
Rodrigues, Jan (Jan Juan Rodrigues)

(c. 1580–c. 1630),

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sailor and trader, was born in Santo Domingo (Dominican Republic), probably the son of an Afro-Caribbean mother and a European father. Like other Atlantic Creoles—persons of African descent whose names suggest that they had long experience in the western Atlantic world—Rodrigues was among those navigators, traders, pirates, and fishermen who traversed the Atlantic as free men, before and during the slavery era of the Americas. Knowledgeable in the many languages, laws, religions, and trading etiquettes of the larger Atlantic world, their presence suggests the porous character of racial lines in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which allowed people of African descent to be employed and even rise to positions of authority in a world suffused with African slavery. Rodrigues arrived in the northeastern territory of North America following the arrival of at least two other free black men, including Esteban Gomez and Mathieu Da Costa .

In April 1525 the explorer Gomez sailed a Spanish ship into the deep bay that secluded Manhattan Island from the Atlantic, which Giovanni da Verrazano had claimed for France in the year before. Gomez sailed several miles upriver before satisfying himself that he had not discovered the fabled Northwest Passage to the “spice islands” of Asia. Completing the voyage, Gomez returned to Spain with thirty-seven natives who were sold as slaves. Further north, in what is now the Lake Champlain region in upstate New York, Da Costa arrived with French explorers in 1603. Da Costa came to know the region well enough to serve as both a guide and French-Indian translator. Soon after Da Costa's arrival, freeman Rodrigues became associated with Dutch exploration of the region.

After Henry Hudson's 1609 exploration of the river that now bears his name, Dutch ships began to frequent the region to trade with the indigenous peoples. In 1613 Dutch sea captain Thijs Volchertz Mossel sailed the *Jonge Tobias* from the West Indies to Hudson's Bay, anchoring off Manhattan Island. There he left Jan Rodrigues to trade with Native Americans.

What happened thereafter—and what we know most about Rodrigues—is conveyed mainly through a series of lawsuits between Mossel and Dutch traders, including captains Adrian Block and Hendrick Christiaensen, both of whom had encountered Rodrigues. When Block, who was mapping Long Island Sound and trading with Native Americans, returned to Holland, he found himself being sued by Mossel, who claimed Block violated his exclusive trading rights. Key to the suit was the freedom status of Rodrigues. Was he a slave, owned by Mossel, or residing on Manhattan Island as a free man doing business on his own?

Block asserted that Rodrigues was a free man, and not a servant or an employee as Mossel claimed. Block insisted that Mossel did not enjoy a trade monopoly on the island, pointing to the presence of Rodrigues, who lived alone and traded independently. Block's defense rested on the argument that Rodrigues was a "free man," who was acting on his own authority and not on behalf of Mossel's alleged monopoly.

Christiaensen supported Block. He declared that Rodrigues had boarded his vessel and presented himself as a free man. Rodrigues even offered to work for Christiaensen, who hired him as a translator to facilitate trade with the Natives.

In April 1614 Mossel returned to North America. Sailing his new ship, the *Nachtegael*, into the Hudson, the truth of the relationship between Mossel and Rodrigues became apparent, along with evidence that Rodrigues was Manhattan's first non-Native American merchant. Sighting the *Nachtegael*, Rodrigues fired his musket at the ship, and its crew returned fire. Brandishing torches, muskets, and swords, Mossel's crew chased the "black rascal" and briefly apprehended him. Though wounded, Rodrigues took a sword away from one of his pursuers and escaped. Later he found refuge with Christiaensen's crew, who took him aboard their boat and sheltered him.

Mossel claimed that Rodrigues's actions proved that he was a renegade servant or employee, and not free. However, the court ruled against Mossel, thus finding implicitly that Rodrigues was a free man.

The written record of Rodrigues, who did not travel to Amsterdam for the proceedings, apparently ended in the Dutch court. Though it is clear that Rodrigues was the sole nonnative resident of Manhattan for several months, and possibly for long stretches of time during the second decade of the seventeenth century, documentation of Rodrigues's entire length of stay is wanting.

By some accounts Rodrigues fathered children with one or more Native American women. His trading post did well, as his inventory, bolstered with axes, kettles, and beads from Christiaensen's supply, was enticing to the natives who valued highly the sturdier metalware for hunting or warfare. Early traders like Rodrigues had learned the profitability of trading with the Indians their own currency, *sewan*. Made from a dark purple or black shell found along the coast of Long Island, the Dutch purchased *sewan* (and the lesser valued white shells known as *wampum*) at advantageous prices and then used it as currency to trade with the natives. But, perhaps most striking or relevant about the Rodrigues saga was his proclamation of himself as a free man, and its acceptance by Europeans.

Rodrigues may have been in the colony when the Dutch West Indies Company (DWIC) arrived in Manhattan in 1625. The DWIC, whose profits were chiefly from commerce derived from slave labor and the slave trade in the Atlantic colonies, was then pursuing its interest in the fur trade, which had been cultivated by early traders like Rodrigues.

In 2013, Broadway, north of 167th Street, was co-named "Juan Rodriguez Way" to honor the early pioneer.

Further Reading

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See also

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