though it were the best manure in the world. And if they do not lay this fish therein, the maize will not grow, so that such is the nature of the soil.

New Plymouth lies on the slope of a hill stretching east towards the sea-coast, with a broad street about a cannon shot of 800 feet long, leading down the hill; with a crossing in the middle, northwards to the rivulet and southwards to the land. The houses are constructed of clapboards, with gardens also enclosed behind and at the sides with clapboards, so that their houses and courtyards are arranged in very good order, with a stockade against sudden attack; and at the ends of the streets there are three wooden gates. In the center, on the cross street, stands the Governor's house, before which is a square stockade upon which four patereros are mounted, so as to enfilade the streets. Upon the hill they have a large square house, with a flat roof, built of thick sawn planks stayed with oak beams, upon the top of which they have six cannon, which shoot iron balls of four and five pounds, and command the surrounding country. The lower part they use for their church, where they preach on Sundays and the usual holidays. They assemble by beat of drum, each with his musket or firelock, in front of the captain's door; they have their cloaks on, and place themselves in order, three abreast, and are led by a sergeant without beat of drum. Behind comes the Governor, in a long robe; beside him on the right hand, comes the preacher with his cloak on, and on the left hand, the captain with his side-arms and cloak on, and with a small cane in his hand; and so they march in good order, and each sets his arms down near him. Thus they are constantly on their guard night and day.

Their government is after the English form. The Governor has his Council, which is chosen every year by the entire community, by election or prolongation of term. In inheritances they place all the children in one degree, only the eldest son has an acknowledgment for his seniority of birth. They have made stringent laws and ordinances upon the subject of fornication and adultery, which laws they maintain and enforce very strictly indeed, even among the tribes which live amongst them. They speak very angrily when they hear from the savages that we live so barbarously in these

respects, and without punishment. Their farms are not so good as ours, because they are more stony, and consequently not so suitable for the plow. They apportion their land according as each has means to contribute to the eighteen thousand guilders which they have promised to those who had sent them out; whereby they have their freedom without rendering an account to anyone. (Only if the King should choose to send a governor-general, they would be obliged to acknowledge him as sovereign overlord.) The maize seed which they do not require for their own use is delivered over to the Governor, at three guilders the bushel, who in his turn sends it in sloops to the north for the trade in skins among the savages; they reckon one bushel of maize against one pound of beaver's skins; the profits are divided according to what each has contributed, and they are credited for the amount in the account of what each has to contribute yearly towards the reduction of his obligation. Then with the remainder they purchase what next they require, and which the Governor takes care to provide every year. They have better sustenance than ourselves, because they have the fish so abundant before their doors. There are also many birds, such as geese, herons and cranes, and other small-legged birds, which are in great abundance there in the winter.

The tribes in their neighborhood have all the same customs as already above described, only they are better conducted than ours, because the English give them the example of better ordinances and a better life; and who also, to a certain degree, give them laws, in consequence of the respect they from the very first have established amongst them.

The savages utilize their youth in labor better than the savages round about us: the young girls in sowing maize, the young men in hunting. They teach them to endure privation in the field in a singular way, to wit:

When there is a youth who begins to approach manhood, he is taken by his father, uncle, or nearest friend, and is conducted blindfolded into a wilderness, in order that he may not know the way, and is left there by night or otherwise, with a bow and arrows, and a hatchet and a knife. He must support himself there a whole winter with what the scanty earth furnishes at this sea-on, and by hunting. Towards the spring they come again, and fetch him out of it, take him home and feed him up again until May. He must then go out again every morning with the person who is ordered to take him in hand. He must go into the forest to seek wild herbs and roots, which they know to be the most poisonous and bitter; these they bruise in water and press the juice out of them, which he must drink, and immediately have ready such herbs as will preserve him from death or vomiting. And if he cannot retain it, he must repeat the dose until he can support it, and until his constitution becomes accustomed to it so that he can retain it.

Then he comes home, and is brought by the men and women, all singing and dancing, before the Sachem; and if he has been able to stand it all well, and if he is fat and sleek, a wife is given to him.

In that district there are no lions or bears, but there are the same kinds of other game, such as deers, hinds, beavers, otters, foxes, lynxes, seals and fish, as in our district of country. The savages say that far in the interior there are certain beasts of the size of oxen, having but one horn, which are very fierce. The English have used great diligence in order to see them, but cannot succeed therein, although they have seen the flesh and hides of them which were brought to them by the savages. There are also very large elks there, which the English have indeed seen.

The lion skins which we sometimes see our savages wear are not large, so that the animal itself must be small; they are of a mouse-gray color, short in the hair and long in the claws.

The bears are some of them large and some small; but the largest are not so large as the middle-sized ones which come from Greenland. Their fur is long and black and their claws large. The savages esteem the flesh and grease as a great dainty.

Of the birds, there is a kind like starlings, which we call "maize thieves," because they do so much damage to the maize. They fly in large flocks, so that they flatten the corn in any place where they alight, just as if cattle had lain there. Sometimes we take them by surprise and fire amongst them with hail-shot, immediately that we have made them rise, so that sixty, seventy, and eighty fall all at once, which is very pleasant to see.

There are also very large turkeys living wild; they have very long legs, and can run extraordinarily fast, so that we generally take savages with us when we go to hunt them; for even when one has deprived them of the power of flying, they yet run so fast that we cannot catch them unless their legs are hit also.

In the autumn and in the spring there come a great many geese, which are very good, and easy to shoot, inasmuch as they congregate together in such large flocks. There are two kinds of partridges; the one sort are quite as small as quails and the other like the ordinary kind here. There are also hares, but few in number, and not larger than a middle-sized rabbit; and they principally frequent where the land is rocky.

This, sir, is what I have been able to communicate to you from memory, respecting New Netherland and its neighborhood, in discharge of my bounden duty. I beg that the same may so be favorably received by you, and I beg to recommend myself for such further service as you may be pleased to command me in, wherever you may find me.

In everything your faithful servant,
Isaac de Rasieres