

Remnants Of The Early Dutch in Guyana 1616-1815

By Dmitri Allicock



Coat of arms -Flag of the Dutch West Indian Company- 1798 Map of Essequibo and Demerara

Nova Zeelandia (New Zealand)

Guyana is the only English-speaking country in South America, but English has been the official language for less than half the time Europeans occupied the country. The Dutch language was the main medium of communication for 232 years, from the time a group of Dutchmen sailed up the Pomeroon River and settled there, to 1812 when English replaced Dutch as the language used in the Court of Policy (Parliament). To this day, hundreds of villages have retained their original Dutch names like Uitvlugt, Vergenoegen and Zeeburg. Some present-day Guyanese have names like Westmaas, Van Lange and Meertens. No Guyanese citizen or visitor can escape visible and other reminders of our Dutch predecessors.

The ruins of a brick fort can still be seen on a little island where the Essequibo, Mazaruni and Cuyuni rivers meet. The original fort was a wooden structure built around 1600 by some Dutch traders who called it Kyk-over-al or "See-over-all" because it provided a commanding view of the three rivers. From 1627 the fort was controlled by the Dutch West India Company, a Holland-based organization which was vested with the power to establish colonies and which monopolized Dutch trade in the New World. The Company appointed Adrianetz Groenewegel as its first Commander to administer Kyk-over-al. The wooden fort was replaced in the 1630s by a brick structure which also served as an administrative centre.

Essequibo was founded by colonists from the first [Zeelandic](#) colony, [Pomeroon](#), which had been destroyed by Spaniards and local warriors around 1596. Led by Joost van der Hooge, the Zeelanders travelled to an island called Kyk-Over-Al in the Essequibo river, (actually a side-river called the [Mazaruni](#)). This location was chosen because of its strategic location and the trade with the local population. Van der Hooge encountered an older ruined Portuguese fort there (the Portuguese arms had been hewn into the rock above the gate).

Using funds of the [West Indian Company](#), van der Hooge built a new fort called 'Fort Ter Hoogen' from 1616 to 1621, though the fort quickly became known amongst the inhabitants as [Fort Kyk-Over-Al](#) (English: Fort See-everywhere). The administration of the West Indian Company as well as the governor of the entire colony settled here in 1621.

Initially the colony was named *Nova Zeelandia* (New Zealand), and incidentally the first New Zealand, but the usage of the name Essequibo soon became common. On the southern shore of the river the hamlet *Cartabo* was built, containing 12 to 15 houses. Around the river, plantations were created where slaves cultivated [cotton](#), [indigo](#) and [cacao](#). Somewhat further downstream, on [Forteiland](#) or 'Great Flag Island', [Fort Zeelandia](#) was built. From 1624 the area was permanently inhabited and from 1632, together with Pomeroon, it was put under the jurisdiction of the Zeelandic Chamber of the WIC (West Indian Company). In 1657 the region was transferred by the Chamber to the cities of [Middelburg](#), [Veere](#) and [Flushing](#), who established the 'Direction of the New Colony on Isekepe' there. From then on Pomeroon was called 'Nova Zeelandia'.

In 1658 cartographer Cornelis Goliath created a map of the colony and made plans to build a city there called 'New Middelburg', but the [Second Anglo-Dutch War](#) (1665–1667) put an end to these plans. Essequibo was occupied by the British in 1665 (along with all other Dutch colonies in [the Guianas](#)), and then plundered by the French. The following years the Zeelanders sent a squadron of ships to retake the area. While the [Suriname colony](#) was captured from the British by [Abraham Crijnsen](#), the by then abandoned Essequibo was occupied by Matthys Bergenaar. In 1670 the Chamber of the WIC in Zeeland took over control of the colonies again. The Dutch colonies in the region endured much suffering as a result of the [Nine Years' War](#) (1688–1697) and the [Spanish Succession War](#) (1701–1714), which brought [pirates](#) into the region. In 1689 Pomeroon was destroyed by French pirates, and abandoned.

