DUTCH COLONIAL FORTS IN NEW NETHERLAND

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When Henry Hudson established Dutch claim to New Netherland with his 1609 voyage, the Netherlands was in a brief twelve-year period of peace in their long war with Spain. During years of bloody strife, the Dutch and Spanish erected many fortifications, large and small, in the Netherlands. Both sides in that war used the ‘Italian system’ of fortification in building small forts, modified, however so that the flanks of the bastions met the curtain walls at right angles instead of projecting lobe-like.¹ Such forts continued to be built in the seventeenth century in the Netherlands (see Figure 8.1).

Henry Hudson, sailing for the Dutch East India Company, ventured far up the Hudson River and anchored his ship adjacent to an island on the west shore about 150 miles (241 km) above its mouth. Indians crowded on board Hudson’s ship to trade food and valuable furs for European knives, beads, and hatchets.² Learning of the potential trade for furs at this location, merchants in the Netherlands immediately became interested in the area. Other ships came, and traders quickly focused on the island as a key location in the fur trade.³

Conflict developed when more than one Dutch ship arrived independently to trade. Early in 1614, Hendrick Christiaensen began building Fort Nassau on the island, later called Castle Island. The ‘fort was built in the form of a redoubt surrounded by a moat eighteen feet wide; it was mounted with two pieces of cannon and eleven pederseros, and the garrison consisted or ten or twelve men’. A map of 1614 or 1616 explains that ‘within the walls [the fort] is 58 feet wide. The moat is 18 feet wide. The house inside the fort is 36 feet long and 26 wide’. This map indicates the fort either as an enclosure in the middle of Castle Island or by a mark on the west side, toward the mainland and away from the river.  

Fort Nassau on the Hudson