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An East Frisian Theory of Wyckoff Origins

By Wilhelm Wykhoff

With Hans Schrader

Note: The following article has been adapted by the editor from a slide presentation prepared by Wilhelm Wykhoff for the 350th Anniversary of the arrival of Pieter Claesen Wyckoff in New Amsterdam. Mr. Wykhoff gave a short introduction, and Hans Schrader then read the text that accompanied the slides.

I was very happy to accept your invitation to explain my theory that your Pieter Claesen Wyckoff actually came from East Friesland in Germany.

I bring warm greetings from our German Wykhoff association, whose president I have had the pleasure to be since its founding. I wish you great success in your current jubilee celebrations.

I have been engaged in family research for over thirty years, having traced my own family back to about the year 1200. I am especially interested in the Wykhoff, a large farm in East Friesland that my family once owned. I have reason to believe that this farm was also the place of origin of Pieter Claesen Wykhoff.

Over the years I have had very interesting contacts with your association. Your genealogists, Helen Wikoff and Bernhard Hall have already visited me in East Friesland. They were able to examine many original documents during their visit in 1984. Helen Wikoff wrote about the visit in the 1986 Wyckoff Bulletin.

My research into the possible origin of your Pieter Claesen Wyckoff has been going on for many years, but recently, only shortly before my departure for the United States, I happened upon important additional material from the estate of the local history and family researcher Andreas Baumann. He was a teacher,

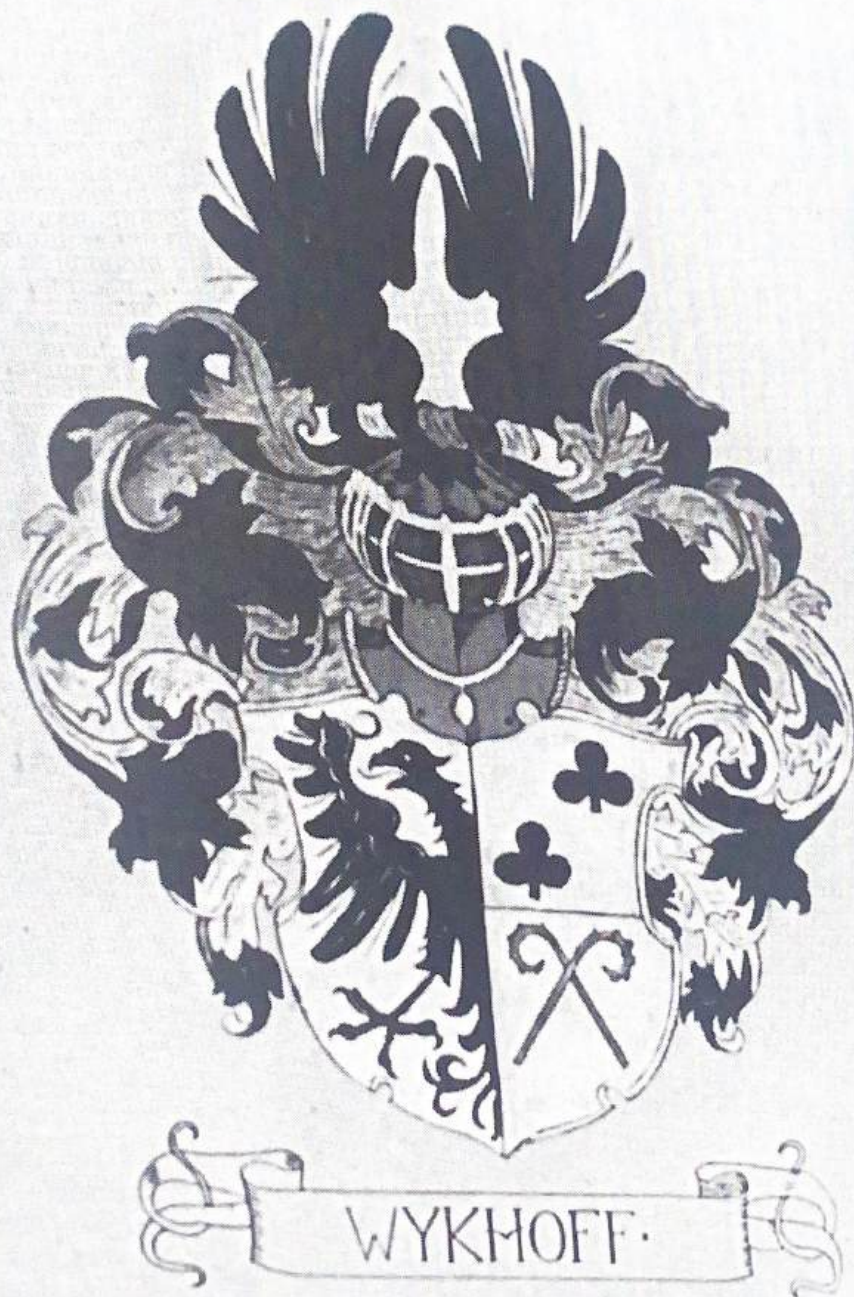
and made a lifetime occupation of research into the history of the Wykhoff area, where he himself lived.