The Chamber of the WIC in Zeeland kept control over the colonies, which sometimes led to criticism from The Chamber of the WIC in Amsterdam, who also wanted to start plantation there. The Zeelanders however, had established the colony by themselves, and after they retook possession of Essequibo under command of the commander of Fort Nassau Bergen in 1666, they considered themselves as rightful rulers of the region. Under governor Laurens Storm van 's Gravesande, English planters started coming to the colony after 1740.

After 1745 the number of plantations along the Demerara and her side-rivers rapidly increased. Particularly, British colonists from [Barbados](#) began settling here. After 1750 a commander of the British population was assigned, giving them their own representation. Around 1780 a small central settlement was established at the mouth of the Demerara, which received the name *Stabroek* in 1784, named after one of the directors of the West Indian Company. From 27 February 1781 to February 1782 the colony [was occupied by the French](#). In 1796 it was permanently occupied by the British.

In 1800 Essequibo and Demerara collectively held around 380 sugarcane plantations.

At the [Peace of Amiens](#), the Netherlands received the Essequibo colony for a short time, from 1802 to 1803, but after that the British again occupied it. In 1812 Stabroek was renamed by the British as [Georgetown](#).

Essequibo became an official British territory on 13 August 1814 as part of the [Treaty of London](#), and was merged with the colony of [Demerara](#). On 21 July 1831, [Demerara-Essequibo](#) was united with [Berbice](#) to create [British Guiana](#), now [Guyana](#).

In 1838, Essequibo was made one of the three counties of Guiana, the other two being Berbice and Demerara. In 1958, the county was abolished when Guiana was subdivided into districts. Currently, historical Essequibo is part of a number of [Guyanese administrative regions](#) and the name is preserved in the regions of [Essequibo Islands-West Demerara](#) and [Upper Takutu-Upper Essequibo](#).



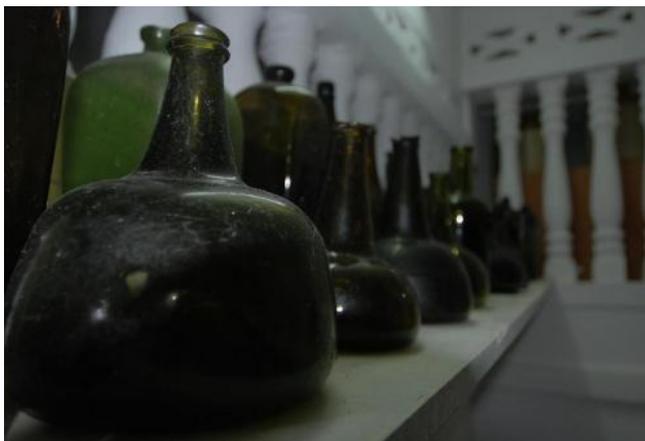
Dutch Hall

This is the great **Dutch hall** on Flag Island in the Essequibo River, established in 1744. It has tall, shuttered windows, the bell-tower of a church and the body of a warehouse. Aside from forts, it's probably the oldest building in Guyana. Inside there's a large expanse of flagstones, a cluster of well-laureled tombs, and a colony of bats. In its day, the hall had been a church, an office, a college, a slave market, and, most importantly, the Court of Policy. From here, the Dutch planters had declared dominion over an estate five times the size of Holland. Now all that remained of them were a few colored pictures, each looking splendid in a breastplate and wig.



Historical Dutch Church – Leguan, Guyana

Leguan, one of the few inhabited islands of the Essequibo, sits squarely in the mouth of the river, a relatively short speedboat ride from Parika. Leguan Island is situated in the delta of the Essequibo River on the coast of Guyana, South America. The island is shaped like a gull wing and is nine miles (14 km) long and 2 miles (3.2 km) wide at its widest making it roughly twelve square miles in area.



