

## **Rensselaerwyck Manor Land Records, 1785-1860**

The Manuscripts and Special Collections unit of the New York State Library owns an extensive collection of land records covering the Rensselaerwyck Manor, an area that once included large portions of Albany and Rensselaer counties. These records consist primarily of maps, surveys, leases, and rent account ledgers covering the period between 1785 and 1860. Although many of the Rensselaerwyck Manor manuscripts were extensively damaged or destroyed in the Capitol fire of 1911, most of the aforementioned land records were spared the same fate since they came to the library after the fire.

The Rensselaerwyck Manor records hold a wealth of information on rural Albany and Rensselaer counties and their early residents. They largely date from the 1630s to the 1860s, following the Anti-Rent Wars, by which time the family had relinquished its feudal rights to most of the land holdings. Altogether, these records have gained the status that is virtually an adjunct to land records maintained by Albany and Rensselaer counties. Current deeds to many parcels of land in both counties contain references to original Van Rensselaer leases. Present-day historians, genealogists, land surveyors, and title abstract firms often consult these records for the valuable, detailed, and accurate information they contain.

The Van Rensselaer family's rights included the collection of ground rent, that is, rent paid annually, usually in commodities such as bushels of wheat, to the agents of the patroon (patron), or the lord of the manor. In 1785 Stephen Van Rensselaer III (1764-1839) inherited the family rights to the Manor and pursued means to more extensively develop and populate manor lands. To better determine the extent of his land holdings, he hired Job Gilbert, John E. Van Alen, William Cockburn, and others to survey and map the entire Manor.

The Hudson River divided the Rensselaerwyck into the East Manor and the West Manor. The East Manor lands included all of Rensselaer County south of Lansingburgh, Schaghticoke, Pittstown, and Hoosick. John Van Alen and Job Gilbert, the principle surveyors of the East Manor, created divisions named Elizabethtown, Philipstown, Roxborough, Greenbush, Schodack, Stephentown, Middletown, and Little Hoosick. Elizabethtown included the present town of Brunswick and part of the City of Troy. Greenbush included lands that are presently situated in the City of Rensselaer, East Greenbush, North Greenbush, and the western parts of Postenkill and Sand Lake. Roxborough included the present town of Grafton and the western part of Petersburg. Philiptown included the present town of Nassau and the western part of Stephentown. Middletown included chiefly the eastern portions of the present towns of Poestenkill and Sand Lake and the western portion of Berlin. Little Hoosick encompassed the present town of Petersburg and the eastern portion of Berlin.

The West Manor comprised all of Albany County except the City of Albany, the southeast portion of the Town of Coeymans, and the northern part of the Town of Watervliet (now the Town of Colonie). William Cockburn, Jacob Winne, and John Preston were the surveyors for many of the West Manor lots. Land records related to the West Manor cover primarily the southwest corner that now comprises the towns of Berne, Knox, Rensselaerville, and Westerlo. The records for other parts of the West Manor were probably destroyed in Capitol fire.

Survey field books contain the actual land surveys and plats (drawings of parcels of land) of many individual lots in both East and West Manors. Surveys were done using the metes and bounds system, that is describing a lot or parcel of land in terms of its relationship to natural features and adjacent parcels. The total acreage of a parcel is recorded too as well as remarks on the characteristics of the land, such as fertility of the soil, type of timber, and the agricultural value of the land. Also, the date of conveyance of the lease is often noted. Most of the surveys are found in bound volumes that are organized by the names of the divisions used by the surveyors. Some of these volumes also include an index to the names of tenants of a particular farm lot.

A series of related map folios of East Manor divisions and the southwest corner of the West Manor complement the surveys by showing all the lots of a given area. The name(s) of the individual or party that held title to a particular lot are identified on these maps. Both the surveys and maps are surprisingly very accurate, considering the rugged wilderness of much of the manor lands in the late eighteenth century, as well as the seemingly primitive instruments in use at the time.

A substantial number, but not all, of the Rensselaerwyck Manor office copies of the original leases to lots granted to tenants are here, too. These leases were executed mostly between the late 1780s and the early 1800s. The leases state the total acreage of land conveyed to the tenant along with the delineation of the farm as refined from information found in the field books. The manner of rent payment was stated too; tenants were required to pay the patroon an annual rent of between 10 to 20 bushels of winter wheat, "four fatt fowls", and one day of service or labor for the manor with a team of horses and wagon. More importantly the leases set forth legal rights and obligations of the tenants. The terms of the lease bonded the tenant and his heirs to the manor in perpetuity, required the tenant to "pay all taxes", and stated he could use the land for agricultural purposes only, while the patroon kept all timber, mineral, and water rights, as well as the right to exploit those resources. In addition, these leases contained the "quarter sale" provision, that is when a tenant sold all or part of his land, there was required payment to the patroon of one-fourth of the property value in cash in order to release the property for sale to another. There are often handwritten notes found on the verso (back) of leases indicating that tenants or heirs had been released from contractual obligations or that the title was transferred to other individuals or parties.

