



## *The Story of Pieter and the Wyckoff Farmhouse*

THE WYCKOFF FARMHOUSE was built around 1652 and was home to the family of Pieter Claesen Wyckoff, his wife Grietje van Ness, their 11 children, and eight generations of their descendants.

### **Who is Pieter?**

Pieter grew up near the city of Norden. Today, Norden is in Germany, but during Pieter's life, it was part of the Holy Roman Empire.

Unable to read or write, and without any family of his own, Pieter agreed to travel to North America and work on van Rensselaer's farm for six years as an indentured servant.

### **Pieter's Journey**

On September 25, 1636, Pieter set sail from Amsterdam on the Rensselaerswyck with 37 other travelers. It was a challenging journey, and the ship was damaged and delayed many months by terrible weather. Finally, the ship reached the small town of New Amsterdam (New York City) on March 4, 1637.



New Amsterdam (New York City) as it might have appeared to a young Pieter Claesen as he approached on his way to Rensselaerswyck. Image from New York Public Library.

Once the Hudson river was clear of ice, the Rensselaerswyck set sail along the Hudson River, landing in van Rensselaer's patroonship (farm) on April 7, 1637.

Pieter helped work Rensselaer's land on Papscanee Island (near present-day Albany) for six long years, transforming this wilderness into a productive farm.

### **A Farm of One's Own**

Finally, on April 7, 1643, Pieter completed his contract with Rensselaer and became free. He remained a farmer at Rensselaerswyck for several more years, eventually marrying another resident of the patroonship, Grietje van Ness. The two of them started their own farm nearby, but they decided to move when the director of the patroonship threatened to raise rents in 1649.

Pieter and Grietje moved down the river to find land that they



The village of New Amersfoort (later East Flatbush–Flatlands) was surrounded by very fertile land great for farming.

could own, rather than lease. In order to encourage colonists to settle the land and prevent the spread of the British, the Dutch government gave farmers as much land as they could farm for free. This was an enticing deal for the young couple, so they moved to the small town of New Amersfoort, which is today in the East Flatbush–Flatlands neighborhoods of Brooklyn.

### **Home Sweet Home**

Soon after arriving at New Amersfoort, Pieter and Grietje's family began to grow, and Pieter became an important figure in the village government. The Dutch director, Peter Stuyvesant, appointed Pieter Claesen a magistrate in the village government and granted him a farm from the West India Company.

In 1655, the young family—Pieter, Grietje, their son Nicholas, and their young daughters Margaretje and Annetje—moved into the house that is today the Wyckoff House Museum.

By 1657, Pieter owned more farmland than any other villager. His family, too, began to grow, and he and Grietje would eventually have 11 children, all of whom survived to adulthood.

Daily life for the family included many chores around the house and nearby farmland. Everyone, including the young children, helped to take care of the family. While Pieter and his children grew many crops to sell at market in nearby New Amsterdam, Grietje and her daughters tended the kitchen garden, growing all of the food needed to feed the family. The house was a bustling center of activity, with 13 family members and the occasional farm hand all pitching in.

### **From Past to Present**

Pieter died in 1694. When Grietje died some years later, the house passed to their oldest son, Nicholas. The house stayed in the family until 1901, when this part of Brooklyn was still primarily farmland. It remained occupied into the 1950s, falling deeper and deeper into disrepair. Eventually, it became used as a storage shed for a gas station that operated on the corner of Clarendon and Ralph Avenue. Finally, after surviving many years of neglect and a fire, the house was restored in 1982.

★ **What do you think?** *Have you ever moved to a new home, transferred to a new school, or changed jobs? How does your family's story compare with the story of the Wyckoff family?*



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