

ENGLAND-NETHERLANDS COMPETITION IN SETTLING SPANISH-PORTUGUESE JEWS ON THE WILD COAST OF THE GUIANAS IN THE 17TH CENTURY

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The so-called Wild Coast stretches from the Amazon River on the east to the Orinoco River on the west. From the beginning of the 17th century, the possibilities for tropical produce made it attractive to European powers. The Portuguese settled in the Amazon River basin and the Spanish on the banks of the Orinoco River, now Venezuela. Between them lay the territories of Cayenne (now French Guyana), Berbice, Demerara, Essequibo, and Pomeroun (today the Republic of Guiana, formerly British Guiana) and Suriname (Surinam, formerly Dutch Guiana).

In order to gain their own footholds on the Wild Coast, the Dutch, the English and French each began a series of expeditions, which deteriorated into armed conflicts among them, with territory passing from hand to hand, leaving murder, pillage, and destruction in their wake. This situation continued until the 19th century.

The Dutch West India Company (founded in 1621) was one of the main forces in colonizing of the United Provinces of Netherlands. According to its founder and principal promoter, Willem Usselinx (1567–1647), it was the duty of the company to bring Calvinist teachings to the American shores. Investors viewed the war against Roman Catholicism and Spain as a religious obligation through which they could serve both God and their own economic interests.¹ Usselinx, who exhibited a crude anti-Semitism in his writings,² watched bitterly as the commercial interests began to prevail after the new company drew up a more commercial charter in 1645. The “Patroon,” who had to be a

- 1 Cornelius C. H. Goslinga, *The Dutch in the Caribbean and on the Wild Coast, 1580–1680*, Assen, 1971, pp. 55, 97, 100.
- 2 C. R. Boxer, *The Dutch Seaborne Empire, 1600–1800*, London, 1965, p. 129, citing Mss. Egerton, British Museum ff. 592.

religious leader, became in fact the Governor. Although the Dutch Reformed Church was the only one originally permitted in the colonies, gradually the Jews were quietly allowed to practice their religion. Priests did not wear their clerical dress in public.³

In 1625, the Dutch occupied the province of Pernambuco in the northern part of Brazil. The new colony was open for Jewish settlement and groups made up primarily of Portuguese Jews residing in Holland settled in Recife and Olinda as well as in other parts of Pernambuco. Jews in Dutch Brazil owned sugar plantations and sugar mills and traded successfully in refined sugar and other tropical products. When Dutch Brazil was retaken by the Portuguese in 1654, Jews had the possibility of leaving Brazil and finding another place to settle. As they were experienced businessmen the Jewish exiles from Brazil were looked upon as very desirable candidates for colonizing the Wild Coast.

One of the main inducements to ensure the arrival of Jewish settlers was civil rights, including freedom to observe their religion, particularly the Sabbath, and permission to open Jewish schools. A typical example was when Jewish refugees from Brazil arrived in Martinique: "A ship of 1400 tons reached the port at the beginning of 1654, its chiefs disembarked and came to present their homage to M. du Parquet (the Governor) and to ask him to agree to their settling in his island, on the same terms and conditions as the French settlers..."⁴

The Jewish exodus from Brazil coincided with the growing interest on the part of the European (Protestant) powers in the cultivation of sugar, the techniques of sugar manufacture, and other tropical produce. In the non-Spanish territories of the West Indies, sugar gradually became the main export crop, and increasing profit from duties on sugar made the possession of West Indian territory one of the chief aims of these colonial powers.

One of the basic documents designed to draw Jewish colonists was the grant by the Dutch West India Company (Amsterdam Chamber), dated September 12, 1659, to David Nassy and his partners for a Jewish colony at Cayenne, which states in paragraph one that David Nassy and his partners are to be Patroon and Patroons of the colony, which was not to extend as far as the town of Cayenne, so as not to interfere with other settlers. The aim was to set up an exclusively Jewish settlement, in which

3 Goslinga, p. 338.

4 R. P. Jean Baptiste du Tertre, *Histoire generale des Antilles Habitées par les Français*, Paris, 1667, vol. III, p. 12.

there would be provided freedom of conscience and provision for building a synagogue and opening a school.⁵

These privileges with a similar adaptation were used in regard to other Dutch territories in the Wild Coast, as in the document found by Robert Cohen in the Hague Archives, "Privileges Granted to the people of the Hebrew Nation that are to go to the Wild Coast."⁶

The Jews settled in the township of Remire, which in a short time became far more successful economically than the large settlement of Cayenne. Remire was described in 1763 by Bellin as "the most smiling and the most fertile region of the island."⁷ The Jews planted sugar cane, constructed a sugar refinery, produced dyes from indigo and roucou, and processed tropical products (cocoa and vanille). They had an orderly community life with its own rules and regulations. A 1659 receipt was found in Amsterdam for a Torah scroll for use in Remire.

