

## History

Fort New Amsterdam lies on an important strategic point, where the Commewijne and Suriname rivers join and flow together to the nearby ocean. Erected as a defensive work for the inland plantations on the upper reaches of both rivers, the fort is a large earthen structure with five bastions.

The order for the construction was given by the "Societeit Suriname". This private company was set up in 1683 in order to administer and defend the colony of Suriname - at a profit. Three partners were involved, among them the city of Amsterdam.

Planning of the fort began in 1734. The Societeit Suriname provided the skilled artisans, materials, and tools; manual labor would be performed by slaves. By 1747 the fort was largely ready. Construction costs had reached over a million Dutch florins, double the original estimate, and over the following years costs would grow even greater.

Its construction also involved many delays and mishaps. It appeared that the location produced brick of poor quality, and so at that time a regulation ordered sailing ships bringing slaves from Africa to carry bricks as ballast. Furthermore, it appears that the foremen and artisans sent from Holland had little knowledge of the local environment, and Dutch methods of building the quarters and powder magazines were copied in Suriname:

*"All is built just as up North in every detail"* (Letter of Governor Mauritius, Sept. 25, 1744)

The brick-built powder magazine therefore was in practice much too damp for good storage of the gunpowder. The other buildings, bridges, and wooden barracks for the soldiers and officers rapidly deteriorated due to the tropical environment, particularly the voracious termites. The fort had to be continuously repaired and replaced to keep it standing.

As a defensive fortification, Fort New Amsterdam knew little success. Twice it fell into the hands of the English without resistance. In the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the fort increasingly lost any meaning. In 1872 a part of the barracks was set up as a prison, and until 1967 this was the only prison in Suriname. On February 1, 1907, Fort New Amsterdam was officially decommissioned as a defensive work and declared to be the government center of the Commewijne district.

Due to its strategic position, during the Second World War Fort New Amsterdam was used by the Americans to defend the bauxite resources on the upper reaches of the Suriname river. Large naval guns on the bulwarks recall this period. During World War II, the prison was used to intern 146 persons from the former Netherlands Indies (Indonesia) who were suspected of Nazi sympathies. A book was written about this somber period, The Green Hell by A.G. Besier.

## Touring the Fort

On your tour of the Fort New Amsterdam Open Air Museum you will come across the following notable sights:

### **The American Artillery**

Biking from town or walking from the boat landing toward the Open Air Museum, you will notice several large American artillery pieces from the Second World War. The Americans were protecting Suriname due to the bauxite mines and companies (notably the American-owned Alcoa) here. These were very important during wartime for the production of aluminum for aircraft. The firing range of the artillery covered the mouth of the Suriname River. Older residents still tell how all of New Amsterdam would be shaken to its foundations when the guns were fired.

### **Cannons and Mortars**

Around the grounds stand several different cannons and mortars that were used at the fort over the years. These guarded the ship-channels of the Suriname and Commewijne rivers. Next to the entrance are two cannon marked 1722 and 1776, as well as two mortars with the inscription 'Carron 1805' and numbered 69062 and 69074. Elsewhere lie two more, one with no inscription and the other bearing numbers.

### **Pina Huts**

The palm-frond covered 'pina huts' (pina is a variety of palm) were built by the Arowaks, an indigenous people. With only 3000 surviving members, they form the smallest ethnic group in Suriname. In the Arowak pina huts, the palm fronds are bound to the roof vertically; this differentiates them from those of the other indigenous groups and the Maroons.

### **Water Reservoirs and Conduits**

On the lawn inside the entrance stand two large water tanks. These date from 1740 and served as water sources for the garrison and later for the prisoners. One also sees brick water channels around the grounds. These date from the same period and even now regulate the drainage of an area that becomes soft and muddy during the rainy season. The function of this water system is now being repaired.

### **1740 Powder House (gunpowder magazine)**

This is one of the oldest buildings of the former fort; it was completed in 1740, hence the name. Since that year it has undergone major changes. Due to its small size and the nature of its brick construction it apparently performed poorly as a gunpowder magazine, and therefore a second one was built. The 1740 magazine took on the role, after 1782, of an artillery laboratory. Adjacent to the building lies a moat infested with caimans and snakes who do not, however, reveal themselves in daytime. The tree across from the Powder House is a breadfruit, from whose fruit many different types of food was made, even chips.

### **Coach house**

These coaches date from the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and were in use until the 1960's. The black hearse was called Lanti, or Nani, and was intended for the poor,

whose mourners were not allowed to walk behind it. The white hearse, the Anitriwagen, was for the rich, who were allowed to form a procession behind. The pumping fire engine was served by firemen made up of slaves who had 'volunteered' for this duty.

