

THE PRESS IN BRITISH GUIANA

BY JAMES RODWAY

British Guiana is a union of two Dutch Colonies, first Essequibo and Demerara, second Berbice, both captured by the British in 1796. There were governing councils in both and the rule seems to have been more arbitrary than that of the mother country, for no one was permitted to criticise the actions of the Governments on pain of corporal punishment. Under such circumstances the colonists were perforce obliged to keep silent and there was no room for newspapers. When there were grievances they could, however, be ventilated in Dutch papers.

Until 1793 there was no press in either colony and therefore all Government notices were written and circulated by means of colony slaves in corials, who passed up and down the rivers, exhibiting the documents at each plantation. The Manager wrote *Vertoond, Visé* or *Scén* and signed his name, after which the same document was carried from one to another, only one copy being available for a district. Some of these circulars are in existence and are interesting for the names of people who otherwise would have been unknown. In Stabroek (now Georgetown) there was probably a bellman, but advertisements were generally written circulars or letters.

Dutchmen are proverbially slow in the mother country and they were more so in the colonies. Englishmen in Demerara subscribed to Barbados newspapers and the Dutch to the "Amsterdamsche Courant," where the more important official notices of transports, etc., were published. The want of a colonial newspaper was hardly felt and when the

pioneer advertising sheet was started it failed for want of support. It will be well to understand that though Demerara was under Dutch government at least one-third of the planters were British; Essequibo had more Dutch and Berbice hardly any foreigners.

In 1793, Mr. J. C. de la Coste, probably a Portuguese Jew, was a partner with Andries Beaujon, as attornies-at-law in the town of Stabroek. Not having a large practice he could leave his partner to do what was necessary, and embark in anything else that pleased his fancy. We may call him a pushing fellow, and probably he shocked some of the slow people in the colony. Among his projects was one for a packet service with Barbados and another for a regular post from Demerara to Essequibo. All his schemes, however, came to nothing and we may safely state that he was ahead of his time as far as the Dutch colonies were concerned.

On July 31, 1793, Mr. J. C. de la Coste petitioned the Court of Policy of Demerara and Essequibo for the exclusive right to establish a printing office and newspaper. He had been requested to do this by a large number of the principal inhabitants, and was inclined to establish a printing press, which he thought would be a great convenience. This, however, he could not do unless he was guaranteed against competition, for five years. He also wanted a special authorization by which the official publications in his paper would have legal force. If permission was granted he would publish a weekly advertising sheet in which all Government publications, ordinances, regulations of the Court and notices would be inserted free, with the understanding that they were duly authorized. If this was allowed he would be enabled to spend the necessary capital.

The Prospectus was in Dutch; the following is a free translation:—

PROSPECTUS OF A WEEKLY ADVERTISING SHEET (ADVERTENTIE
BLAD)

The aforesaid paper will be printed on medium sheets and published every Sunday morning, and will contain the sessions of the respective Courts of Policy and Justice of both rivers, as well as the Ordinances and Regulations of the said Courts:

The Edictal Citations and Execution Sales of both rivers:

The deaths and births of both rivers:

The arrivals and departures of vessels, with their cargoes and passengers:

The appointments and changes of all civil and military offices:

Inland news of all the occurrences of the week:

Reviews of the state of the cultivation; memoranda of the seasons; opening up of new land; private sales; changes among the planters; happy and unlucky accidents; in fact, whatever may be of public interest. And, the most noteworthy foreign political news from Europe, the West Indies and America, for which the printer will make the necessary correspondence connections to secure reliable and ample news.

Further, the aforementioned advertising paper will contain publications, notices calling up creditors of boedels, departures of persons from the Colony, public and private sales, hiring or renting of goods and slaves, and all other news interesting to the public.

It will also contain the names and descriptions of the runaway slaves, who may be captured and brought to the fort during the previous week.

Demerary, July 29th, 1793. J. C. de la Coste.

This project appears very ambitious, and it could hardly have been carried out; even at a much later date no Demerara paper was so comprehensive. However, the Court was favourably impressed and granted part of the petition but a patent or octroy could only be obtained from the Colonial Council in the Netherlands. Meanwhile they undertook to prohibit that any other printing press be established in the colony and agreed to recommend that the authorities at the Hague should grant the patent.