On December 24, 1657, an agreement was signed between the Dutch West India Company and the Dutch cities of Middelburg, Vlissingen, and Vere in order to support settlements in the Pomeroon region of Guiana. Here again preference and priority was given to the Portuguese Jews who had fled Dutch Brazil and had experience in the region and were familiar with its conditions. The other potential settlers for the new colony were Dutch farmers and French Huguenots, neither of whom had experience in tropical America. The Jews settled in New Middelburg on the banks of the Pomeroon River and were joined by Jews from Amsterdam, Hamburg, Leghorn, and Salé (Morocco). Being Spanish-speaking, they were of great assistance in commerce with the Spanish colonies.⁸ Initial crises and difficulties notwithstanding, the colony met with success. Sugar from New Middelburg was available in Amsterdam as early as 1661.⁹

The English began settling in Barbados in 1627, a previously uninhabited island that was very attractive to settlers. They tried to grow tobacco, but the produce of Virginia in North America was better. Their

5 David Cohen Nassi, et al., *Essai historique sur la colonie de Surinam*, Paramaribo, 1788, II, pp. 113–122; and Jan Jacob Hartsinck, *Beschryving van Guiana*, Amsterdam, 1770, part 2, pp. 940–945.

6 Robert Cohen, "New Aspects of the Egerton Manuscript," *Jewish Historical Quarterly* 62 (1973), pp. 337–47.

7 S. Bellin, *Description géographique de la Guyanne...*, Paris, 1763, p. 6.

8 Mordechai Arbell, "The Jewish Settlement in Pomeroon, Pauroma, Guyana (1657–166)," *Revue des Etudes Juives*, 154 (1995), pp. 343–60.

9 James Rodway, *Chronological History of the Discovery and Settlement of Guyana, 1493–1668*, Georgetown, 1888, p. 148.

cotton was inferior to that of Carolina. The Governor Francis Lord Willoughby (1650–52, 1660–66) had to look for other opportunities for his already overpopulated island. The proximity to Dutch Brazil gave him the solution. “Dutch merchants being in large part Jewish gave the Barbadians the opportunity to break into the sugar market. Technology, marketing, and credit lines were brought.”¹⁰ David de Mercado from Brazil was considered the real founder of the Barbados sugar industry. His new technologies for refining, the art of drying and crystallizing, and the right positioning of the coppers in the furnaces made Barbados the richest English colony in the New World, owing entirely to sugar. The importance of de Mercado’s system was formally acknowledged on June 22, 1663.¹¹

Lord Willoughby, who was then also Governor of Surinam, called Willoughbyland, upon observing the conditions in Surinam became interested in bringing experienced planters to the colony. The opportunity came in February 1664, when a French fleet arrived in Cayenne. The Dutch commander surrendered, but in the terms of capitulation, the French commander Alexandre Prouville de Tracy accepted, in paragraphs 4 and 5, “the free exercise of the Jewish religion and his protection of it.”¹² These terms were not always kept and some of the Remire Jews and Dutch Protestants were “shipped to Rochelle (a military outpost on the border of Surinam), where they were given a favorable reception by the English.”¹³ The Cayenne Jews “brought with them their experience...and a marked increase of prosperity (in Surinam) could be noticed.”¹⁴

10 Hilary Beckles, *A History of Barbados from Amerindian Settlement to Nation State*, Cambridge (G.B.), 1990, p. 168.

11 David de Mercado, inventor of a sugar mill who “by his long residence in the West Indies, with much study, charge and expense hath attained to the perfection of making and framing of sugar mills after a new manner.” Francis, Lord Willoughby, and Lawrence Hyde asked to have the sole right to use the invention in the Barbados and the Cariby Islands. *Calendar State Papers, Colonial Series — American and the West Indies 1661–68*, p. 144. Oppenheim, “An Early Jewish Colony in Western Guiana, 1658–1666,” *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society [PAJHS]*, 17 (1907), p. 146.

