

## “Govert Loockermans: Local Boy Makes Good”

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Govert Loockermans was born in Turnhout, in the province of Brabant, in about 1616, to Jacob Lokermans, a peat-cutter, living in France at the time, and his wife Maria Nicasius.

Turnhout was an unwalled city in Brabant, one of the areas in the southern Netherlands during the Reformation under Spanish and Roman Catholic rule. As unwalled, Turnhout and other cities like it suffered mightily during the long years of the Dutch Revolt, and many residents fled for safety, for religious freedom, and for economic betterment to the northern provinces of the Dutch Republic, particularly the Province of North Holland. It has been estimated that in 1600, up to 150,000 residents of Flanders, Brabant, and Wallonia emigrated north. These emigrants comprised up to 20 percent of the population of Holland in the seventeenth century. Govert was among them.

In 1632, now about sixteen, he found employment as a cook's mate aboard a vessel owned by the Dutch West India Company, the *de Soutbergh*, which was bound for New Amsterdam for trading purposes. It hardly needs saying that the occupation of cook's mate was at the very bottom of the social ladder. We can imagine Govert toiling over a fire in a three-sided brick fireplace in the bowels of the ship, a fire whose job it was his to tend all day long, as he endlessly boiled fish or dried peas for

the passengers. Nearby was a portable oven that he used for drying out wet biscuit full of weevils and parasites. We can be sure he soon wearied of serving up the usual fare of salted beef, pork, cod, dried peas, cheese, and hard bread to the 50 sailors “and at least 100 soldiers and other passengers” aboard, according to Willem Frijhoff, and cleaning up afterward as best he could in sea water with soap made of ashes and beef tallow.

The particular voyage that Govert undertook was an unusually long one, perhaps of nine months, as *de Southbergh* traveled to the Caribbean on its way to New Amsterdam, but during those months in a most fortuitous circumstance he got to know one of his shipmates in a way that would shape his future. This man was Wouter van Twiller, age about twenty-six, who was sailing to New Amsterdam to take up the position of Director of the colony of New Netherland.

Van Twiller was clearly impressed with the cook’s mate, who, he discovered, could not only read, write, and figure but who possessed other characteristics of interest to a man who might like to have a resourceful young striver in his orbit. The incoming Director offered the cook’s mate a job as clerk to the Dutch West India Company, which “owned” and administered the colony from afar, and Govert was on his way.

His employment as a WIC clerk was the first step on his career of trader and merchant, for it introduced him to prices and values, and to the commercial methods and customs then in use, to the trade routes pursued, and to the Native Americans who brought the coveted peltry from the interior to the trading posts along the Hudson and down the coast to the Chesapeake. He soon learned the native

languages enough to engage in trade with the Indians, independently of the Company, and with his profits he purchased a share in a small vessel.

In 1639, the faltering Dutch West India Company gave up its monopoly on the fur trade, and Govert, now twenty-two or twenty-three, saw his main chance. He returned to Amsterdam and, touting his experience, found employment with Gillis Verbrugge, the head of a powerful Amsterdam merchant family. Verbrugge hired Govert as factor for the family's business in New Netherland. The chronology is not crystal clear, but Govert, perhaps, had already sealed the deal by farsightedly having married his boss's widowed niece. Marriages among related Dutch families resulted in what has been described as a "dense network of relationships that confounded strangers and excluded newcomers." This marriage pattern was no mystery, and no accident. It was intended to create the kind of group the Dutch knew best and trusted most. It was the Dutch way of controlling real estate and other wealth. In his letters to his employers, preserved at the New-York Historical Society, Govert warmly addresses his wife's relatives as his dear Uncle and beloved cousins. He had joined the firm. He was family.

When Oliver Rink published his award-winning book *Holland on the Hudson* in 1986, Govert was so little known that he is not even mentioned in this important economic and social history of Dutch New York, although the Verbrugge family network is amply covered. Since 1986, however, historians have discerned the broad outlines of Govert's rise from lowly cook's mate to prominent merchant, one of the founders of New Amsterdam's first municipal government in 1653, and an official of the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church.