Having gone so far Mr. de la Coste began his preparations and we find him writing again to the Court on the 29th of October. He had already got the press, but the paper was not yet issued. On receiving the favorable answer from the Court, he at once set to

work to put the office on a proper footing by purchasing the necessary slaves and materials. The principal inhabitants supported his project and promised subscriptions; he also received much advice and many recommendations in regard to the way he should conduct the paper. Possibly as a result of gratuitous advice, he now added a postal delivery in connection with the distribution to subscribers of the new paper.

This was quite an innovation, for there was no postal system within the Colony, the mails from outside being delivered from the Secretary's Office on payment of postage and fees. It followed, therefore, that people living at a long distance might not know that letters were waiting for their messengers and were often hampered in many ways. We who know what a postal delivery means, suppose that people would be eager for the scheme proposed by Mr. de la Coste, who was prepared to give bonds for the due performance of the work.

His new Prospectus differed little as far as the paper was concerned but the following additions were made:

The advertising paper will be printed on a large sheet of the same size as the English papers.

The Publications, etc., will be published in both the Dutch and English languages.

The Advertisements and public notices, etc., will be published in the languages in which they are given.

The papers will be delivered in Stabroek early on Sunday morning, and four messengers will be sent out at the same time to distribute them through the different districts of Demerara.

The subscription for the newspaper and free postage for one year will be 55 guilders, of which 33 guilders must be paid in advance at once, and the remainder on the 1st. of May, 1794, for which subscribers must bind themselves by their signatures.

The Court approved of the new plan, with the exception of a proviso that every ship captain should be bound to deliver his letters to the new office and a reservation that it could alter or amend the regulations at any time.

A year later Mr. de la Coste again petitioned the Court. Having received permission he had carried out his plan to the best of his ability and up to the present had received no complaints. He could not, however, get the ship captains to send their letters to his office or to call for others. Some did so and the result was confusion; he therefore asked the Court to order that all letters be sent to him. The Governor had used his influence, but in the absence of a law, there were no means of enforcing the recommendation. Owing to this difficulty, he had thought of giving up the Post Office, but as the inhabitants were continually assuring him of its value he still kept it up. For the first time people had somewhere to deposit their letters and where they could get others from outside; this prevented the delay of sending negroes to enquire. The experience of the first year, however, proved that there was no profit, for the cost of eighteen distribution offices, and a clerk, were a little over the amount of the returns. He therefore again petitioned that every ship captain be bound to bring his letters and to call for those which he should take away when leaving. If an ordinance were passed he would print it at his own cost, and distribute copies to the captains on their arrival.

The Court was favorable and willing to do all they could, barring the ordinance, confining the matter to a recommendation to the Governor.

The newspaper and post office were carried on for another year, but in March, 1795, we find signs of weakness. It appears that Mr. de la Coste had an attorney named Andries Beaujon as partner who did most of the legal business. This gentleman, however, died in 1795, and the work devolved on the other partner. He therefore applied to the Court on March 9, 1795, for permission to transfer the management of his correspondence office to Nicolaas Volkerts; his request was granted, and we may presume that the business was a failure.

The final conclusion is shown by a letter from Mr. de la Coste, dated Oct. 31. 1795, informing the Court that as his subscriptions expired that day he intended to discontinue his newspaper and to close the printing office; he returned the license with many thanks to their honourables. At the same time it appears that the Post Office was also closed, for nothing more can be found in our Colonial records.

This first newspaper is apparently unknown apart from the Records, and I have never seen a copy. Even its name is wanting for Mr. de la Coste calls it an "Advertentie blad" or "Courant"; possibly it may have been "Courant van Essequibo en Demerary." It would be interesting to see whether the paper corresponded in any way with the description of its projector.

The year 1795 was critical for the Dutch colonies on account of the happenings in Europe. There was a little revolution in Demerara, through the sudden departure of the Governor. For a time everything was in confusion, but a little republic was started and lasted for a few weeks. Mr. de la Coste published at the Hague, a pamphlet giving an account of occurrences, but whether he went back to the Netherlands does not appear. Mr. Nicolaas Volkerts lived in the Colony until 1812, and we shall see his connection with other newspapers. The press became the property of the Widow Volkerts, who may have been the mother of Nicolaas.