12 du Tertre, v. 3, p. 34.

13 The Amsterdam newspaper *Hollandse Mercurius*, July 1664, cited in Hartsinck, *Beschryving van Guiana*, Amsterdam 1770, p. 167, and R. A. J. Van Lier, “The Jewish Community in Surinam, A Historical Survey,” in R. Cohen (ed.), *The Jewish Nation in Surinam*. Amsterdam, 1982, p. 19.

14 James A. Williamson, *Eight Colonies in Guiana and on the Amazon, 1604–1668*, Oxford, 1923, p. 160.

In order to attract more Jews, and to prevent them from going to other Dutch colonies, a “Grant of Privileges by the Governor, Council and Assembly of Surinam to the Jews of Surinam” was issued August 17, 1665, through which in addition to what was they had been given by the Dutch, they received: (1) exemption from compulsory public office; (2) the right to draw up wills and conclude marriages; (3) [the right] to conduct their own trials in cases of fines of less than 1000 pounds of sugar, and

Every person belonging to the Hebrew nation now resident here, or who may hereafter come to reside and trade here, or in any place or district within the limits of this colony, shall possess and enjoy every privilege and liberty possessed by and granted to the citizens and inhabitants of this colony, and shall be considered as English-born; and they and their heirs shall in this manner possess their property, whether real or personal.¹⁵

This is considered the first time in history that the English granted full religious liberty and citizenship to Jews.

According to the grant, the Jews were received under the protection of the English government, with all their property, even if said property was imported from any foreign place or kingdom — which really meant the neighboring Dutch colonies.

The Cayenne Jews who had settled in Surinam and who might have been considered aliens under the Navigation Act of 1660, and therefore prohibited from engaging in trade, with their goods subject to forfeiture, were now granted all the rights of other English citizens. It is doubtful whether the Dutch in the area, who had anticipated the English positive treatment of the Jews by several years, would have been ready to grant the same rights. The English actually copied many of the provisions the Dutch granted to their colonists on the Wild Coast.

Jamaica was captured by the English from Spain in 1655 and Port Royal became the chief center of English trade in competition with the Dutch commerce with the Spanish colonies. Therefore Cromwell and William III encouraged Jewish settlement in sparsely populated Jamaica. The almost total monopoly of Jews in the island’s “staple trade,” the vanilla and pimiento production, was an incentive to attract more Jews to Jamaica. In 1655 Governor Thomas Modyford proposed to Willoughby that he try to oust the Dutch from the West Indies. They were prodded by

15 *Essai Historique* (English version), vol. II, pp. 188–190.

the reports such as the one by the English agent in Leghorn, Charles Longland, to the Secretary of State John Thurloe on March 8, 1657, about the Dutch attracting Jews there for Pomeroun, granting them privileges and immunities.

It seems that the States of Holland are making a plantation betwixt Surinam and Cartagena in the West Indyces, wherein they go very wysly and pollitickly to work aiming chiefly at a trade there with the Spanyard: for which purpose they have sent hether to invyete many families of Jews and granted them many privileges and immunitys, which they have printed and sent hether. I intend your Honour a copy therefor enclosed if I can get it translated in tyme. Spanish is become now the Jews mother tongue not only in these parts but throughtout all the Turks dominions, in which respect they will be very useful to the Dutch in theyr plantation; and many opportunities may present for them to converse with the Spanyard;... the Spanyard there are in most extrem want of all European commoditys.¹⁶

In 1658 Major John Scott wrote about Pomeroun that “the Dutch settled... in the rivers Borowma [Pomeroun]...Jews drawn from Brazile by the Portuguese settled there, and being experienced planters, that soon grew a flourishing colony.”¹⁷ Further comment was made by General Byam, Governor of English Surinam, who noted “But the greatest of all they [the Dutch] ever had in America was Bowroom [Pomeroun], alias New Zealand, a most flourishing colony.”¹⁸

As a result, by commission of Lord Willoughby, in 1666 Major Scott attacked and completely destroyed in 1666 the colony of Pomeroun (New Middelburg).¹⁹ The Dutch returned to Pomeroun, but the Jews did not and there is uncertainty as to where they went. According to various attempts to track their movements, they eventually settled in Curaçao. It

16 Adam Anderson, *Origin of Commerce*, London, 1799, vol. 2, p. 585; David MacPherson, *Annals of Commerce*, London, 1805, vol. 2, p. 472; and State Papers of John Thurloe, London, 1742, v. VI, p. 825.

