

Steven Coerten: New Netherland Colonist, 1660: I.

by Daniel Voorhis Grinnell, Phillips Exeter Academy '65, Amherst College '69.

History of Van Voorhees family traced in Drenthe from time of Saxon migration to year when family was founded in America.

IN the year 1660 a Dutchman named Steven Coerten left his native province of Drenthe in the Netherlands and emigrated to the New World with his wife and seven children. This man, of some distinction in his own time and locality, as we shall see, was destined to be a progenitor of the two thousand or so people living in the United States today who bear the name of Van Voorhees or one of its many variations,^{1*} and of several hundred thousand more who have Van Voorhees blood in their veins.²

Although I am a direct descendant of Steven Coerten in the eleventh generation (Voorhis is my mother's maiden name), this paper was conceived less for the glorification of an ancestor than for the exposition of a story which gives us insights into the origins, lives, and characters of a great many of the 17th century pioneers in the Dutch colony of New Netherland. I shall attempt herein to determine Steven Coerten's heritage, his social, economic, political, and religious standing, the course of events in his life, and his character from the few pieces of evidence, both specific and general, which have survived the past three hundred or more years and which are available for our perusal.

The life of Steven Coerten (1600-1684) divides naturally into three periods: his life in the Netherlands, his migration to America, and his new life on the western end of what is today called Long Island. In the following essay I shall treat in separate parts the three periods of this man's life, and then try to unify and re-evaluate the whole in a brief conclusion.

The Saxon ancestors of Steven Coerten probably arrived in the area which was to include the province of Drenthe sometime before the end of the seventh century A.D.³ Coming from Thuringia, a region in East Germany, they pushed aside the less-powerful tribes of Germanic Friesians already living in the northern lowlands. These tribes, after having dwelt further to the south since as early as 1200 B.C., had been driven northward by an influx of Belgae and Franks during Caesar's Gallic campaigns of 57 to 52 B.C.⁴

As the Middle Ages wore on, Coerten's forebears gained proprietary control of a large tract of land centering on the district of Hees (see map) and located about ten kilometers (six miles) from the much larger town of Meppel.⁵ A feudal estate was established upon this land, which, if it fits a general description of the rest of Drenthe, was "rather barren country," having "few fertile valleys" and only "some brooks and good grazing areas."⁶

By the 15th century the estate had been subdivided into three manors called Voorhees (meaning before or near the town of Ruinen in the district of Hees, and hence the post-migratory surname), Middelhees, and Achterhees, which were each inhabited by a different branch of a family known as *thoe Hees* ("at Hees").⁷ Only the aristocracy in the Netherlands used the preposition *thoe*, with those of the commonalty using *van*, meaning "from." After 1574, in accordance with the



Reduced from illus. in Van Voorhees Genealogy.

Map of a part of Drenthe Province showing location of the district of Hees. Taken from the *Atlas le Theatre du Monde*, by Guillaume and Jean Blaeu, published at Amsterdam in 1638.

rising spirit of Dutch nationalism, the "at Hees" family dropped "thoe" in favor of the more democratic "van."⁸

Due to the high-handed expropriation policies of the Bishop of Drenthe, who was also Lord of Drenthe, the *thoe Hees* family lost their land to the "double cloister" (both monks and nuns) of nearby Dickninge, or Dickinge, sometime during the 15th century.⁹ The heads of the family remained in actual control of the three manors, however, being appointed *meyers* (stewards) of their estates and paying, in accordance with feudal practice, a nominal rent to the cloister.

Following the Reformation and the spread of Calvinism among the Dutch people, the northern provinces threw off the harsh rule of Philip II, the Catholic king of Spain, and established the Dutch Republic in a process which began with the Union of Utrecht in 1579. Secularization of church properties in Drenthe was begun in 1598 by order of William Louis, Count of Nassau and stadholder (chief executive) of the three northernmost provinces of Drenthe, Groningen, and Friesland.¹⁰ The "convent maidens" of Dickninge, which had gradually come to be more of a nunnery than a monastery, were subsequently placed "on alimentation" (maintenance or support).¹¹ Dickninge, how-

GUEST AUTHOR.—This essay by Mr. Grinnell won the silver medal and cash prize last Spring for the best paper on a phase of American history prior to 1800, in the annual competition sponsored at Exeter by the New Hampshire chapter of the Society of the Cincinnati. We are glad to publish his essay for the excellence it exhibits in composition and use of source materials on a subject of special interest to Holland Society members. Mr. Grinnell, son of Mr. and Mrs. Carroll C. Grinnell of New York and Port Jefferson, L. I., is the eldest grandson of Dr. Harold O. Voorhis, a past President of the Society and retired Vice President of New York University.