During the two years 1793-5, Government Notices were printed, but after the closing of the printing office the old system of written circulars was resumed. A few specimens of Mr. de la Coste's printing exist in the Colonial Secretary's office, Georgetown, and are fair examples; we may presume that he superintended the work himself and that the slaves he bought were only capable of doing rough work. Whether the people of the colony missed the paper or not does not appear, in fact everything was upset in April, 1796, by

the arrival of a British force to which the colonies surrendered without firing a shot.

The British authorities were not satisfied with written notices, and proclamations, and it therefore followed that on June 8, 1796, the Dutch Governor, who had been retained, informed the Court of Policy, that the Commander of H. B. M. Forces had expressed a desire that a printing press should be established. This would not only be a convenience to the Commander in sending orders to the military posts, but also of great benefit to the people in general. The Governor, therefore, proposed that a press be established in Stabroek, the expenses to be paid jointly by the Colony and the Government, i. e. from the two Chests that then existed. A proper person should also be engaged, at an annual salary, to print all public papers for the Government, and the Courts, he being allowed to increase his income by printing for the inhabitants. If the appointment should be approved it would be necessary to furnish him with a press and printing materials, which there was now a good opportunity of procuring by applying to a certain Mrs. Volkerts who might be induced to dispose of a press in her possession.

After deliberation it was resolved that the Governor be requested to inquire of Mrs. Volkerts, whether she would sell and if so, at what price. Further, it was decided to send to Barbados for a competent person on a salary of fifty or sixty "Joes" (\$400 to \$480) half to be paid by the Colony, and half by the Government, which person would be bound to print all such public papers as may be required by the Government and the Courts.

Two days later the Governor stated that he had taken measures to secure the printing press and materials from Mrs. Volkerts. At first she had refused to sell, but shortly afterwards he had received the following letter:—

"Honoured Sir,

I request that you will ascribe the negative answer which I have returned to you in regard to the selling of the printing press, to no other cause than some scruples which weighed in my mind, which are now dissipated. The press with all its types, materials, and in short all that belongs to it, is accordingly at your service, and I humbly request that you will, instead of causing the same to be previously appraised, allow me at once for the whole a sum of 2,200 guilders, (\$880).

I believe this may a little exceed the price which my husband paid for it, but at the same time I think that from the expense of improving and amending the press, it would by this time have cost him the sum I now ask for it.

I beg leave to recommend myself to your protection and benevolence, and have the honour to be, etc.

Timmerman *q. q.* H. J. Volkerts."

The Court resolved to purchase the press for the sum named, provided it be appraised and found in good order by the printers, who were daily expected from Barbados.

Soon afterwards two printers named Ellis and Cox arrived and established the first Government Printing Office, as well as "The Royal Essequibo and Demerary Gazette." The salaries paid to them quarterly from both Chests was 704 guilders (\$281.60); all other expenses were apparently paid by Ellis & Cox, who were obliged to trust to private work for labour, etc. Whether they bought slaves does not appear; possibly they may have hired one or two.

The new paper was published on August 22, 1796, but as far as I know there is no copy of the first issue. The R. A. & C. Society has No. 5, Sept. 4th, which is a foolscap sheet almost filled with advertisements.

This absence of news was characteristic of our early papers, which were hampered by the Government in many ways, and it was not until about 1819 that local news and correspondence became at all prominent. I may here state that the historical students will find much information in the advertisements, and that they are of great value for the light they throw upon local conditions. We may be sure that the stores of

the time imported only things that could be sold; we can, therefore, be certain that the people used what was offered for sale. The real history of the colony can be gathered from its newspaper notices and advertisements.

The "Essequebo & Demerary Gazette" was a weekly, published regularly until the colonies were restored to the Batavian Republic, after the Peace of Amiens, near the end of 1802.

Being English, it did not satisfy the new Dutch authorities, and therefore on the first Saturday in 1803, a Government paper named "*Nieuwe Courant van Essequebo en Demerary*," printed by Nicolaas Volkerts, Gouvernements Boekdrukker, was issued and continued during the short occupation by the Dutch. What became of the late printer does not appear; probably he did not understand the Dutch language and may have gone back to Barbados. The first paper under the new heading contained an Official Notice, that by Resolution of the Colonial Council for the American Colonies and Possessions the privilege of printing such papers and documents as the Government or the Courts of Policy and Justice should consider proper to be published, was granted to Nicolaas Volkerts.