17 P. M. Netscher, *Geschiedenis van de Kolonien Essequibo, Demerary en Berbice*, The Hague, 1888, pp. 74–75, and V. T. Harlow (ed.), *Colonizing Expeditions to the West Indies and Guiana 1623–1667*, London, 1924, pp. 141–42. Major Scott, Account of Guiana, British Museum Sloane Ms. No. 3662, fol. 37, in Oppenheim, p. 124.

18 Lieut. General Byam, *Journal of Guiana from 1665 to 1667*, British Museum, Sloane Ms. No. 3667, fol. 27, published by Oppenheim in “An Early Jewish Colony in Western Guiana 1658–1666,” *PAJHS* 16 (1908), p. 137.

19 Harlow, p. 199.

is known that a group of Jews of Italian origin left Curaçao in 1693 and settled in Tucacas on the Venezuelan coast, where they founded the community Santa Irmandad (The Holy Brotherhood). As many of the Pomeroun Jews had come originally from Leghorn, Italy, and it is also known that there was no emigration from Leghorn to Curaçao, researchers have speculated that those Italian Jews may have been the refugees from Pomeroun.

In 1667 by orders of Gen. Henry Willoughby, Captain Sir John Harmon attacked Cayenne. His aim was twofold: to destroy the sugar works and to take the Jewish settlers in Remire back with him. He transferred 51 boiling coppers for sugar to the ships, burned the sugar mills, and destroyed the town.²⁰ He ordered that all the remaining Jewish settlers board the ships and that the French settlers remain. His amazed officers as Christians queried “whether any or all of the Jews do concern his Majesties interest?” The commander’s answer was, “It is necessary for the Jews to be transported for the reasons fit to be given to his Majesty.”²¹ It is not clear if the Jews were finally taken to Barbados or to Surinam.

In the same period, the Dutch admiral Abraham Crynsens attacked English Surinam and on March 7, 1667, the English surrendered. This Dutch occupation, ratified by the Treaty of Breda, stipulated by the terms of surrender that the English subjects shall be free to sell “their estates and depart from Surinam.” The Dutch refused to let the Jews leave and refused to see them as English subjects. Jamaica at the same time offered “The Dutch Hebrew and English Nation of Surinam — shipping for families, servants and merchandize, conveniences for making sugar, indigoes, and double quantity of land usually allotted.”²² The Dutch governor Peter Versterre realized that if the Jews leave, “it will bring destruction to Surinam.”²³ The English settlers took everything movable and set fire to the sugar mills.²⁴ The English had sent two commissioners for trade and plantations to supervise the evacuation of the English subjects. Their report to Sir Joseph Williamson, Principal Secretary of State, is very significant. It states that when the Dutch saw that the

20 Rodway, p. 210.

21 Harlow, p. 240 (Public Records Office, Lt. Gen. and Sir J. Harmon, ff. 172–89).

22 Gordon Merrill, “The Role of the Sephardic Jews in the British Caribbean Area,” *Caribbean Studies* 4:1 (April 1964), pp. 32–49.

23 L. L. E. Rens, “Analysis of Annals Relating to the Early Jewish Settlement in Surinam,” *Vox Guyana* (Paramaribo) 1 (1954), p. 34.

24 Rodway, p. 213.

number of Jews who wished to leave was much larger than they had expected, they refused to let them go, fearing it would lead to the destruction of the colony.²⁵ (See text in Appendix.)

In a protest against the Dutch government for detaining the Jews dated August 21, 1675, the English commissioners noted “all the mischievous consequences that may arise by you detaining the said Hebrew Nation.”²⁶ There followed a list of the persons of the Hebrew Nation willing to depart and transport themselves and their estates to Jamaica, but “hindered by your Government.” [The number of persons was 322, but this also included servants and slaves. — M.A.]

The Jews also pressured to leave and petitioned Whitehall:

Court of Whitehall

Present the King in Council

Petition

Issack Pereira

Aron de Sylva and diverse other Jews —

Jews formerly settled themselves in plantations in Surinam and became his Majesty's subjects being made free denizens by the Letters Patents under the Great Seal.²⁷

Whitehall's decision on the petition was to demand from Holland the release of the Jews detained in the colony.