In addition to the field books and leases are the massive leather-bound volumes containing the debit-credit accounts of tenants. These ledgers (often called "rent ledgers") document the annual collection of rent by manor agents from 1799 to 1899. While rent was usually due in bushels of wheat, fowls, etc. as stated in the leases, the individual accounts show that actual payment may have been in the form of cash or promissory notes, or other commodities such as oats, rye, cider, shingles, firewood, livestock, or additional days of service laboring for the Manor. Accounts may also include valuable information on dates of releases and property transfers (often not found in leases or recorded deeds) and on subdivisions, subleases, and other partial sales of a farm lot. Occasionally they contain interesting personal information as well. Indexes to names of accounts are found with most volumes. The ledgers have been microfilmed; the New York State Library's call number for the microfilm is MA/FM,974.74 V36 99-18511.

The records are available for research Monday through Friday, 9 AM to 5 PM in the reading room shared by the New York State Library Manuscripts and Special Collections and the New York State Archives on the 11<sup>th</sup> floor of the Cultural Education Center. An unpublished finding aid to these records along with a name index to the leases is available in the reading room and on our web site. The original records may be studied; however, in some cases, because of the fragile nature of these materials, researchers may be directed to use the microfilm copies. The microfilm is located the main library on the seventh floor of the Cultural Education Center.



### Land Survey Terms—1790 Definitions

Common units of measurement found in Survey Field books and Leases

Acre	The (English) acre is a unit of area equal to 43,560 square feet, or 10 square chains, or 160 square poles. It derives from a plowing area that is 4 poles wide and a furlong (40 poles) long. A square mile is 640 acres. The Scottish acre is 1.27 English acres. The Irish acre is 1.6 English acres.
Chain	Unit of length usually understood to be Gunter's chain, but possibly variant by locale. The name comes from the heavy metal chain of 100 links that was used by surveyors to measure property bounds.
Gunter's Chain	Unit of length equal to 66 feet, or 4 poles. Developed by English polymath Edmund Gunter early in the 1600's, the standard measuring chain revolutionized surveying. Gunter's chain was 22 yards long, one tenth of a furlong, a common unit of length in the old days. An area one chain wide by ten chains long was exactly an acre. In 1695 Queen Elizabeth I had the mile redefined from the old Roman value of 5000 feet to 5280 feet in order for it to be an even number of furlongs. A mile is 80 chains.
Furlong	Unit of length equal to 40 poles (220 yards). Its name derives from "furrow long", the length of a furrow that oxen can plow before they are rested and turned. See Gunter's chain.
Link	Unit of length equal to 1/100 chain (7.92 inches)
Pole	Unit of length and area. Also known as a perch or rod. As a unit of length, equal to 16.5 feet. A mile is 320 poles. As a unit of area, equal to a square with sides one pole long. An acre is 160 square poles. It was common to see an area referred to as "87 acres, 112 poles", meaning 87 and 112/160 acres.

Below are some of the terms that are frequently found in remarks by the surveyors that described the soil conditions and other physical characteristics of the land.

"Strong Soil"	Loamy, firm, hard, and compact
"Middling Soil"	Tolerable, barely acceptable
"Indifferent Soil"	Moderate or of middle rank
"Cold Soil"	Tendency to hold water, or hydric
"Uneven"	Hilly or rolling terrain
"Vly"	Dutch term for swamp or marsh (wetlands)
"Rock Oak"	Chestnut oak ( <i>Quercus Montana</i> )
"Fir"	Balsam fir ( <i>Abies balsamca</i> )

## Selected Bibliography

These books provide background information on the Rensselaerwyck Manor or translations and/or transcriptions of materials in the collection that may not be used because they were burned in the Capitol fire of 1911 and are, therefore, in very fragile condition.

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Van Rensselaer, Florence. *The Van Rensselaers in Holland and in America*. (New York, 1956) R-REF 929.2 V2744

*Van Rensselaer Bowier Manuscripts, Being the Letters of Kiliaen Van Rensselaer, 1630-1643, and Other Documents Relating to the Colony of Rensselaerswyck. Translated and Edited by A.J.F. van Laer, Archivist. With an Introductory Essay by Nicolaas de Roever, Late Archivist of the City of Amsterdam. Translated by Mrs. Alan H. Strong*. (Albany, N.Y.: University of the State of New York, 1908). R-REF 974.742 R414n