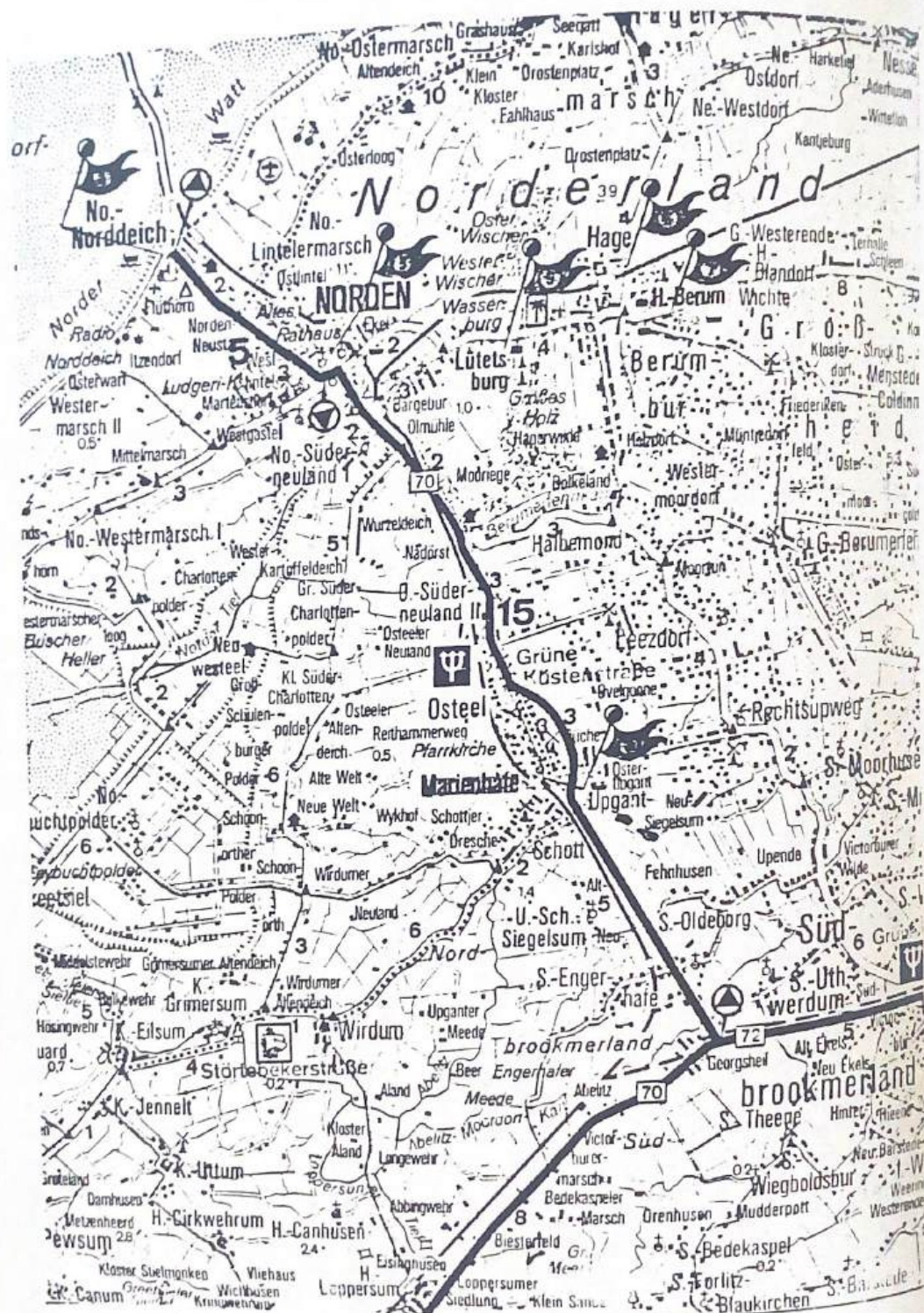
Because these papers were discovered so shortly before my leaving for America, I have not been able to review all of his extensive handwritten notes, or to check them against the original documents. But many of his findings, especially his Wykhoff research, gave me new insights. That is why I am going to report some of these new findings without having been able to verify them against original documents.

