CHAPTER ONE

THE DUTCH COMMUNITY IN NANTES

The principal income of the county of Nantes are its wines and not through those who consume it locally but through those who send it to their foreign countries and primarily via the sea. The Hollanders are the ones who taught the inhabitants of the county of Nantes how to adulterate their wines in order to preserve them better at sea, they are the ones who taught them how to make brandy, they are the ones who taught them how to make barrels...they are the ones who spend their days bringing into Nantes barrel staves and other things needed to keep the wines, and lastly, they are the ones who relieve the county of Nantes of its wines and brandies. Without the commerce of the Dutch, the residents of Nantes could only [arrange?] and discontinue their vines. If however the pretensions of these fake barrel-makers would be implemented, the Dutch would be forced to abandon the commerce of Nantes.1

Position paper of the Dutch community in Nantes, 8 July 1678

The sharp and condescending tone of the above statement grew out of many decades of intense Dutch involvement in the economy of Nantes and its wine producing hinterland. Periods of relatively smooth relations became progressively shorter, the result of local initiatives aimed at curbing the power of the Dutch to dictate economic life or through royal initiatives that sought to increase France’s share of the international commercial pie. During the first half of the seventeenth century, the political situation in Europe ensured royal and ministerial backing which allowed the foreigners to firmly anchor their trade in Nantes. By the middle of the century, the situation changed significantly. The end of the Thirty Years War—and the end of the Dutch war for independence—realigned the international power structure, while the economic power of the Dutch evoked strong retaliatory measures from England and France. With the French push for a solid and independent merchant marine came economic and political pressures. The revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 added religious persecution to these negative factors. Despite all this, a [reduced] Dutch colony remained active in Nantes throughout the second half of the century.

1 ADLA B 6781, 8 July 1678, Registres de la Senechaussée. This Dutch reaction to a protest by the barrelmakers of Nantes was signed on behalf of their compatriots by Simon de Licht, Gerard Pieters, Pieter Hollaert, Mathieu Hooft, and Jacob de Bie, all naturalized citizens of Nantes. My translation.
The growing prominence of this group over the first five decades invites a more thorough examination of their activities and expatriate lifestyle. We can combine the wealth of information in Rotterdam’s notarial records and those of Nantes with the trade statistics from the unique port register of 1631. Disputes and legal wrangling between Dutch and French wine traders regarding illegal or unfair business practices in 1645 add an inside view of those practices and reveal the network of Dutch traders in Nantes that year. In addition to the Dutch community’s relationships with the French merchants of Nantes, its connections with the patria and other mercantile centers along the Atlantic seaboard, the bilateral sources have also brought to light the hitherto hidden business ties between the Dutch and the Sephardic merchants in the Loire port. The Dutch used Nantes as a transshipment port in their efforts to by-pass the Spanish trade embargoes. The strong ties that already existed between the French merchants of the Contractation de Nantes—which included several Sephardim—and their counterparts in the northern Spanish port of Bilbao could be exploited by traders on both sides of the embargo. We will take a close look at this important and profitable secondary network below.

**Settlement trends**

Sparse sources prevent a definitive count of the number of Dutch residents in Nantes, yet a combination of notarial records in Rotterdam, Nantes, and Bordeaux, with additional information derived from secondary sources, has at least yielded enough data to come up with a reasonable idea about residency trends over the first five decades of the seventeenth century and allows us to consider the impact of periods of war versus peace on the size of the Dutch expatriate community.² The graph identifies trends over the years, but the number of Dutch residents was undoubtedly higher than surviving records can reveal.³

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² The 5-year averages absorb the worst of the source-related spikes.
³ The notaries of Nantes recorded all Dutchmen as 'marchands Flamands' which means they could come from anywhere in the Dutch Republic or the Flemish speaking part of the Spanish Netherlands. Not included in my data are those men whose names are not obviously Dutch. Sephardic Jews traded under a wide variety of aliases, and it is highly likely that a number of the men considered to be ‘Dutch’ were in fact originally Spanish or Portuguese Jews or Conversos.