CHAPTER ONE

FROM ‘GRAND DESIGN’ TO BANKRUPTCY: THE RISE AND FALL OF THE WIC, 1621–1674

At the time of its founding in 1621 the WIC was expected to serve as the exclusive Dutch trading and colonizing company in the Atlantic. People inside and outside the Company were also optimistic that the WIC, through attacks on Iberian possessions in the Atlantic, would greatly contribute to the defeat of the Spanish enemy and to the consolidation of Dutch independence. In reality the dual purpose of being a military instrument and a commercial organization proved difficult to combine. This chapter examines the rise and fall of the WIC from the origins of Dutch expansion in the Atlantic in the 1590s until the dissolution of the bankrupt WIC in 1674. It sketches the main political, economic, and military activities of the Dutch and the WIC in the Atlantic world to contextualize indigenous-WIC relations in the seventeenth century.

Dutch Expansion in the Atlantic before the WIC, 1590–1623

When the Dutch entered Atlantic waters during the 1590s, the Spanish and Portuguese had already established a dominant position in the Atlantic for more than a century. During the sixteenth century the Portuguese and the Spanish developed four distinct commercial circuits in the Atlantic connecting Europe, West Africa, and the Americas. The oldest Atlantic circuit was the Portuguese trade with the various indigenous polities in coastal West Africa ranging from Senegambia to Angola. In this region the Portuguese exchanged European goods such as textiles, copper, and metal for gold, ivory, and, increasingly, slaves. The Portuguese island-colonies, which included Madeira, the Cape Verde Islands, São Tomé, and Príncipe, were also part of this circuit. The second and the most valuable Atlantic circuit was the system of trade and shipping between Spain and Spanish America. Since the 1530s, well-protected Spanish treasure fleets loaded with Mexican and Andean silver annually sailed to Spain. With the importation of American silver the Spanish Habsburg Crown was able to
finance its ambitious policies in Europe. The third Atlantic circuit was the movement of goods and people between Portugal and Brazil. The most valuable commodities shipped to Portugal from Brazil were dyewood (brazilwood) and increasingly sugar. The fourth and final Atlantic circuit consisted of the slave trade between West Africa and the New World. This trade developed rapidly after 1550 following the dramatic demographic decline of indigenous American populations due to infectious diseases and Iberian colonialism. To satisfy the growing need for workers in the Brazilian sugar plantations and

Map 1. The Atlantic world in the Seventeenth Century.