

Recognizing Dutch American Heritage Day

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Like every people group who has become part of the great American melting pot, the Dutch have left a lasting imprint on the fabric of The United States of America.

Every November 16 the United States celebrates Dutch-American Heritage Day. On November 16, 1776, a small American warship, the Andrew Doria, sailed into the harbor of the Dutch colonized island of St. Eustatius in the West Indies. The American crew was delighted when the governor of the island ordered that his fort's cannons be fired in a friendly salute. This was the first salute ever given by a foreign power to the flag of the United States. It was a risky and courageous act of international friendship, and the first acknowledgement of the independence of the United States. The Netherlands was also home to the first American Embassy in the world. John Adams purchased the house at Fluwelen Burgwal 18 in the Hague on April 19, 1782 (which is observed every April 19 as Dutch-American Friendship Day).



The people of the Netherlands (which we often call Holland), have a long history of friendship with the U.S. The Dutch were active allies of the American revolutionaries during the Revolutionary War. St. Eustatius was an important port for the Americans to acquire arms. Many early settlers of the New World were Dutch. The original name of New York was actually New Amsterdam, and it was the hub of New Netherland, which comprised sections of present-day New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, and Delaware. When you wander Manhattan, you'll still find hints of the original Dutch names like Stuyvesant. Even familiar locations like Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Flushing were originally Breukelen, Bronck, and Vlissingen.

Although freedom of religion is now considered an inalienable right within the United States, many of the people who first voyaged to the New World were attempting to escape religious persecution. The colony of New Netherland became a safe haven for those seeking freedom to practice the religion of their choice. However, people came to New Netherland from more than just Europe – those seeking to escape the confines of Puritanical society in New England regions like Boston and Rhode Island also came to New Netherland. As a result, the colony was one of the first to hold a truly cosmopolitan and blended society.

Experts believe that, in addition to Enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke, the Declaration of Independence was also influenced by the Dutch "Plakkaat van Verlatinge" (Act of Abjuration). The Act of Abjuration was written in 1581 to assert Dutch independence from Spanish rule, and contains several parallels with the Declaration of Independence, including

the famous preamble which asserts the right of citizens to revolt against tyrannical rule. Both documents also present both a catalog of concerns and grievances to prove oppression by either Spanish or British rule respectively, and a record of attempts to mediate these concerns within already existing legal or civic channels.

The Dutch have also impacted American English. There are roughly 8,000 words in the modern English lexicon that spring from Dutch roots. These include words such as easel, landscape, coleslaw, cookie, snack, skate, sled, sleigh, buoy, cruise, skipper, commodore, yacht, and so many more. Even Yankee and Knickerbocker have Dutch origins, and Santa Claus comes to us by way of the Dutch Sinter Klaas.

We have had several presidents of Dutch descent including Theodore and Franklin D. Roosevelt, George H.W. and George W. Bush, and Warren G. Harding. 8th President Martin Van Buren was the first president whose native language was not English. Van Buren's first language was Dutch. Other famous Americans of Dutch descent are inventor Thomas Edison, the famous Vanderbilt family, actors Audrey Hepburn, Dick Van Dyke, and Henry and Jane Fonda, musicians Eddie and Alex Van Halen, and Ronnie Van Zant, writer/ animator Matt Groening, baseball Hall of Famer Bert Blyleven and even Tiger Woods.

In my twenties I had the unique experience of living in the Netherlands for a year. I spent part of my year in Amsterdam and part of the year in a small town named Middenbeemster. I fell in love with the country, and found the people to be remarkably kind, incredibly brusque and straightforward, exceptionally tolerant, fiercely independent, and quick to lend a hand (while reminding you that they would have done it better). About seven years ago I discovered (in a letter from my Great-Great-Aunt Helen) that I have a little Dutch blood running through my veins. In fact, I have been to the area where my ancestors most likely lived before I even knew I had Dutch ancestors. I am five generations removed from the family who left a small town along the Dutch-German border to pursue a new life in the United States of America. It was an unexpected gift to discover a personal tie to the little country with a big personality that became a home away from home for me. I would always say that I was generically British and Scotch-Irish but knowing the names of specific individuals who left their Dutch homeland to get a new start across the ocean somehow makes me feel more American. I have a stake in the melting pot. I am proud of my Dutch heritage, and it has been a great adventure discovering the ways in which the Dutch have made their mark on the United States from its foundation to the present day.