Volkerts admitted that he did not know English and therefore could not conduct a paper in that language. A specimen of his printing is in our Museum, the "Publicatie" containing the Articles of Capitulation of Essequebo and Demerary, September 19, 1803.

It is a broadsheet, printed on both sides, in Dutch and English. The surrender was made, as on the former occasion, without firing a shot and it is noticeable that the Grand Seal of the Colony of Berbice commemorated the fact by the motto, "*Sine pulvere palma.*"

An English printer was required, but Nicolaas Volkerts appears to have become owner of the Government press, and he therefore employed Mr. E. J.

Henery under an agreement for half profits. The old name was restored and the paper went on steadily without trouble until the first agreement lapsed and another became necessary. Then as Henery and Volkerts could not agree as to terms, the former carried off the press to his own house and would not return it until ordered to do so by the Court of Justice. Volkerts was now in a difficulty for want of an English printer and in the end had to send to England from whence he got two printers, Thomas Bond and Adam Aulert, meanwhile carrying on the paper in his own name.

The difficulty occurred in 1805 and Mr. Henry sent to England for a press, by means of which he started a rival Gazette on January 6, 1806. In this new paper Henery gave "a short and simple but true statement of facts," which Volkerts answered with his version of the dispute. The conclusion of the last article is as follows:—

"We have to express our great obligations to the same gentleman, for his very extraordinary moderation and forbearance in being most graciously pleased not to exclude us from offering ourselves as candidates for public favour. We will, with his leave, so mercifully vouchsafed to us, strive to deserve that desideratum; and, should we succeed,—should we by our exertions and industry be fortunate enough to attain any height in the public esteem,—we will not prove ungrateful, we will not kick down the ladder which may enable us to ascend, but agreeably to the old English proverb we will heartily wish well to the bridge that carried us safe over."

There were now two rival Gazettes of the same name and we may be sure that there was no love lost between them. To add to the ill-feeling Volkerts obtained the Colonial printing, while Henery did the work for the Government and added "Royal" to the title of his paper. This, however, did not last long, for on July 31, 1806, the Court decided that as Nicolaas Volkerts had sold his printing office, the privilege of printing *all* the Court's publications be given to Mr. Henery. On June 21 preceding, Volkerts announced that his

paper would in future be printed by T. Bond, whose care and attention for some time past had given it a circulation hitherto unknown in these colonies. Up to the present there had been no real news, but now the opposition led to a little development. Volkerts announced that he was making proper arrangements for obtaining intelligence from all quarters. This was followed by a few local items not altogether pleasing to the authorities, for the Governor interfered by issuing the following order, published March 22, 1806:

"To Mr. Volkerts, Printer:

I am directed by the Governor to inform you that His Excellency has seen with much displeasure some illiberal and ill-natured reflections and paragraphs which have lately appeared in your weekly paper. As they can have no other tendency than by exciting irritation and animosity among the inhabitants, to disturb the tranquility of this Colony, His Excellency expects you will conduct your publication with more propriety in future and thereby prevent the necessity of a more severe correction.

You are required to publish this Reprimand in your next paper.

C. T. Tinne, Government Secretary
King's House, Stabroek, March 21, 1806."

I tried to find the paragraphs referred to and probably this is one of them:—

"Van Braam has been appointed Grave Digger. From the number of applicants, which we understand there was for the situation, it would seem that the loaves and fishes are no less an object of desire than in Europe."

The newspaper of that day was by no means free and we may presume that is the reason why there was hardly any news. The selections from British papers were, however, very good, and later came letters to the editors, some of which were scurrilous. Some correspondence in 1810 in connection with proposed churches for different sects led to Government interference which checked it for a time.

The matter was of little importance and I can hardly understand why it was checked. However, a Government Notice was issued on July 17, stating that dis-

cussions on Churches were "interdicted by authority."