Our Wykhof coat of arms was discovered on old tombstones, and has been confirmed by the Public Record Office in Aurich. On the left is half of an eagle, a symbol conferred on all free Frisians by the Emperor Karl. According to Dr. Ohling, a renowned genealogist, who is also related to my Wykhoffs, the clover leaves show the rural origins of the family, and the crossed bishops' staffs refer to the right of the Wykhoffs to lodge Catholic bishops before the Reformation. According to Ohling, the name "Wykhoff" comes from the old German word "wic," which meant a holy place.

The principal towns of East Friesland are Emden, Norden, Aurich, Esens, Leer, and Wittmund. More than one historical document refers to Pieter Claesen as coming from East Friesland or Nordinge, probably Norden, an important city in East Friesland. The outer edge of this province in Northwest Germany is very fertile, but in the center there is less fertile sand and moor. The entire province is protected from the sea by strong dikes. On the shore of the North Sea are the East Frisian Islands. In the West Central area are Marienhaf and Upgant, where the Wykhoff is located. On the Southwest is the Dutch border. In the 14th to 16th centuries this area's connections with Holland were very strong, stronger perhaps than even with Germany. Likewise the Frisian language is very similar to that spoken in northern Holland, and the people have little trouble understanding each other.

There is a small river that is very important in the history of the Wykhoff. It is called the Stoertebecker Deep, and will be discussed later in detail.





Norden, Marienhaf, Wykhof, Upgant, (Upganter),
and Stoertebekerstrasse (Stoertebecker Road)
all appear in this section of East Friesland.

The name of the Wykhoff is often not spelled with the two "f"s of the East Frisian language. The reason for this is that maps were drawn by Prussian officers who were unfamiliar with the Low German language and the correct spelling of "Hoff," which means "farmhouse."

The Wykhoff was probably originally built in the 13th century by the local lord, Ast von Upgant, who was my direct ancestor. My latest findings indicate that the original Wykhoff was located about three hundred meters from the house presently standing. Between the two locations a dike was built. Apparently the original building was destroyed by flood.

It is very interesting that I have been able to locate a "Classen's blue clay pit" in close proximity. (A "clay pit" was a large excavation dug to obtain clay for making bricks.)