Historical Hand-blown wine bottles and decanters left by the early Dutch. The Dutch were in what's now Guyana from 1595, and they remained in Suriname until 1975. A point worth noting, many Dutch never left the Colonies and are the ancestors of many Guyanese. Throughout the creeks there are flagons, demijohns, hand-blown wine bottles, decanters, crocks, pots and flasks. But mostly it's gin. If it's possible to read history from the rubbish, then a curious picture emerges.



Fort Kyk-Over-Al was a [Dutch](#) fort in the colony of [Essequibo](#). It was constructed in 1616 on an islet in the mouth of the [Mazaruni River](#). It once served as the centre for the Dutch administration of the county, but now only ruins are left. The name Kyk-Over-Al derives from the Dutch for "See over all", a reference to the commanding view of the river from the fort. Fort Kyk- Over- Al is located on a small island, which is approximately 1.5 acres in size. The island was once the seat of government for the colony of Essequibo under the period of Dutch occupation in the 17th century. It is said to have been

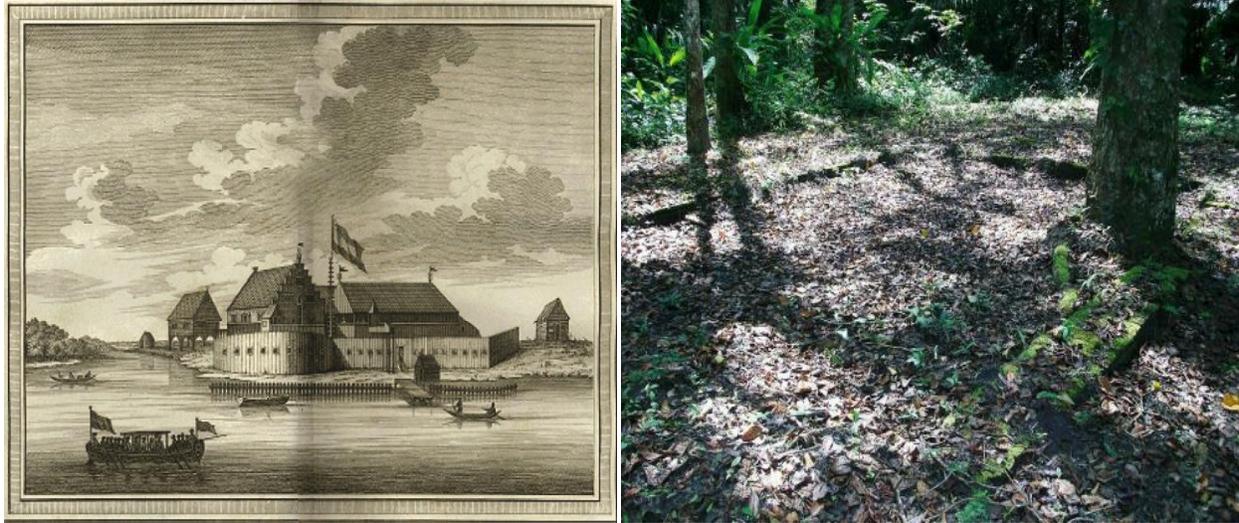
the smallest fort ever built by the Dutch overseas.

The Dutch faced their first serious attacks in 1665 when Major John Scott was sent by the Governor of [Barbados](#), [Lord Willoughby](#), to invade the settlements in the [Pomeroon](#). By that time, prosperous sugar plantations were already established in that area. Scott, in alliance with [Caribs](#), seized [Nova Zeelandia](#), and after leaving 50 men to hold it, he proceeded up the [Essequibo](#) and occupied Kyk-Over-Al with 20 men.

The occupation of Kyk-Over-Al by the English did not last long, for the Dutch Commandeur of [Berbice](#), [Matthys Bergenaar](#), was able to march overland with a group of soldiers and recapture it. At the same time, a French expedition arrived in the Pomeroon area to help the [Dutch](#) who were their allies. They besieged the English at the fort at Nova Zeelandia and starved the men into surrendering. The prisoners were shortly after massacred by the [Arawaks](#) who were allies of the [French](#).

