

## Groot Manuel de Gerrit



Manuel was a sailor on a Spanish or Portuguese ship in the 1620s. West Africans sometimes worked on European ships, and they sometimes had European names like Manuel. One day, Manuel's ship was captured by the Dutch. These captures were a hazard of life at sea. Crew members were killed, abandoned, or forced to work on the new ship. Sometimes they were sold as slaves to plantations in the Caribbean or Brazil. Manuel and the other crew men on his ship had a different fate. They were brought to Manhattan Island as slaves.

The colony of New Amsterdam was only two or three years old then, just a small struggling settlement at the tip of Manhattan. It was *too* small and struggling to please the Dutch West India Company, which wanted a busy and profitable trading site here. Before this could happen, Manhattan had to be cleared of trees. Buildings had to be constructed, and roads cut. There were not enough white colonists to do all this work, so Manuel and other Africans were brought to New Amsterdam. Manuel was given the common Dutch name de Gerrit and he was called *groot*, which means big.

Groot Manuel and the other slaves were not allowed to leave the colony. They did backbreaking work, often chained together: sawing, hauling, plowing, carrying, and building. One wall they helped build is gone now, but the location is remembered as Wall Street. The slaves were responsible for getting New Amsterdam on its feet. They helped defend the settlement against Indian raids, too. Without them, it is hard to imagine how the colony would have survived.

As hard as the slaves worked, they were sometimes given time off. One day in 1641, Groot Manuel and some of the others went to a tavern. A fight broke out and a slave named Jan Premero was killed. The colony's leaders decided to punish one person, rather than lose several slaves. They picked Groot Manuel and sentenced him to hang, but the noose around his neck broke, maybe because he was so *groot*. The leaders tried another rope. That one broke, too. They gave up and let Groot Manuel live.

The Company knew how valuable the slaves were, and so did the slaves themselves. In 1644, Groot Manuel and several other long-time slaves petitioned the Dutch West India Company's director, Willem Kieft, for their freedom. He granted it, saying that they had been promised freedom for a long time, and could not take care of their families if they remained slaves. He freed the men's wives as well. He gave the families plots of land north of town in an area that became known as the Land of the Blacks. Kieft did this partly to create a buffer zone to protect New Amsterdam from an English or Indian attack.

The blacks were called free, but they were not as free as the white people who lived in New Amsterdam. They had to pay a tax every year, or donate some of their crops at the market, and be ready to serve the colony again if they were needed. Maybe worst of all, their children remained slaves. Historians later called this "half freedom." However, the blacks were no longer enslaved. Nearly 20 years after he was stolen from his ship, Groot Manuel was a man who owned property and had some say over his life. He could keep the small amount of money he earned, beyond what he owed to the colony. He could live in a community with other black people, away from white families. His farm covered much of what is now Washington Square Park.

Sources: Richard Dickenson, "Abstracts of Early Black Manhattanites," *New York Genealogical and Biographical Record* 116 (April, June 1985): 100-104, 168-173.