It appears that Nicolaas Volkerts must have disposed of his interest in the Demerara paper in 1806, and gone to Berbice, for we find him starting the first paper in that colony during this year. The paper was called "The Berbice Gazette," and the file we have from January to June, 1812, shows it as a broadsheet, printed on both sides but not folded. It compares favourably with those of Demerara, in fact, the type appears new and the printing very good. When leaving for Europe Volkerts sold this paper to William Schultz, who carried it on for many years; I knew him as an old man in the seventies, and he once offered to sell me a volume of the Gazette. The Subscription in Volkerts's time was \$12, but later it was 33 guilders, i.e. a Joe and a half (\$13.20). Two Joes was the usual subscription for papers coming out twice or thrice a week and this was kept up to recent times. Two Joes would be \$17.60 at full exchange value but there was a reduction, until the subscription of the Royal Gazette in the seventies was \$14.67. William Schultz added the words "and New Amsterdam Advertiser" to the title of Berbice Gazette and for a time called it "The Berbice Advertiser."

The estimates for 1807 put down the cost of printing for the Colonial section at 2,500 guilders (\$1,000) and we may presume that the Government section paid an equal sum. It was certainly a day of small things.

The names of the two papers before 1814 were "*The Essequibo and Demerary Gazette*," that of Henery being distinguished by the addition of "Royal." In 1814 the older press changed the name of its paper to "The Guiana Chronicle and Georgetown Gazette," and the other became first "The Demerary & Essequibo Royal Gazette," and afterwards "The Royal Gazette: Demerary & Essequibo." The Chronicle existed for many years, but got into difficulties through its correspondence columns. In 1820 it became mixed up in the dispute between Governor Murray and

President Rough in connection with the fees of the Courts of Justice. With the favour of the Governor the Chronicle started a line of scurrilous abuse which ultimately led to its suppression, but the Royal Gazette came down to the eighties.

Before 1820, and in fact for many years after there was an utter absence of what we may call the literary side of the press in British Guiana. There were no books or even pamphlets, beyond translations of Dutch legal documents. I have a Mss. which was probably circulated about 1811, in which the personal element is conspicuous as it was in England, but it could not be safely printed in Demerara.

Almanacs were regularly issued from about 1802, either in sheets or folded; these developed into pocket books containing lists of officials and plantations, as well as translations and digests of Dutch laws and regulations for English readers. They were called Local Guides, the earlier publications being small, but they grew in later years to become compendiums of the laws in force. The earliest in our library is for 1815 and is entitled "The Annual Miscellany or Local Guide." It was published at the Royal Gazette Office, and contained an almanac as well as abstracts of the laws and regulations of the colony. That for 1820, which is also in our library, came from the same office and is called "The Local Guide, conducing to whatever is worthy of notice in the Colony of Demerary and Essequibo."

The first notice I can find of these annuals is an advertisement in the Gazette, of February 22nd, 1812, which states that "A Pocket Almanack for 1812" was just published.

In 1811 we find an advertisement of what afterwards became one of the features of the Local Guides:

"Regulations for the Administration of Justice and the Manner of Proceedings in the Rivers Essequibo and Demerary, framed by the Committee of Ten, and approved by their High Mightinesses, the Lords

States General of the United Netherlands; Dated October 4, 1774; Translated by J. Huiberts, and revised by J. P. Baumgardt, Esq., First Exploiteur at Rio Demerary."

This is said to have been re-printed by Edward James Henery in Georgetown from the same translation published in Berbice. In 1812 the same work appears to have been the main feature in "Every Man his own Lawyer, just published in quarto, price 11 guilders, in Dutch and English, the *Manner* of Proceedings in the Courts of Justice in these Colonies."

The Charter of Berbice in English was on sale at the Berbice Gazette Office in 1812 and in 1816. "The Letters of Derector, the Second Fiscal" etc., at the Royal Gazette Office. The letters were controversial, mainly attacks on the missionary system, first appearing in the Gazette.

The most important book was printed by E. J. Henery at the Royal Gazette Office in 1814. It is a thick octavo of 418 pp. beside the Appendix and Index, and is entitled

"Judicial, Practical & Mercantile Guide for the use of Judges, Lawyers, Merchants and all those who desire to have a general knowledge of Laws. Translated from the Dutch of Joannes van der Linden, Ll.D., Counsellor at Law at Amsterdam. With an Appendix of some Law Terms, etc."

The translator appears to have been L. P. Van Braam, but his name does not appear. There is a good copy in our library.

This work was of such importance that a translation was proposed in 1812 and a Government Notice was issued offering a premium of three thousand guilders for a correct translation into English.