* Footnotes begin on p. 7.

(Continued from p. 4)

ever, now apparently owned by the government, continued to exist as a land corporation. Rents were still collected, being used to support the former nuns and, under the joint supervision of the stadholder and the tenants, to advance public education.¹²

The ancestry of Steven Coerten can be traced specifically as far back as Coert thoe Hees, who may have been his great-great-grandfather, and who was probably born around the beginning of the 16th century. His name, mentioned in connection with a certain property-law case in 1542, is recorded in the *Ordelen* or *Ordel Boeck* ("Ordeal Book" or "Book of Sentences") of the *Etstoel* ("Seat of Law"), which, under the long-surviving *Lex Saxonum* of the northern provinces, was Drenthe's supreme court.¹³ Because the rather barren province of Drenthe was sparsely populated, this court took up even the most trivial of matters, such as the pasturage of cows.¹⁴

Up until the end of the Dutch Republic in 1795, the names of many of the descendants of Coert thoe Hees appear, for one reason or another, in the *Ordelen* or in the account books of the rent masters of Dickninge.¹⁵ Unfortunately, we cannot find the names of Steven Coerten's immediate ancestors and must therefore be content with the fact that his father's first name was Coert ("Steven Coerten" meaning, by immemorial Dutch usage, Steven, son of Coert). We do find, however, in the *Ordelen*, that Albert Coerten, the brother of Steven Coerten, became meyer of the manor of Voorhees in 1619. From a translated entry in the rent master's accounts for 1621, we can learn the size and yearly rent of the manor:

Voorhees contains 21 *mudden* of farmland and 7½ *dachmaet* of grainland, which again for a period of six years beginning May, 1621, is leased to Albert van Voorheess, for 28 *mudden* yearly, which according to the overseer has been received for the first year.¹⁶

Since the yearly rent in *mudden* was perhaps one-twentieth of the anticipated crop, we should not expect any hardship to have been involved in its payment. In 1626, however, the rent was suddenly increased, and one Jonker Van Boetzelaer became the lessee of both Voorhees and Middlehees.¹⁷ Since Albert Coerten (or "van Voerheess") is on record as having leased the manor of Voorhees from Van Boetzelaer in 1630, it appears that he had been a sub-tenant of part of the estate for the previous four years.¹⁸ His financial circumstances had apparently improved to the extent that he could now afford to pay the higher rent set in 1626 on the whole estate, plus the added cost of Van Boetzelaer as a middleman.

After 1650, according to the *Ordelen*, Albert Coerten presided jointly over the manor with his eldest son, Coert Albertsen (Coert, son of Albert). In 1662, Albert Coerten died, leaving his eldest son as the sole sub-tenant (at this point the word meyer somehow seems inappropriate). As the reader will note, this was two years after Albert Coerten's brother, Steven Coerten, had emigrated to America. In 1676, Coert Albertsen also died, allowing Jan Coerten, the second of six sons, to take over the manor.¹⁹

So far, we have had several indications, at least, of the position of the Van Voorhees family at the time of Steven Coerten's emigration with his wife and children in 1660. First, we can be fairly certain that the family enjoyed a certain amount of local prominence, having

successively owned, held in stewardship, and leased a substantial amount of land in Drenthe since medieval times. Reinforcing this indication of family status is a second indication: the use of the aristocratic "thoe" in the general family surname before the rebellion of the northern provinces against Spain. Thirdly, there is the evidence provided by the accounts of the rent masters of Dickninge, indicating that certain members of the family, such as Albert Coerten, were prospering comfortably as middle-class farmers.

A fourth "bench mark" of the family's standing is the existence of a family coat-of-arms registered at the St. James College of Heraldry in England.²⁰ In the design of this insignia is the helmet of an Esquire, a title which is a rank lower than that of Knight.²¹

There is a tradition today in one branch of the Van Voorhees family that the family coat-of-arms was

(Continued on p. 8)

Ten variations of the name Van Voorhees are: Voorhees, Voorhies, Voories, Voorhes, Voris, Voorhis, Van Voorhis, Vorus, and Vorse. These variations are essentially misspellings of the original name, which was adopted in accordance with English custom toward the end of the 17th century. Elias W. Van Voorhis, *A Condensed Genealogy of the Van Voorhees Family* (New York: The Van Voorhees Association, 1932), pp. 5-30. As the reader may know, the Dutch were notoriously inconsistent name spellers. The patronymic "Coerten," for instance, frequently came out "Koert," "Coerts," and "Coerte."