This brings up the matter of Govert's religious history. Historian Willem Frijhoff describes him as having "abandoned" his Roman Catholic faith in New Netherland, which seems a little harsh, since the Roman Catholic Church was not permitted to exist in New Netherland. Govert's correspondence in the New-York Historical Society reveals a religious bent and a strong deference to God. "Dear beloved Uncle and cousins," he wrote in an undated letter in the 1640s, "[I]f it is God's will, it will be a successful trip. I have no doubts He will bless it and give me good health so I can trade it to the best possible profit as will bring us blessing. I am confident He will grant that . . . , [S]o be commanded in God's mercy, who will bestow on us that which will bring us blessing, and who pleases to give us safe travel, since we will set sail today." This can be construed as the typical conventional pious language of the day, but it was sincerely meant.

Govert came to be, in the end, a model citizen, but along the way he was not always so virtuous or high-minded. Records reveal that, if they agreed not to trade with the English, he promised local Indians firearms and ammunition in return, which was highly illegal. He traded at posts on the Delaware that were reserved for Dutch West India Company officials, he was accused of torturing and killing Indians, and of smuggling. Willem Frijhoff portrays him as a "vigilant and cunning merchant," a "ruthless pioneer," and the forerunner of today's "Wall Street capitalist." But he was not the only up-and-coming merchant trader in New Netherland guilty of such offenses. It was a competitive, even cutthroat environment.

On the positive side, he comes out on the right side of history. Like many of his fellow New Netherlanders, he took exception to the autocratic rule of Director Willem Kieft, not only for promulgating disastrous wars against the Indians, but also for his disregard of even the very rudiments of representative government. He did the same in the case of Kieft's successor, Director General Petrus Stuyvesant. Even though in 1649 and 1650, he was a member of the so-called Board of Nine Men, an advisory group to Stuyvesant and his Council, Govert Loockermans in those years supported lawyer Adrian van der Donck's efforts to take the colonists' grievances against Stuyvesant to the States General in The Hague for redress. Van der Donck's efforts, hand delivered in the form of a long litany of complaints about the administration of the Colony and a petition requesting the establishment of municipal government for New Amsterdam, were successful. The States General ruled in favor of the colonists, and New York City recognizes February 2, 1653, as the starting point of its civic history.

It is quite amazing that Govert defied Stuyvesant in this way, for only two years before the petition of Adrian van der Donck, his elders in Amsterdam had strongly urged him against doing so. In a letter at the New-York Historical Society dated August 12, 1647, they wrote:

“We all, your devoted ship-owners, want to ask you to please keep the lord Stuyvesant as friend, and ensure to always stay in his good graces even if we are the topic of talks. Don't count the cost to honor him with this or that, whichever he or his wife would like to have, perhaps some goods where the price was too high. In that case you could sell it to him at cost, as he isn't just anyone! And such a man could do us great good, or great harm. Whatever you do, maintain a neutral posture. If it would happen that the freemen or the whole community were in opposition to him, in small or in big matters, keep yourself out of it. This way you can stay in his good graces. In general, a lot depends on preventing damage for us. Because if you get him against you,” they went on, “or if he were to become your enemy, he could be a considerable obstacle and break our necks over a straw. Or he could turn all your wares, and our wares, from profit to loss. As we

have taken on a very large project, as will become clear from the following, we will have all the more need for his good graces.”

Of course, it happened that the whole community did oppose Stuyvesant in 1649. But Govert was his own man, it seems, despite his employer’s dire warnings and despite the predictable wrath of the Director General.

By his two marriages (the second to Marritje Jans, sister-in-law of the Reverend Everardus Bogardus), and the marriages of his sister Anna and a nephew, Pieter, this complex figure became related to most of the leading families of New Amsterdam. The descendants of these various marriages still walk the earth today, and they number in the hundreds of thousands. Among the most illustrious in the past are Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Cyrus McCormick, Robert Fulton, various Astors, James Fenimore Cooper, Herman Melville, and even Montgomery Clift.

Govert Loockermans, local boy made good, indeed.

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