

Long Island's First Italian, 1639

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FOREWORD

It seems not untimely today to recall the story of Pietro Caesar Alberto who became a Long Island farmer in what is now the Borough of Brooklyn even before the island's first English settlements were established at Southold and Southampton.

Alberto's arrival and Americanization are here described by one who is himself a descendant of this first Italian to become a Long Islander. Judge Pyrke is a trustee of the New York State Historical Association. He is perhaps more widely known, however, for having served eleven years as State Commissioner of Agriculture and Markets. Before that he had been County Judge and Surrogate of Essex County.

In dedicating his treatise to the many staunch Americans of Italian birth and extraction now serving in the nation's armed forces and other activities, Judge Pyrke called attention to the fact that Pietro Caesar Alberto was among the early settlers who came to America from a fatherland, Venice, which was even then a republic.

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ON MAY 28, 1635, in the evening, the ship *de Coninck David*, Captain David Pietersen de Vries, skipper, mounting fourteen guns and with a crew of five and twenty men, dropped anchor far down the Bay into which the River of the Prince Mauritius poured its waters gathered in the far mountains. Two days later a boat was lowered into which clambered Captain de Vries and five of the crew. Without an inkling of the fate in store for them, the oarsmen bent to the task of propelling the heavy boat to Fort Amsterdam five Dutch miles away. No one of the boatload other than the skipper himself was destined ever again to tread the deck of the *de Coninck David* or of any other vessel.

We may guess the reason for this labored method of approaching the Fort. Two years before, de Vries had had an unpleasant experience with Wouter Van Twiller, the director general, which still rankled. Van Twiller had searched his ship, confiscated a few beaver skins, charged de Vries with violation of a regulation of the colony, and at one point in the controversy

had ordered the guns of the Fort trained on de Vries' vessel and threatened its destruction. This was bitter medicine to be swallowed by the proud spirited de Vries, outstanding navigator of the Netherlands and co-founder of the ill-fated *Swanendael* on the South River, the more unpalatable coming from Van Twiller just risen from a clerkship in the office of the Company in Amsterdam. De Vries had lodged a complaint in the home office and Van Twiller had learned of it from Kiliaen Van Rensselaer, his uncle. Under the circumstances it was prudent for de Vries to feel out the situation before bringing his ship within gun range of the fort.

There was urgency, however in the call. The *de Coninck David* was leaking dangerously, and facilities for repair being lacking in the Virginias, de Vries was forced to make the unplanned run up the coast to New Amsterdam in search of assistance.

On arrival at the Fort, de Vries found Van Twiller still holding forth, but weighted down with troubles and in a mellow and cooperative mood. Shortly before, he had sent

an armed force to the South River to suppress an attempt at colonization by a band of Englishmen from Point Comfort, Virginia, who had seized the site of abandoned Fort Nassau. He had captured the intruders and brought them to New Amsterdam but was at wits' end to dispose of his troublesome guests. In addition the English were again becoming aggressive at the Fresh River. All in all he welcomed the opportunity to consult the experienced de Vries who was well versed in the ways of the English and had established cordial relations with the settlers in the Virginias.

De Vries, deep in conference with Van Twiller and not indifferent to Van Twiller's unexpected hospitality, decided to remain at the Fort while he sent his crew back to the ship. Providentially for him, as it developed, he had found at the Fort one Flips Jansz, an experienced pilot formerly in his employ, and he engaged Flips to accompany the crew and to bring in the ship. To the decision to remain at the Fort de Vries owed his life.

With the return journey nearly completed and the de Coninck David but a mile or two away, a violent thunderstorm arose which the small boat found difficulty in weathering. Filling with water it

went entirely out of control. Two of the panic stricken crew, Frenchmen, went overboard in a desperate attempt to swim to the ship and were drowned. Towards nightfall two more jumped into the water in a hopeless effort to swim to shore and were seen no more. This left Flips Jansz and de Vries' boatswain alone in the boat.

For two days and three nights the boat was tossed back and forth, the plaything of the maddened waves. In the afternoon of the third day the boatswain announced that he would abandon the boat. Flips responded that for his part he would await the Providence of God. The boatswain let himself into the sea and disappeared. Flips' resignation to Providence brought reward. Within a quarter of an hour of the disappearance of the boatswain, the boat was cast through the heavy surf to the shore of Long Island. Mustering his remaining strength, Flips dragged himself five or six paces from the water and fell exhausted. Friendly Indians found him, carried him to their habitations and brought word of the tragedy to the anxious de Vries.