It is very significant that the Jewish community in Surinam, aware of the hunger for Jewish colonists and the struggle between English and Dutch for every available settler, asked the Dutch governor Julius Lichtenberg to reconfirm their privileges, if they do not leave Surinam. They felt powerful enough and decided they could dictate their own terms. In a petition to the Dutch authorities they stated “in letters from various region, from many of our coreligionists, who are inclined to come and settle here, inquiry is made as to our conditions here, and how we are treated.”²⁸ They asked for confirmation of the privileges existing and the granting of new ones, mainly the privilege to work on Sundays,

25 Colonial Papers (MSS), v. 34, no. 115, Calendar Art 624, published by Dr. J. H. Hollander, “Documents relating to the attempted departure of the Jews in Surinam in 1675,” PAJHS, 5 (1897), p. 13

26 Colonial Papers (MSS), v. 35, no. 22 III Calendar Art 675 published by Dr. J. H. Hollander, “Documents relating to the attempted departure of the Jews in Surinam in 1675,” PAJHS, 5 (1897), p. 16.

27 Colonial Papers (MSS), v. 36 no. 23, Calendar Art 818.

28 *Essai Historique*, I, p. 38.

formation of a Jewish civil guard, elimination of debts incurred by the Inquisition, and the control of Church matters by the Jews, with recourse to the governor for enforcement if necessary.²⁹

Lichtenberg granted those rights (on October 1, 1669). The Dutch-English conflict, however, was not resolved until March 1672, when another war was declared between them. One of the pretexts for that war was the evacuation of Surinam.³⁰

It is not certain how many Jews left Surinam for Jamaica. I did not find the names of those who petitioned to leave in Jamaican registries. In Jamaica "the planters who quitted Surinam settled in the eastern district of the county of Cornwall, and obtained the name of Surinam quarters. The town of Laconia has about fourteen houses, mostly inhabited by Jews."³¹ The port of Savanna La Mar, which was the capital of Cornwall, and handled sugar, rum and mahogany produce, had an organized Jewish community. In the Barbados archives I have located Jewish planters from Surinam in Barbados.

With the decline of sugar prices in Europe with the introduction of beet sugar, beginning in the 18th century, the importance of Jewish expertise in sugar refining and sugar trading lessened. As a result the English authorities in Barbados and Jamaica limited Jewish rights. Special taxes were levied on Jews. Jews could not be elected to public office, their testimony could not be accepted in public courts if they did not swear on the Bible. These discriminatory practices continued until the beginning of the 19th century, when they were lifted—in Barbados in 1820 and in Jamaica in 1831. This was a far cry from the generous grant of privileges given to the Jews by the English in Surinam on August 17, 1665.

In Dutch Surinam it was intended to limit Jewish rights, especially those additional rights permitting Jews to work on Sundays and to perform their own marriages. This intention failed, not being approved by the central authorities in the Netherlands. The Jews were no longer the successful planters, but small, impoverished shopkeepers in the capital Paramaribo. A latent anti-Semitism began to surface. Jews were not invited to Dutch homes anymore, they were no longer nominated to public office, and they were not permitted to enter the city theater. The social status of the small shopkeeper was much lower than that of a planter.

29 *Essai Historique*, p. 131

30 James Rodway, *Guiana: British, Dutch and French*, New York, 1912, p. 70.

31 Thomas Coke, *A History of the West Indies*, Liverpool, 1808, p. 363.

When Jewish planters were needed, they received unprecedented rights and privileges, not known in many parts of the world in the 17th century. The tendency was to forget them when the need for Jews declined.

Appendix

For the Right Honourable Sir Joseph Williamson Principal Secretary of State of his Majesty of Great Britain 11/7/1675 Surinam

...it should be lawful for the Hebrew nation to depart, but since here is a ship arrived from Holland [as he pretends] brought orders for stopping them.

...finding the Jews to be as considerable both for numbers and fortune, and since he had published they may all depart, more had given their names than he expected, which wholly altered his resolution of suffering them to go, believing it would be immediate destruction to the place, which is the only ground (I presume) of altering yet which he had given, his concession unto.

Edward Cranfield
Marcus Brandt
Commissioners for Trade and Plantations