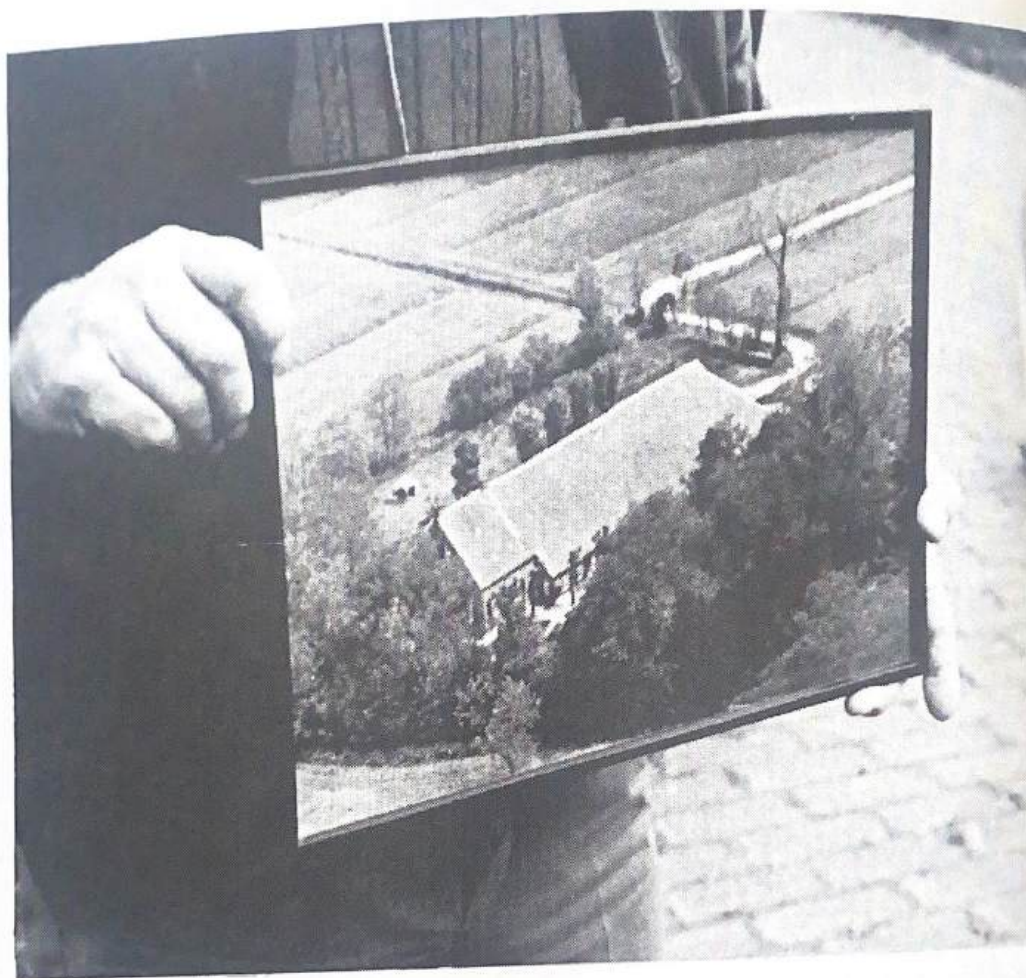
The Wykhoff was managed by descendants of the original builder until about the middle of the 17th century. It was then leased out, and finally sold by the heirs in 1769.

The dikes protecting East Friesland were breached on many occasions. The sea made deep incursions before large areas were gradually reclaimed over many centuries of hard work. At one point the Wykhoff was situated directly on the shore, where the Stoertebecker Deep flowed into the North Sea.

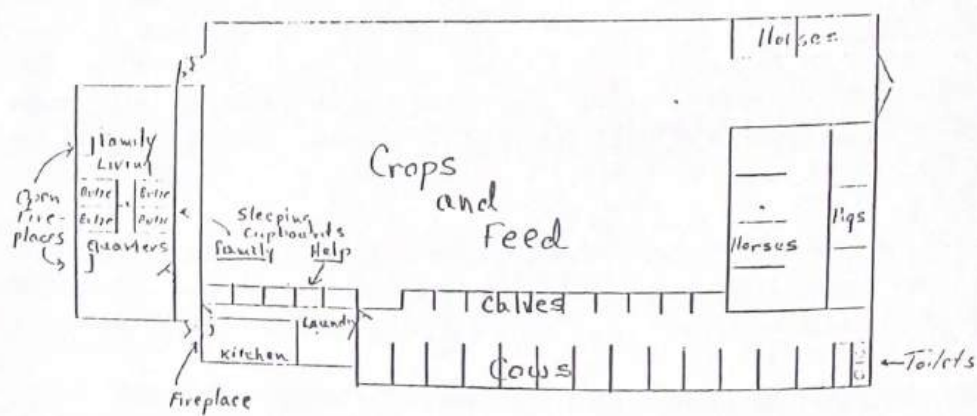
There are present day street signs showing the name "Wykhoff." The Wykhoff is still shown on maps as a separate village.