Earlier, de Vries, mystified by the failure of his ship to arrive, sent one of the Company's yachts to bring in the

vessel, and without further untoward incident this was accomplished.

When the de Coninck David made contact with the wharf one of the crew without ceremony leaped ashore, and with quickening pace moved towards the little community huddled about the Fort and disappeared in its shadows. The name of the ex-sailor, for he was to be a landsman henceforth, was Pietro Caesar Alberto, a native of Malamocco, Republic of Venice, the first of the Italian race to become a settler in New Netherland and probably in all of North America, and the progenitor to be of all in America of the name of Alburtis or Burtis, names once very common on Long Island.

This informal and unplanned entrance into New Netherland of Alberto is veiled heavily in mystery. He has been tentatively identified by Louis P. de Boer, a specialist in old world antecedents of early American settlers, as Guilo Cesare Alberti, son of Andrea Alberti, Secretary of the Ducal Treasury of Venice, and Lady Veronica, his wife, baptized in the Parish Church of San Luca on June 20, 1608. An older brother, Pietro, it seems, had died previously. Later when another son was born he was named Pietro but

to avoid an ill omen was baptized Guilo.

Skepticism is in order when high birth is imputed to early settlers in New Amsterdam. In 1635 life was hard and drab and the rewards of effort meagre in that feeble community, struggling to complete its first decade of existence. In fact it was doubtless one of the last spots on the planet where one should have searched for a scion of the proud House of Alberti, a notable family, of Gothic or Lombardic origin, widely spread in the south of Europe in the disturbed days of the Holy Roman Empire.

The New Amsterdam of 1635 was badly and arbitrarily governed, largely neglected by its sponsor, the Dutch West India Company, hedged about with savages of uncertain disposition and unpredictable behavior, and already feeling the uncomfortable pressure of the expanding and land hungry Yankees to the north and forced to meet an occasional aggression from the English well to the south.

It was in that precise year that the New England Council granted to William Earl of Stirling all of Long Island, under the name of the Isle of Stirling, and accompanied the grant with a stern denunciation of the Dutch settlers as intruders. This may have

seemed at the time as little more than an unneighborly gesture but it was deeply portentous of things to come. In a score and a half of years an Englishman, Colonel Nicolls, with an ample fleet at his back, would with one deft, utterly lawless, though bloodless, stroke, sponge all of New Netherland from the map to make effective the regal gift of other people's property to the Duke of York and Albany at the hands of his delightfully generous brother, Charles II.

There is one slight bit of record evidence that may lend support to the identification of Pietro Alberto with the elite of Venice. An examination made many years ago of the records in Venice disclosed that in 1639 "the name of Pietro Caesar Alberto had been stricken off the Blue Book". This date may have significance for if our Pietro Alberto left Venice for Holland about 1634 and had not been heard of in the meantime, his death could have been reasonably presumed by 1639 and called for the dropping of his name from the "Blue Book".

If our Alberto was the "Blue Book" Pietro Caesar Alberto, we have posed for us the problem why a Venetian Blue Book enrollee should engage as a sailor on a Dutch vessel sailing from the Texel

in a hazardous voyage to plant a colony in faraway Guiana, and why later he should break completely with his aristocratic past and throw in his lot with an alien and unpromising community in the New World. His presence in the United Provinces in 1634 or 1635 should not in itself be surprising. The Venetians were notable as being citizens of the world and they could be found in some numbers in all of the important capitals, and moreover in the first half of the 17th century relations between the two Republics of Venice and the Netherlands were close and cordial.

It is conceivable that Alberto's engagement as a crew member on the *de Coninck David* was animated by a spirit of adventure and that his impulsive decision to throw in his fortunes with New Amsterdam was an escape from unhappy, possibly intolerable, relations with *de Vries* who seemingly lacked enthusiasm for Italians. Once in a description of the Indians *de Vries* remarked "They are very vengeful, resembling the Italians".

Thirst for adventure was an inborn quality of the Venetians, exemplified in its most bizarre form in the fabulous journeys of Marco Polo into the fastnesses of Asia, resulting in discoveries fully as mo-

mentous as those a little later in the New World of his fellow Italian, Colombo. In truth it was the enchanting tales of Polo of the riches and wonders of distant Cathay which fired the imagination of the peoples of Europe and led indirectly to the discovery of America.

