

## Kiliaen Van Rensselaer Letter to Arendt Van Curler, May 10<sup>th</sup>, 1638

### Topic

- New Netherland
- Atlantic trade
- Colonialism
- Mercantilism

### Skills

- Close reading
- Reading for tone
- Gathering & Interpreting Evidence

Middle & High School  
Level

In a nutshell,  
this document  
shows...

- Different wares and merchantable goods brought to New Netherland from Holland
- The business relationship between Kiliaen Van Rensselaer and Arendt Van Curler
- The family lineage of Arendt Van Curler and his connection to the Van Rensselaers
- The agricultural and commercial goals of the Patroonship of Rensselaerswyck

### Essential Question:

**What was the main goal of those who founded and managed New Netherland?**

### Historical Context:

**This letter from Kiliaen Van Rensselaer, Patroon of Rensselaerswyck and wealthy stockholder in the Dutch West India Company, was sent to his nephew, Arendt Van Curler. Van Curler was assigned with managing Kiliaen's affairs in North America, as Kiliaen never left Holland to manage his Patroonship. Van Curler was virtually in charge of Rensselaerswyck, which encompassed modern day Albany and Rensselaer counties, and included the lands surrounding Fort Orange. Though the Patroon notes tobacco planting and other main sources of income for the investor, Van Curler was assigned with managing the finances of the Patroonship, and thus engaged in the fur trade with Native Americans visiting the woods and riverfronts near Fort Orange, where Van Curler lived during his tenure as Kiliaen's Secretary.**

## Document Analysis:

1. Introduce the lesson with a bell-ringer question regarding a specific quotation from Kiliaen Van Rensselaer's letter to Arendt Van Curler that you will write on the board: "...one has to be servant before one can be master." What does this quotation reveal to you about business in New Netherland? Allow students to respond in broad terms.
2. Distribute the primary document to students and instruct them to identify what type of document it is, who wrote it, and who it is addressed to.
3. After students identify the document, give a brief lecture on New Netherland as a Dutch colony in North America, spanning 1609 to 1664. Introduce Kiliaen Van Rensselaer, his role in the Dutch West India Company, and his nephew and secretary Arendt Van Curler.
4. Read aloud the letter to Van Curler once to the class and instruct students to follow along. Then read aloud the guiding questions accompanying the document and instruct students to keep the questions in mind as you read aloud the letter a second time.
5. Instruct students to find a partner or form a small group of 3 and instruct them to answer each guiding question collaboratively.
6. Reconvene class and have students volunteer their answers for each guiding question, allowing at least 2 pairs or groups to respond to each question.
7. Assign students a creative writing assignment in which they take on the role of Arendt Van Curler. Instruct students to respond to Kiliaen Van Rensselaer's letter, addressing each responsibility and providing feedback to Van Rensselaer's requests by predicting how Van Curler would have responded to his uncle's letter. Their responses should be at least 3 paragraphs long and should address each instruction given to Van Curler by Van Rensselaer.
8. Conclude the lesson by posing the essential question for the students: "What was the main goal of those who founded and managed New Netherland?"

## *Optional Extension Activity:*

The following activity could be completed in order to extend students' thinking and encourage them to make connections.

Return to Arendt Van Curler at the very end of the New Netherland unit. Have students research the Van Rensselaer Bowier manuscripts [located on the New Netherland Institute's website at <https://www.newnetherlandinstitute.org/research/online-publications/van-reysselaer-bowier-manuscripts/>] and analyze any correspondence between Van Rensselaer and Van Curler. Did Van Curler change while living in New Netherland? In what ways did his career evolve?

**A.J.F. Van Laer, Van Rensselaer Bowier Manuscripts: Being the Letters of Kiliaen Van Rensselaer, 1630-1643, and Other Documents Relating to the Colony of Rensselaerswyck, Albany: University of the State of New York, 1908.**

Kiliaen Van Rensselaer to Arent Van Curler  
May 10, 1638

Arent van Coorler, assistant

This day, 10 May

Honorable, discreet cousin Arent van Coorler: I hope that by this time, with God's help you have arrived in my colony and duly delivered there the goods which you took with you and that according to my wish you have already begun noting everything down exactly and writing me of it, that I may know how things stand there, especially as to the increase of the animals, horses, cows, etc.; also, that you kept a correct account of all the goods which I sent heretofore and now send herewith, and where they may be sold with profit. In all things, however, you will have to submit yourself to your commis with whom you serve so that he will not have to complain of you; but aside from that you may write me of every detail and if you take good care of your affairs and write and advise me at length I will, when the opportunity offers itself and in proportion to your capacity, also take care of your promotion and advancement, but one has to be servant before one can be master. Write me also definitely about the tobacco planting, how it has succeeded there, and of the farms and of the saw and grist-mills and what further there may be of interest, and do not let any opportunity for writing me go by as we long very much for news here. Your father is still well and your brother is at present staying at my house; both send many greetings, etc.

**What sort of job has Kiliaen Van Rensselaer assigned to his nephew, Arendt Van Curler? Would you say Van Curler's job is important? Why or why not?**

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# Consider the Source Online



**Van Rensselaer instructs Van Curler to do several things upon arriving in the colony. List every task. Highlight what you believe to be Van Curler’s most important assignment. Why did you choose this?**

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**What does this document tell you about the overall design of New Netherland? What might life be like there for the colonists living in Rensselaerswyck?**

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**Put yourself in Van Curler’s shoes. How would you respond to “one has to be servant before one can be master”? Does this document tell you anything about Van Rensselaer or Van Curler’s aspirations? Take note of any possible answers you can come up with.**

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