For more information on published and unpublished materials related to the Rensselaerwyck Manor, search on *rensselaerwyck* or *renssewlaerswyck* or *van rensseleer* in the New York State Library's online catalog, which can be found at [www.nysl.nysed.gov](http://www.nysl.nysed.gov)



## Van Rensselaer Manor Papers

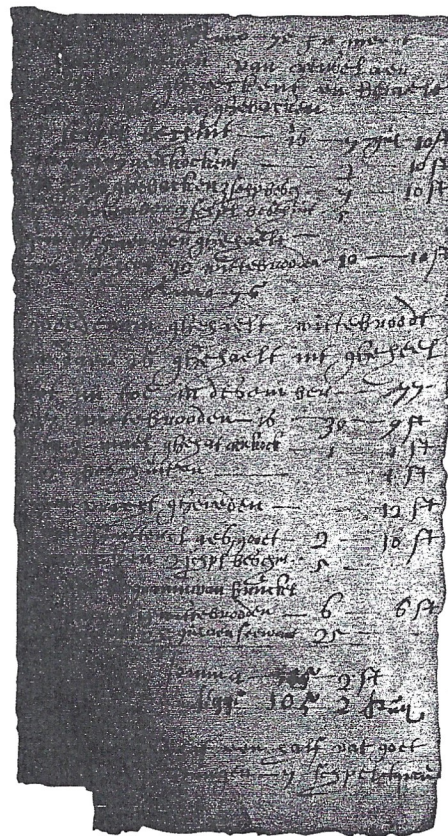
**S**HOES, stockings, shirts, linen pants, blankets, brandy, cloth, cheese, vinegar, merchandise, brown medicinal beer, a suit of clothes, an English hat, a Rouen hat, oil lamps, a gun and baldrick, powder and lead, cordage, grain scythes—these are some of the goods that two of America's early Dutch farmers, Brant Peelen and Cornelis Theunisen, must have been happy to receive from the ship *Eendracht* in 1634. They had lived in the wilderness at the upper Hudson for three years during which they lived off whatever they produced themselves, whatever they could trade with the Indians, and whatever was being sent to them by their employer, Kiliaen van Rensselaer from the Dutch Republic. Just four years earlier this wealthy Amsterdam jewelry trader had established the patroonship of Rensselaerswijck in New Netherland, which would remain in the hands of his descendants until about 1860.

Together, the heavily damaged letters, contracts, bonds, accounts, maps, ledgers and other documents that are left of the manuscripts of Van Rensselaer's patroonship are almost like a movie account of the development of one of America's earliest European settlements. Mere fragments of manuscripts provide images of how a settlement of not even 10 farmers in 1634 grew in 18 years to a community of more than 200 colonists who practiced law, religion, and poor relief, and became a full-grown society.

How contacts between colonists and Indians in those years took place is revealed in detail by letters, accounts, and various treaties of land transactions. Numerous accounts provide insights into various religious celebrations and customs as well as the routines of daily life. This collection contains an abundance of details about 17th-century material culture such as food, clothing, jewelry, furniture, and house and barn plans and descriptions. From one blacksmith's account we learn that cows were wearing bells that were produced and sold in Rensselaerswijck for a certain price. From tailors' accounts we learn about the products they made, materials they used, and prices, as well as the manner in which they worked; a tailor would often work for days and sometimes weeks at the Van Rensselaer's house. The records show that certain Dutch customs were kept long after the English had taken over New Netherland; a 1675 baker's account mentions that Maria van Rensselaer bought *Sinterklaas* [Santa Claus] goods illustrating that the feast of Saint Nicolas was celebrated in Albany at that time. In addition to business information, letters written between family members and friends reveal personal matters, such as relations with friends and other inhabitants of the village, raising children, illness, and death.

The Van Rensselaer Manor Papers reveal the successes and hardships of ordinary people, men, women, and children, wealthy and poor, masters and slaves, from the earliest years of America's written history into the 19th century. The users of this collection include historians, genealogists, archaeologists, and lawyers researching land titles and Indian rights. A finding aid is available on the New York State Library's Web site:

<http://www.nysl.nysed.gov/msscfa/sc7079.htm>



(ABOVE)

Baker's account from Wouter de backer (Wouter Albertsz).  
March 1675.

This document mentions that Maria van Rensselaer fetched rusks, cookies, whitebread, etc. This is the first reference to the celebration of *Sinterklaas* [Saint Nicholas] in New Netherland, recording that she spent f2:10 on *Sinterklaas* goodies: "...aen sunterclaesgoet f2:10."

(OPPOSITE)

Invoice of goods shipped to New Netherland. July 1654.

This is a detailed account of books, lace, and other textiles sent with Cornelis van Schel and Jeremias van Rensselaer from Amsterdam via the ship *De Gelderse Blom* to New Netherland to be sold on behalf of Gerrit Lambertse Kock and Jan van Wely.