The voyage of Captain de Vries in 1634 to South America was calculated to appeal to a spirit of adventure. The fourteen guns gleaming on the deck of the *de Coninck* David testified pointedly that this was not to be a pleasure cruise. The Thirty Years War was in full swing, and to the natural perils of a trans-Atlantic voyage of that day were the added hazards of seas haunted by vessels of war, privateers and pirates.

The outward voyage of two months to Guiana was commonplace enough for the circumstances of the period. The thirty planters were landed in their new home and set to work. After a month spent in organizing his new colony, which like the earlier one at Swanendael, was destined to short life, de Vries sailed for Virginia in the expectation of recouping the cost of his voyage by exchanging the merchandise of his cargo for good Virginia tobacco leaf. Barely had he started when tidings came of dangers ahead. A refugee told of his escape

from the Spaniards "who had killed between 500 and 600 Englishmen".

A little later, off the west end of Spaniola, de Vries encountered a fishing boat with a wood sloop in tow, filled with English refugees who had fled from the island of Tortuga to escape Spanish vengeance. The boats were so laden with human freight that they could not move and de Vries was importuned to take fifty of the unfortunates to a place of safety. De Vries was willing but his crew objected that in such a time it was dangerous to take on board so many strangers, outnumbering the crew two to one. After a long "discourse" in which de Vries sought to quiet the fears of the crew by pointing out that the strangers were not seamen but planters who would not run away with the ship, the views of the skipper prevailed and the Englishmen were taken on board. The reluctance of the crew is understandable in a time when piracy thinly disguised as privateering was one of the most popular as well as rewarding forms of patriotic enterprise.

It is possible that Alberto may have been one of the leading insurgents in this attempt to flout the captain's authority, and the incident may have been the deciding factor in Alberto's determination to

break the bond with de Vries.

The event demonstrated that de Vries' judgment was sound, as the refugees were safely landed in Virginia, where de Vries unloaded his cargo and after a month's delay pointed for New Amsterdam for repairs to his leaky vessel.

Whether Pietro Alberto was patrician or plebeian, the story of his subsequent life in New Amsterdam as it can be reconstructed in broken outline from the sparse records which have survived the erosion of three centuries may have interest.

There is no way of knowing the reception which Alberto was accorded when he suddenly injected himself into the life of New Amsterdam which is described as containing "a roving waterside population of sailors, longshoremen and traders including many rough and shiftless characters". But if there was any uplifting of the eyebrows on the appearance of this unusual type of "foreigner", Alberto could have retorted in the words of St. Paul "I am a citizen of no mean city", for Malamocco had been the capital of the Venetian Republic, and Venice had for centuries been one of the great powers of Europe, despite its small territory and a permanent population never exceeding 200,000. Dubbed

the "Mistress of the Adriatic" it was much more than that. It dominated the carrying trade of the Mediterranean and was an important factor in the coastal trade along the Atlantic seaboard, and its mariners had no superiors anywhere.

Alberto's first years in New Amsterdam are enshrouded in mystery. Nothing is known beyond the fact that he followed a humble but useful occupation to win his daily bread.

We first hear of him in 1639 and in an interesting connection. De Vries was back in New Amsterdam, this time not in his own ship but in a vessel of the Company. Again he was bent on founding a colony, this time a patroonship on Staten Island. Alberto was planning a reception for him but not in the modern Grover Whalen manner. In January, 1639 Alberto haled de Vries into court to compel payment of wages remaining unpaid from the 1635 voyage. De Vries, always belligerent, defended the suit on the ground that Alberto had deserted the ship—as indeed he had—and thereby forfeited the balance unpaid. Alberto was able to produce a witness to show justification for leaving in that de Vries had twice on the voyage threatened to set Alberto ashore, once in

Cayenne and later in Virginia. The Court awarded Alberto ten guilders.

In the same year there is evidence that Alberto had moved up a rung or two in the economic ladder for on Dec. 15, 1639, he entered into a contract with Pieter Montfoort to make a plantation and build a house at the Waal-Bogt, "Bay of the Foreigners". It was not until a year

upon securing a confirmatory grant from the Dutch authorities in due season.

The two farms had a river frontage of about 700 feet, and with the land of Michael Picet comprised the area now lying between Clermont and Hampden Avenues in modern Brooklyn.