Thus, Essequibo reverted to the Dutch, and Admiral Crynssen, who had earlier captured [Suriname](#) from the English, arrived as Commandeur. He concentrated his attention on redeveloping Kyk-Over-Al and the surrounding areas. Pomeroon was not regarded as a priority.

In 1676 the Dutch established a trading post on the [Pomeroon River](#). Ten years later, they decided to appoint a separate Commandeur to control affairs on that river while maintaining a Commandeur at Kyk-Over-Al. This caused some difficulty because the Commandeur of Kyk-Over-Al refused to render assistance to his counterpart in Pomeroon. Nevertheless, within two years, settlements sprang up and [sugar cultivation](#) was established again.



Fort Nassau on the Berbice River

This is all that remains of **Fort Nassau**, on the Berbice River, Guyana. Fort Nassau was the capital of the colony of [Berbice](#). It was situated approximately 88 kilometers upstream the [Berbice River](#) from [New Amsterdam](#).

The original fort was burnt by the French when they attacked Berbice in 1712. A new fort was subsequently built, which was burned in 1763 by Berbice governor Van Hoogenheim to prevent it from [falling in the hands of revolting slaves](#).

The remains of Fort Nassau were declared a National Monument by the Guyanese government in 1999. Recently, efforts have been started to preserve the fort.

Only one 18th century description of these building remains, from a Dutch traveler called Hartsinck. In "Beschrijving van Guiana of de Wilde Kust", he'd described a structure 100 feet long and 50 feet wide, which had served as a church, a storehouse, the government, and the home of the 'corp de garde'.

On 8 March 1763, the Dutch - faced by a massive slave revolt - spiked the guns, and the fort was set on fire. Now all that remains are a few outlines (the hall, and some stables, according to Hartsinck, two smithies and some barracks). But, inside the forest, it's cathedral-cool, and, on the day I visited, we also found the old ramparts, a small brick bridge, some glazed tiles, and a stash of hand-blown bottles.

In 1733, a village which had sprung up around Fort Nassau was named New Amsterdam ([Dutch: Nieuw Amsterdam](#)). The fort and the village were abandoned in 1785 in favor of [Fort Sint Andries](#), situated more downstream, at the confluence of the [Canje River](#). The new village was again named [New Amsterdam](#), and is still known by that name in contemporary Guyana.



One of the most significant Dutch legacies in Guyana was the method of land management. Settlement and agriculture initially were limited to a belt of land extending 50 to 150 kilometers upriver. The marshy coast flooded at high tide and did not appear conducive to European settlement.

The prospect of large profits for tropical agricultural products, especially sugar, led to the reclamation of coastal lands in the second half of the 1700s. In the 1740s, when Dutch sugar planters moved their estates from Kyk-over-al to other locations towards the coastal belt, they had to spend large sums of money and organize an army of manpower on sea defense, drainage and irrigation.

The Guyana coastland is six feet below high-tide level and is vulnerable to flood-water from the sea. In addition, the planters had to combat water draining down from the highlands behind their estates and were threatened with flooding every rainy season. Faced with this dual agony, the Dutch planters devised a system of water control that is used up to this day.

The Dutch were eminently suited to this task, having originated the polder system, a technique by which a tract of usable land is created by damming and then draining a water-covered area. Using this system, the Dutch created a coastal plain that remains one of Guyana's most productive plantation areas.

The polder system entailed the use of a front dam, or facade, along the shorefront. This dam was supported by a back dam of the same length and two connecting side dams, which formed a rectangular tract of land known as a polder. The dams kept the salt water out, and fresh water was managed by a network of canals that provided drainage, irrigation, and a system of transportation. The labor for the "polderization" of Guyana's coast was provided by the Dutch colony's African slaves.

History is the witness that testifies to the passing of time; it illuminates reality, vitalizes memory, provides guidance in daily life, and brings us tidings of antiquity. In life and in death, in the past and the present, our Dutch pioneers attempted and tamed the wild of early Guyana and left an indelible impression, worthy of preservation.