

Friedrichstadt – Remonstrants and Mennonites

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5-minute read.

Introduction

A Danish Duke builds a new town in the 17th century, financed by Dutch Remonstrant investors, and settled by Dutch Mennonite craftsmen and their families, an early example of economically driven religious toleration.

The Duke and the Town

Duke Friedrich III of Schleswig-Holstein-Gottorp (1597-1659) founded the town of Friedrichstadt in 1621. A nephew of Christian IV King of Denmark and Norway, Friedrich championed the establishment of the town to boost the income of his territory through improved sea trade. Located in the province of Schleswig-Holstein, at that time part of Imperial Denmark, the town was situated in the region of Nordfriesland, northeast of Ostfriesland in the northern part of current day Germany, and Friesland in northwestern Netherlands. The town was well sited to become a successful port.

The Dutch Investors

While planning and preparing to raise the vital new town, Friedrich's gaze fell upon the successful industrial and commercial operations observed in the neighboring United Provinces of the Netherlands, the envy of the modern world during this era. Wealthy Dutch entrepreneurs constantly reminded the Danish Crown of their commercial strength by submitting an endless stream of investment proposals for projects in Schleswig-Holstein. Among these entrepreneurs were moderate Calvinists known as Remonstrants, who, owing to their opposition to certain Calvinist principles, had found themselves socially and politically outcast. They were open to new business opportunities in a polity more tolerant of their beliefs. [1] Friedrich extended an offer of religious tolerance along with a range of financial incentives in exchange for investments in his project.

Denmark had become a staunchly Lutheran state only a few years after Martin Luther published his Theses in 1517. Consequently, Friedrich's open approach to the Remonstrants may have been looked upon locally with some suspicion but he diffused the political issue by drawing the line at welcoming these moderate Calvinists. At the outset no Mennonites or other religious groups (with the exception of the fully acceptable Lutheran congregants) were to be permitted in the new town. [2]

The Remonstrants

Calvinism was born in the furor that accompanied the Protestant Reformation, taking a strong hold in such regions as the Dutch Netherlands where it supplanted the Roman Catholic Church

by the end of the 16th century. One aspect of the Calvinist worldview that distinguished it from earlier, and later, religious groups was its particularly strong, clear, enunciation of the principle of predestination, adhering to a version known as double predestination. Simply explained, this belief asserts that God designated, at birth, the destiny of some people to damnation and some to be saved. A person's destiny after death was pre-determined.

Certain moderate Calvinists objected to this stark theological view, asserting that people could certainly influence their destiny. They became known as the Remonstrants. In 1619 a Calvinist Church synod in Dordrecht overruled the Remonstrants, their church officials were dealt with harshly, and Remonstrant practices and church services were banned. [3]

Wealthy Remonstrants, therefore, proved to be an approachable group of investors for Duke Friedrich because he could provide them with the religious toleration that had been withdrawn in their native land. Following careful evaluation of the Duke's proposition, enough investors were brought together to execute the plan.

By 1628 the prospects had improved for Remonstrants in Netherlands. That year a group of 242 notable citizens signed a petition requesting the permission of the Amsterdam city council to establish a Remonstrant Church in the city. [4] Among the signatories was Frans Harnasveger (1571-1649) [5], brother-in-law of Gysbert de Veer (1556-1615). Gysbert and his wife Deborah Harnasveger (1560-1627) were among the early Dutch Mennonite settlers in the Danzig region.

The Harnasveger family was no stranger to religious controversy. Deborah's grandfather, Jacob Harnasveger (1480-1563), an armorer by trade, had participated in an ill-fated Radical Reformist attempt to oust the Catholic administration of Amsterdam in 1534. Jacob was arrested and tried for conspiracy in the plot. He was found guilty. Despite the efforts of the prosecution team to have him sentenced to execution for his role in the plot, he was merely expelled from the city for two years, after which he was able to return to his family and his trade. [6]

The Mennonites

In the early years of the planning stage the Duke's Remonstrant advisors recommended he invite other disaffected groups who could contribute to the enterprise. They had in mind the Dutch Mennonite congregants who faced much the same religious dilemma at this time. In fact, this became a sticking point for the Remonstrant group because they felt that financial success hinged on attracting enough of the right kind of ambitious, hardworking settlers. By 1622 the Duke relented, offering Mennonites the right to practice their religion in public. [7]

The de Veer Connection to Friedrichstadt

Nicolaes de Veer (1583-1646) was a son of Gysbert de Veer (1556-1615), introduced above. According to Michael Calmeyer, author of the definitive genealogy of the de Veer family, Nicolaes' branch of the family was among the most socially prominent ones in Amsterdam in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Nicolaes was a very wealthy merchant and Baltic trader as well as a teacher in the Mennonite congregation in Amsterdam. Nicolaes' descendants

belonged to a small circle of well-to-do Mennonite merchant families, all closely related through marriage. [8]

In 1626 Nicolaes travelled to Friedrichstadt, which by now had become a successful new community. It is unclear whether he invested in the town, but he remained there until 1628, when he returned to Amsterdam.

Friedrichstadt Today

Friedrichstadt remains a thriving community featuring Dutch architecture in the heart of Germany. It hosts the only Remonstrant church not found in Netherlands [[9], along with a Mennonite church and cemetery.

Notes

[1] Sem Sutter, *Friedrichstadt an der Eider; An Early Experience in Religious Toleration, 1621-1727*, The University of Chicago, 1982, pp. 17-18.

[2] Sem Sutter, p 49.

[3] Zijpp, Nanne van der. "Remonstrants." *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. 1959. Web. 31 May 2024, <https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Remonstrants&oldid=146127>.

[4] John Michael Montias, *Art at Auction in 17th Century Amsterdam*, Amsterdam University Press, 2002, p 81.

[5] The Frick Collection, *The Montias Database of 17th Century Dutch Art Inventories*, <https://research.frick.org/montias/inventoryList/652>.

[6] Barry Teichroeb, *Jacob Harnasveger: 16th Century Anabaptist Reformer*, www.mooserungenealogy.com.

[7] Sem Sutter, p. 80.

[8] Michael Calmeyer, *De Geschiedenis van het Geslacht de Veer van 1556 – 1929*. (Calmeyer, 1929). For an annotated translation of Calmeyer's work see Barry Teichroeb, *De Veer: Five Centuries of History*, www.mooserungenealogy.com.

[9] <https://friedrichstadt.remonstranten.nl/>.