It is a certainty that Alberto was one of the first occupants of land on the Long



Early Brooklyn Farms

and a half later that Alberto secured a patent for the land from the Director General and Council of New Amsterdam. Four years subsequently he received a second patent for an adjoining parcel. It is plain that Alberto took possession before acquiring formal title. He may have entered into possession under an Indian purchase, but more likely as a squatter, counting

Island shore of the East River, and he may well have been the first producer of tobacco on Long Island. It is a pleasing fancy that he derived his idea of becoming a tobacco grower and his understanding of the appropriate cultural practices during the month that the de Coninck David was berthed in the Virginias.

The first patent for a "tobacco plantation" in New

Netherland was granted to Thomas Beshar on Nov. 28, 1639, a few weeks before Alberto made the contract with Montfoort to make a plantation and build a house. Beshar's land was "on the beach of Long Island", probably at Gowanus. There is no way of determining whether Alberto or Beshar was the first to make a tobacco crop, but surely Alberto was among the first planters of tobacco on Long Island.

Three years before, Jacobus Van Curler was the patentee of an extensive area which became New Amersfoort and later Flatlands, but there is nothing at hand to indicate that tobacco was a crop there.

The next glimpse we get of Alberto was when he embarked on his greatest adventure, marrying a wife. Among the early marriage records of the Reformed Dutch Church in New Amsterdam is the following entry:

1642 den 24 August, Peter Petro Alberto, j. m. Van Venetian en Judith Jans, j. d. Van Amsterdam.

The bride was the daughter of Jan Manje and his wife, Martha Chambart. The Manjes were probably Walloons, that ancient and interesting race of the French-speaking provinces of southern Nether-

lands, many of whom having fled into the northern Netherlands to escape religious persecution were ready immigrants to New Netherland. They constituted the first farmer element in the new province.

Jan Manje has some claim on fame because of being one of the very few casualties of Kieft's insensate Indian War whose identity can be definitely established. As he lay dying from wounds received at the battle at Stamford, Conn. (1644) he availed himself of a soldier's privilege of making a nuncupative (oral) will by declaring his testamentary intentions to Councillor La Montagne. La Montagne, a distinguished physician, while opposed to the war, led the Dutch forces, and was Manje's commander, and the appropriate person to receive, and later confirm in court the dying man's last wishes.

Both de Vries and La Montagne had protested but without avail when Kieft had declared earlier his intention "to wipe the mouths of the savages".

In the twelve years following the marriage of Pietro and Judith seven children were born to them, all promptly baptized in the New Amsterdam Dutch Church and given mainly Dutch names—Jan, Marles, Aert, Marritje,

Francyntie, Willem and Francyn.

In selecting names for their offspring Pierto and Judith followed Dutch custom in naming their first and second born—Jan and Marles (Martha) for the maternal grandparents. If the practice was adhered to in the naming of the children later born, it may be inferred that the name of the father of Pietro was Arturo or Gugliemo, rather than Andrea as suggested by de Boer. Of the seven children Francyntie died in infancy and Marles probably did not reach maturity.

The early home of the Albertos was on the Heere Graft (Broad St.) from which they moved prior to 1643. This street in early days was "the favorite dwelling place of the quality", but it is not intended to suggest that the Albertos were of that rank.

Both Pietro and Judith died shortly before November, 1655. From an allusion in the records to the "stewards of the dead and of the Indian sufferers", in connection with the guardianship of the children, an inference has been drawn that they lost their lives in an Indian raid, to which their location on the Waal-Bogt might have exposed them.

There is no record of how the orphaned group were held

together in their precarious situation following the deaths of both parents. Fifteen years or more later the records show that the daughters have married and the sons have moved from the Waal-Bogt up Newtown Creek and become established at Maspatt Kills, where contact with that English community has Anglicised the Dutch given names; Jan has become John, Aert Arthur and Willem William. John, who married Elizabeth, daughter of John Scudder, early became a substantial property owner and a citizen of recognized standing. Alburdis Avenue in Queens is a present day reminder of the rank of the family in Newtown two and a half centuries ago.

Arthur, who married Elizabeth, daughter of James Way, a favorably known English-born Quaker, settled in the Foster's Meadows section of Hempstead about 1690 and became the progenitor of the Burtises who for decades were numerous in Hempstead and Oyster Bay. William, whose wife was Mehitabel ———, removed about 1701 from Newtown to New Jersey, and eventually he and his family became lost to view.