The position of the press in Demerara and Essequebo can be seen from the following extract from a Ms. called "The Talisman" written in 1811; the author is unknown but he must have been English, for he abuses the Dutch laws and the lawyers who enforced them:—

"The indignant feelings of an English heart will exclaim "why"? (i. e., Why not make their grievances known) then, it is because their Governor informs the inhabitants that they are under Dutch Law, where the liberty of the press is completely done away; and no petition can be forwarded or meeting held but by the Governor's authority and control, which completely closes the Door against redress, and acts as a security against the most determined individual, so that his sufferings have to be borne without a murmur, and everything remains at the mercy of sordid caprice or interested motives."

BRITISH GUIANA NEWSPAPERS BEFORE 1820

ESSEQUEBO EN DEMERARY COURANT? 1793-5.

Weekly, Printed and published by J. C. de la Coste, Stabroek. (No copy appears to exist and the title is uncertain.)

THE ROYAL ESSEQUEBO AND DEMERARY GAZETTE, 1796-1802.

Weekly. One Joe (\$8.80) per annum. Printed by Ellis and Cox, Stabroek (now Georgetown). In 1802, printed by Samuel Cox.

The Royal Agricultural and Commercial Society has the following:—

1796, No. 5, September 24th.

1802, No. 319, November 6th ("Royal" left out.)

NIEWE COURANT VAN ESSEQUEBO EN DEMERARY, 1803, Jan.

Weekly. Printed by Nicolaas Volkerts, Gouvernements Boekdrukker.

(No copy known.)

THE ESSEQUEBO AND DEMERARY GAZETTE, 1803—

Weekly. Printed and published by E. J. Henery, Stabroek.

The Colonial Secretary's Office has:—

1803. Oct. 8 to Dec. 31. Nos. 41-53.

1804. Jan. 7 to Dec. 29. Nos. 54-105 (wanting No. 56.)

1805. Jan. 5 to Dec. 28. Nos. 106-157.

1806. Jan. 4 to Dec. 27. Nos. 158-209.

(Nos. 158 to 184 printed by N. Volkerts, Nos. 185 to 209 by T. Bond.)

The Royal Agricultural and Commercial Society has:—

1804. June 10.

1805. June 22.

The Colonial Registrar's Office has:—

1807-8 complete, 2 vols.

(To May 16, 1807, printed by Aulert and Bond.)

THE ESSEQUEBO AND DEMERARY ROYAL GAZETTE.

Tuesdays and Saturdays. Printed by Edward James Henery, Stabroek.

Files in Colonial Secretary's Office:—

1810-1813, '15. Vols. V-VIII, X. Five volumes complete.

Royal Agricultural and Commercial Society has:—

1812. Feb. 15.

June 9.

Oct. 6.

1814. Aug. 6 to 23, Dec. 10.

Colonial Registrar's Office has:—

1810. Jan. to Oct. 6.

1811. Complete.

THE ROYAL GAZETTE: DEMERARY AND ESSEQUEBO.

Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays. Printed by William Baker.

Colonial Secretary's Office has:—

1816-20. Complete.

Colonial Registrar's Office has:—

1820. Complete.

Royal Agricultural and Commercial Society has:—

1819. April 6.

April 10.

May 25 to Aug. 19.

1820. Complete.

THE ESSEQUEBO AND DEMERARY GAZETTE.

Wednesdays and Saturdays. Printed by Aulert and Stevenson.

Colonial Secretary's Office has:—

1813. Complete.

THE GUIANA CHRONICLE AND GEORGETOWN GAZETTE, 1814—

Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Printed by Aulert and Stevenson or A. Stevenson.

Royal Agricultural and Commercial Society has:—

1816. June 14.

1817. Dec. 10.

1819. April 23.

June 7 and 14.

1819. Dec. 22.

1820. Complete. ("Demerara" not Georgetown Gazette.)

BERBICE GAZETTE, 1806—

Saturdays. Printed by N. Volkerts, New Amsterdam, Berbice. Subscriptions \$12.

Royal Agricultural and Commercial Society has:—

1812. Jan. 4 to June 13.

NOTE With the exception of the last the papers were all published in Georgetown, Demerara, Stabroek until 1812 when the name was changed.

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