## **Kappas**

Just past the 1740 powder magazine you will see several 'kappas'. In these iron pots sugarcane sap was boiled down to sugar above great wooden fires. The slaves, and later the contract workers, had to continuously stir the contents to prevent it from caramelizing. If this happened, severe punishment followed: in the slave period, for example, a glowing ember was placed in the open hand of the guilty party.

## **Plantation House**

The plantation house was built in 1986 after an original model. The house is now used as a reception building and conference center for the Fort New Amsterdam Open-Air Museum.

## **Prison**

After 1872 a part of the barracks was taken over and used as a prison (the *Bandietenhuis*, or Bandit House.) As mentioned above, during the Second World War it also served as a concentration camp for people from the Netherlands Indies (now Indonesia) suspected of Nazi sympathies. It also housed prisoners of war, among them the crew of the German merchant vessel Goslar, who had scuttled their own ship (the hulk is still visible from the Paramaribo waterfront).

Conditions in the prison were very harsh, with 9-15 people in each cell, no air conditioning, poor provision for hygiene, and the like. There were also four solitary-confinement cells. For bad behavior the standard punishment was a week in one of these extremely dark, unventilated cells. The prison remained in use until 1982. Some of the cells are now used as exhibit rooms.

## **1778 Powder House (gunpowder magazine)**

The design of this building dates from 1744, although it was not begun until 1775, and finished in 1778. The Powder House still stands in its original condition. It has a heavy barrel vault with a thickness of 60 centimeters, wider at the base. The vault supports the wooden roof-frame, so the slate roof is not truly structural.

On the front gable you will see the decorative wrought iron coat of arms of the 'Societet van Suriname' ('SVS'), incorporating the symbols of Amsterdam (the 'X'), the West Indies Company, and the Van Aersen van Sommelsdijck family. These three parties created the "Societet van Suriname" as a private undertaking with the purpose of profitable development of the colony. The wrought iron wall anchors on the front side form the date of the building: 1778.

The Dutch design turned out in practice to be ineffective; it was too damp to keep the gunpowder dry. One of the Dutch governors of the period complained about this in one of his letters:

*“... Overall, I see that fortress through disappointed eyes, like a troublesome child – it will never be of benefit proportional to its cost. It looks nice on the map, and I believe that if it were in Brabant [Holland] it would be a good piece of work. But in the entire layout there is no attention given to the conditions of this country...”*

### **Lightship**

This is one of the first lightships in Suriname, built in 1905. It was in service at the mouth of the Suriname River from 1911 until after the Second World War. Slowly but surely, it is now being overtaken and dismantled by the tropical undergrowth.

### **Sluice Gate**

The brick sluice gate, built in 1781 to replace an older one, serves even now to control the runoff of excess water during the rainy season. Thus it forms part of the water management system of the entire area.

### **Juncture of Suriname and Commewijne rivers**

As you walk around the earthen bulwarks of Fort New Amsterdam, you will see two imposing rivers: on the left the Suriname River, and on the right, the Commewijne. One passes the spot where the two rivers flow together into the Atlantic Ocean, making an impressive spectacle. Dolphins are regularly spotted here, depending on the tides.

At this observation point stands the statue of “The Discoverer”, made in 1958 by the Surinamese artist Erwin de Vries at the behest of the former (colonial) government. This statue portrays the supposed ‘discoverer’ of Suriname, Alonso de Ojeda.

### **Commander’s Residence**

Completing your tour, back near the entrance you come across a number authentic wooden officer’s houses, including the so-called Commander’s Residence. This is one of the oldest structures in Suriname. It was built in 1750 as the house of the commander of Fort New Amsterdam in typical colonial style of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Flora and Fauna**

A lot of interesting fruit-bearing trees and plants can be found throughout the park-like landscape of the Open Air Museum. Many trees are host to several sorts of bromeliads, epiphytes, and wild orchids. The trees, fruits, plants, and puddles attract insects, animals and birds, among them hummingbirds, parrots, and others. With a bit of luck you can see caimans, iguanas, chameleons, and bush-spiders.

### **Work Underway on the Grounds**

As you may have noted, various improvement, renovation, and restoration jobs are underway in order to conserve the historic value of the fort for the future, and to increase its attractiveness to visitors.

The work is a joint project between Dutch and Surinamese partners. An important part of the project is to provide professional training and work experience to Surinamese youth with poor career prospects, among them prisoners nearing the end of their terms. After completing their work-study program, such youth go into various manual careers.

### **Snacks**

Drinks and a variety of Javanese dishes are available in the 'warung' (restaurant) by the entrance of the Fort New Amsterdam Open-Air Museum. You can also buy a cold drink at the prison complex.

We hope that you have enjoyed a pleasant visit and that we will see you again at the museum or at one of our cultural events.