The evolution of the family name, Alberto, to the present day style, Burtis, is not lacking in interest. The Dutch of

New Netherland did not generally use surnames. When Pietro Caesar Alberto appeared among them, his full name, especially the cognomen, Alberto, gave them difficulty and never received complete acceptance. In the records he is described in more than a score of styles, ranging from Pieter Malamocco to Peter Schoorsteenveger, the first indicative of place of origin and the second descriptive of his early vocation in New Amsterdam.

These variations arose not from uncertainty on the part of Alberto as to his true name but generally from the language predilection of the clerk, or sometimes the dominie, preparing the document or entering the record. In the court action against de Vries, Alberto was described as Cicero Pierre. It was doubtless a clerk trained in French who wrote the name Pierre. The substitution of Cicero for Caesar occurring in this instance and once five years later when Alberto receipted for his wife's share of her father's estate, cannot be explained except on the ground of the scrivener's confusing the names of the two classical writers, Caesar and Cicero.

With the fondness of the Dutch for nicknames it is a certainty that Alberto in the common speech of the com-

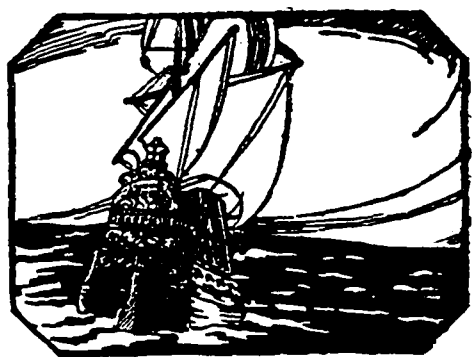
munity was called "Pieter the Italien", more formally Pieter Ceser and occasionally Pieter Mallamacque.

The Latin form "Albertus" is clearly a gift of the church through the classically trained Dominie Everardus Bogardus. In that period men attached to the learned professions and particularly individuals engrossed in the classics affected Latinized name forms, of which Everardus Bogardus is an example.

Through the baptismal records of the New Amsterdam Dutch Church the latinizing process at work upon the name Alberto can readily be followed. At the time of his marriage there is no touch of the Latin in the recording of his name as Peter Petro Alberto, but with the baptism of the first child the Latin urge becomes manifest. When Jan was baptized the father is entered as Petrus Petro Alberto. At the baptism of the second child, Marles, there is a slight backward step as the father becomes Cesar Alberto, alias Pieter de Italien. Two years later Aert is baptized, and there for the first time the Latin Albertus appears, the father being described as Caesar Albertus. For more than thirty years thereafter and extending down to the second generation the form "Albertus" is consistently ad-

hered to in the church record. The last family entry was made on Oct. 1, 1679, when Judith, the child of Jan Pieterszen Bandt and Marie Pieters (Alberto) was baptized, and the child's uncle is recorded as a witness under the name "Willem Albertus".

Dominie Bogardus may have been in a whimsical mood in applying the Latiniz-



ing technique to the Alberto family. Conscious that not a few Dutchmen, himself included, had dubbed themselves with Latin names, he may have concluded that it was fitting that the only real Latin among them should, regardless of cultural attainments, be accorded a similar dignity.

The change from Albertus to Burtis was probably not in the beginning a matter of decision by the family. The Latin name Albertus was hard for the Dutch to handle, and at an early date it was occasionally shortened even in the records to Burdes, Burtos or Burtis. Eventually the family conformed to the prac-

tice of the community, and in about the fourth generation the name Burtis was in nearly universal use.

Members of the Burtis family intermarried with a considerable proportion of the early Long Island families, including Baylis, Bedell, Carman, Clowes, deBevoise, Dorton, Duryea, Foster, Fox, Hendrickson, Higbie, Linnington, Mott, Remsen, Van Nostrand, Way and Wyckoff. The family speedily became known as Dutch, as indeed it was, reflecting the preponderance of Dutch blood through intermarriage.

At the normal rates of proliferation there should be in the United States at the present time upwards of three thousand persons who embody the Alberto genes; and probably not more than a score of them have awareness of their descent from the venturesome, industrious, resolute Pietro Alberto, who three centuries ago, finding himself by the whim of fate in an alien community, adapted himself to his new environment as if to the manner born, conformed to the prevailing religion of the community, took to himself an Amsterdam wife, presented his children at the altar of the Dutch church for baptism in Dutch names—in short became a Dutchman in everything but name and blood.

But more important, he established himself as a worthy prototype of the hundreds of thousands of his countrymen who in the intervening years followed his blazed trail to

our shores and through their abundant gifts of body, mind and spirit have contributed significantly to the development and well being of this, their adopted land.

