

Early Foods and Medicines of 17th Century New Amsterdam: Cross-cultural Plant Exchange in the Lower Hudson River Valley

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This paper analyzes the archaeology and environmental implications of 17th century ethnobotanical data from the initial shoreline block of the Dutch West India Company (WIC) in Lower Manhattan. In addition to the structural remains of the colony's early inhabitants, the excavation yielded a well preserved sequence of colonial plant remains spanning the periods of Dutch and early English rule and, in essence, a three-phase, century-long, series of environmental time capsules dating back to the first half of the 17th century. This revised archaeological and botanical chronology: 1) revealed significant order-of-magnitude changes in plant diversity between the 17th and 18th centuries; 2) presents new archaeological insights about the introduction and nature of early Dutch cultigens in New Amsterdam; 3) suggests that many of the archaeologically-recovered early 17th century plants may have been collected, or cultivated, as foods, dyes, or medicines, from both European and Native American sources. Building from new research in Dutch botanical history, these data suggest some of the mechanisms, institutionalized protocols, and traditions, especially those highlighting the role of women, underlying the cross-cultural exchange of medicinal plant knowledge. Finally, ethnohistorical parallels in the naming, qualities and uses of the recovered medicinal plants also suggest long distance inter-regional networks (e.g. Inter-coastal, Upper Hudson-Lower Hudson) of shared ethnobotanical expertise between Native American herbalists and Dutch, as well as English, and possibly French, colonial botanists and medical practitioners.

HRES CONFERENCE: Environmental History of New York City and the Hudson River. Pace University, February 9th, 2011. Sponsored by the Hudson River Environmental Society ([HRES](#)) and the Hudson River Foundation.

January 20, 2011