If we make two assumptions, a) that the Van Voorhees family is, on the average, now in its eleventh generation in America, and b) that each marriage has resulted in one boy and one girl who have grown up to have children of their own, then the theoretical ratio of the approximately two thousand people who bear the family surname to those in the family who do not is 1:26-1 or 1:1024. Multiplying 2000 by 1024, we have 2,048,000 U.S. citizens who can, in theory, claim Steven Coerten as a direct ancestor. Due to the probability of childless marriages and marriages between distant cousins all along the line, I have reduced this astounding figure to the more likely estimate of several hundred thousand. Although the formula I have constructed may almost never hold up in real life, it gives one quite an appreciation for human fecundity.

¹Calvin I. Kephart, "Origin of the Van Voorhees Family," *Historical Handbook of the Van Voorhees Family in the Netherlands and America* (New Brunswick, N. J.: The Van Voorhees Association, 1935), p. 11.

²*Ibid.*

³Personal letter from Helen M. Voorhees to Harold O. Voorhis, Dec. 12, 1960.

⁴Kephart, p. 12.⁵*Ibid.*⁶*Ibid.*, p. 13.⁷*Ibid.*, p. 12.⁸*Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁹H. P. Schaap, "The Four Letters of Hilbert and Albert Coerts," in *The Van Voorhees Letters*, ed. by Donald A. Sinclair and Helen M. Voorhees (New Brunswick, N. J.: The Van Voorhees Association, 1962), p. 2.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 3; Kephart, p. 14.¹¹Kephart, p. 15.¹²*Ibid.*, p. 12.¹³*Ibid.*; Schaap, pp. 3-5.

¹⁴Schaap, p. 4, and editors' footnotes indicating that land measurement in Drenthe was related to work units. Thus, a *mudde* meant the amount of land sowed with one *mudde*, and a *schepel* the quantity sowed with one *schepel*. Bear in mind that the basic unit of Dutch dry measure, e.g. of wheat, was then the *schepel* (0.764 bu.), four of which equalled one *mudde*; hence, 21 *mudden* were equivalent to 64,176 bushels. Cf. A. J. F. van Laer, *Van Rensselaer-Bowier Mss.* (Albany: University of the State of New York, 1908), p. 849. A *dachmaet* was the quantity of land which could be harvested in one day.

¹⁵Schaap, p. 4.¹⁶*Ibid.*¹⁷Kephart, p. 15.

¹⁸Personal letter from Elias W. Van Voorhis to Josephine L. Voorhees, Nov. 18, 1886, quoted in "The Family Coat of Arms," *Historical Handbook of the Van Voorhees Family in the Netherlands and America* (New Brunswick, N. J.: The Van Voorhees Association, 1935), p. 7.

¹⁹"The Family Coat of Arms," *Historical Handbook of the Van Voorhees Family in the Netherlands and America* (New Brunswick, N. J.: The Van Voorhees Association, 1935), p. 10.

Editor's Note:

This article is reprinted with the permission of The Holland Society of New York, from the April 1966 issue of its quarterly magazine De Halve Maen.

The second installment will appear in a later Newsletter.

STEVEN COERTEN (VAN VOORHEES)

(Continued from p. 7)

awarded for valor on the field of battle, a possibility for which there was plenty of opportunity, but for which there are no substantiating facts. It may be, also, that the family device was the battle insignia, later adopted for family-wide use, of an ancient Saxon ancestor. The likeliest possibility, in my opinion, is that one of Steven Coerten's immediate forebears, upon being appointed to a city or county magistracy after the founding of the Dutch Republic, adopted a coat-of-arms to use as a seal ring when attesting official papers and deeds. This was common practice among magistrates, or *schepens*, as they were called, in the days of the Republic, when the Herald's College in England and the Burgundian Heralds in Spain no longer controlled the adoption, or use, of a coat-of-arms.²²

