

MANHATTAN'S FIRST MERCHANT

Soon after Henry Hudson's 1609 exploration of the great river that now bears his name, Dutch ships began to frequent the region to trade with the indigenous peoples. In 1613, Dutch sea captain Thijs Volckertsz Mossel sailed the *Jonge Tobias* from the West Indies to Hudson's Bay, anchoring off Manhattan Island. There he left a black man named Jan Rodrigues to trade with Native Americans.

What happened thereafter is known only through a series of lawsuits between Mossel and Dutch traders, including captains Adrian Block and Hendrick Christiaensen, both of whom had encountered Rodrigues. When Block, who was mapping Long Island Sound and trading with Native Americans, returned to Holland, he found himself being sued by Mossel, who claimed Block violated his exclusive trading rights.

Block insisted that Mossel did not enjoy a trade monopoly on the island, pointing to the presence of Rodrigues, who lived alone and traded independently. Block's defense rested on the argument that Rodrigues was a "free man," who was acting on his own authority and not on behalf of Mossel's alleged monopoly.

Christiaensen supported Block. He declared that Rodrigues had boarded his vessel and presented himself as a free man. Rodrigues even offered to work for Christiaensen, who hired him as a translator to facilitate trade with the Natives.

In April 1614, Mossel returned to North America. Sailing his new ship, the *Nachtegael*, into the Hudson, the truth of the relationship between Mossel and Rodrigues became apparent, along with evidence that Rodrigues was Manhattan's first non-Native American merchant. Sighting the *Nachtegael*, Rodrigues fired his musket at the ship, and its crew returned fire. Brandishing torches, muskets, and swords, Mossel's crew chased the "black rascal" and briefly apprehended him. Though wounded, Rodrigues disarmed his pursuers and escaped. Later he found refuge with Christiaensen's crew, who took him aboard their boat and sheltered him.

The court ruled against Mossel, thus arguing implicitly that Rodrigues was free. But Jan Rodrigues disappeared from the written record thereafter. However, it is clear that Rodrigues, the "black rascal," was the sole nonnative resident of Manhattan Island for several months, and possibly for several years during the second decade of the seventeenth century. His trading post prospered, as his inventory—bolstered with axes, kettles, and beads from Christiaensen—was valued by local Native Americans, with whom Rodrigues apparently maintained good relations. Some accounts maintain that Rodrigues fathered children with one or more Native American women.

—Christopher Moore