Four letters, three of them brought to light and translated recently (1961), provide us with still another source of insights into the life of the Van Voorhees family in Drenthe. Although the letters were written from twenty-four to thirty-nine years after Steven Coerten's migration, they give us an indication of what the family's life must have been like before 1660. Sent by two grand-nephews of Steven Coerten living in Drenthe, all four letters were addressed to Steven Coerten's eldest son, who had gone along on the trans-Atlantic trip. Particularly informative is this passage from a letter written in 1684 by Hilbert Coert:

. . . [T]here are still four of us brothers left and we are reasonably prosperous and I, Hilbert Coert built a new house in the *riegijen* [literally, a row of houses] where I now live and which is good and I have there so much business that I can keep three horses and eight cows so I am doing all right and my brother Jan now lives at Voorheys in the old place and he is reasonably prosperous as well . . . and my brother Albert is a carpenter . . . and he is doing all right as well.²³

This letter, written in old Dutch, of course demonstrates Hilbert Coert's literacy by its very existence. Having had an education, however, was by no means unusual in the Netherlands, where since "before the outbreak of the war with Spain even the peasants could read and write well."²⁴ Furthermore, this passage together with others like it indicates that members of the Van Voorhees family were tied down neither to one place nor to one occupation.

Not only was the family solidly bourgeois, but some

of its members appear to have belonged to the ruling regent class. Jan Alberts, a nephew of Steven Coerten, was an overseer of Dickninge, and Hilbert Coert cites a female cousin as being "among the richest people on the 'Wold'."²⁵ Thus, there is evidence that the Van Voorhees family occupied a position of both prominence and respect in local Drenthe society.

If it were not for two brief entries in local Drenthian records, we would know next to nothing about the pre-migratory life of Steven Coerten himself. In fact, we would only know the names and ages of most of his immediate family at the time of his emigration. In 1660 he was sixty years of age, was married to Willempie Roeloffse Suebering, his second wife, and had eight children. Three of these — Mergin, Hendrickje, who was married, and Coert, a twenty-two year old son — were by his first wife, whose name and fate are not known.²⁶ Of only one of his five other children, by his second wife, does the record associate both name and age: Lucas, ten. The others were Jan, Aeltje, Janneltje, and a second daughter Hendrickje, but to whom we may assign the known ages (eight, six, four, and two) has not been determined.²⁷

The first of the two vital scraps of information mentioned above appears in the manuscript of a Ground Inventory of 1642 for the manor of Ruinen, which was less than a mile from Hees. This record states the area and value in guilders, stivers and pence of the property farmed by Steven Coerten as follows:

1642—Steven Coerts:	
3 mudden and 2 schepels.....	539-0-0
House and garden	300-0-0 839-0-0 ²⁸

From this it is evident that instead of settling on the Voorhees place, Steven had moved to Ruinen. He thereby became one of the manor's chief crofters (tenant farmers), who formed a class in Drenthe distinct from that of the landowners.²⁹

Our second source is found in the accounts of the rent-master of Dickninge for 1658. This document discloses that Steven Coerten had bettered his position by renting a larger estate called "Pols-Erv at Ruyne," consisting of 17½ mudden of farmland and 7½ *dachwerck*, at a yearly rate of 23 mudden.³⁰

Two years after this entry in the records of Dickninge, Steven Coerten, whose family roots in Drenthe went so deep in the past and were so interwoven in local society, would leave his native region and cross the Atlantic to America. The reasons for his decision and his experiences aboard ship and in the New World, are now to be explored.

(To be concluded)

²²*Ibid.*, p. 9.

²³Personal letter from Hilbert Coert to Steven Coerten, Apr. 13, 1684, in *The Van Voorhees Letters*, ed. by Donald A. Sinclair and Helen M. Voorhees (New Brunswick, N. J.: The Van Voorhees Association, 1962), pp. 7-8.

²⁴Douglas Campbell, *The Puritan in Holland, England, and America* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1893), Vol. II, p. 340.

²⁵Schaap, p. 5; Coert to Coerten, p. 8.

²⁶"Stories from Family Records," *The Van Voorhees Association at Its Tenth Anniversary* (New Brunswick, N. J.: The Van Voorhees Association, 1942), p. 63.

²⁷"The Historical Handbook," *The Van Voorhees Association at Its Tenth Anniversary* (New Brunswick, N. J.: The Van Voorhees Association, 1942), p. 21.

²⁸Schaap, p. 5. ²⁹*Ibid.*

³⁰*Ibid.*, and editors' footnote which describes *dachwerck* as a measure of land in terms of the amount of work that could be done in a day.