There are "old" and "new" Wykhoffs. One hundred years ago the farm was divided between two brothers and the results were called the "old" and the "new" Wykhoffs.

When Helen Wikoff and Bernhard Hall visited East Friesland we showed them the Wyckoff in its present state. A reproduction of an aerial photograph of the building rebuilt in 1757 on the original foundations



The old Wykhoff (burned, 1974)



Floor plan of the old house, about 1840

and with the same room arrangement shows a very impressive building with very thick walls. The house was surrounded by a water-filled ditch. There was undoubtedly a bridge there also. Unfortunately, this structure burned down in 1974.

Although a very large building overall, only the two front rooms were used for living space by the family. These rooms also included open fireplaces for warmth and the typical enclosed cupboards for sleeping. There were no separate bedrooms. Behind the two main rooms were the kitchen, and the sleeping cupboards for the help. The major part of the building was the barn, with stables for the cattle, horses, pigs, and sheep, and a large area for storing hay, straw, and the crops. The roof was of a special shape that protected it from the strong North Sea winds.

Around the year 1400 the entire North Sea, including the powerful Hanseatic League, lived in fear of a pirate named Stoertebecker. Stoertebecker's first name was Claes, and there were strong connections between him and the Wykhoff.

The small river mentioned earlier, which connected the church in Marienhafé with the Wykhoff is still called the Stoertebecker Deep. Today it is very narrow and is not navigable. But when Stoertebecker was alive (and before and after that time) the Wykhoff was a point for transshipment for ships coming from the open sea. Here goods were loaded into smaller boats that could go right up to Marienhafé. The pirate Stoertebecker had very shallow draft boats that could sail right up to the church itself. Indeed, the pirates actually lived in the church and kept their booty there, which they shared with the local chieftains and the populace.

In 1755, when the Wykhoff was being rebuilt, a pot of Stoertebecker's gold was supposedly found in the foundations. A shirt and slippers belonging to Claes Stoertebecker were kept in the Wykhoff for many centuries. Now they are in the museum in Emden. It seems that the name "Claes" has played an important part in the history of the Wykhoff.

The oldest seal of the church in Marienhafte, dating from the 14th century, shows Mary with Jesus. This seal is very interesting because the legend, when translated, means seal of the holy Mary in Upgant. On the sideways seal may be clearly seen "Uppagent" or Upgant in mirror writing. This shows that after the withdrawal of the order of Catholic monks called "Praemonstratenser," who built the church, the people who inhabited the Upgant farms took over ownership of the church. The now much larger town of Marienhafte was not yet in existence at that time.

The earliest settlement at Upgant was an 8th century one. In 945 Upgant is mentioned in documents for the first time. The farming village got its name from the little river of Gant. There were many buildings there that looked like fortresses -- the Wykhoff, Fockenborg, and the Hahneburg, for example. Upgant, together with Brookmerland, was an autonomous republic with its own judges until 1350.

On May 20, 1625, just when Pieter Claesen was a child, the farmers in Upgant successfully tried to renew these old rights. They once more got their own judges and self-government.

On the spot where the church stands today there was a fortified farm owned by a local chief, which was similar to the Wykhoff. The owners of this farm took part in the crusades, and there were connections between them, and Upgant, with the Wykhoff. This aristocrats' farm, which belonged to Upgant, was called Marienhoff. The owners were of the Flemish-Brabant family "Tzerclaes," a family of Frisian origin. Tzerclaes means "the son of master Claes," another case of the special significance of the name "Claes" to the Wykhoff. At the beginning of the 13th century, this noble family moved to Berum, in the vicinity of Norden, and gave the Marienhoff to the Praemonstratenser order of monks. This order built, with the help of the farmers of Upgant, the impressive Mariendom (Cathedral of Mary). When they had finished the church, the order founded a new monastery on the island of Aland, five miles away, because they were not able to give work to

all the monks in Marienhafte who had built the church. They sold the farm, and the fields were divided.

Merchants, craftsmen, fishermen, and sailors settled down. Marienhafte became an autonomous settlement. At the same time that the church was built, a market was established where the farmers and craftsmen could trade their goods. The market area was surrounded by a wall with gates. The Frisian word for this market area is "wyk." The wyk was a place of refuge which had special protective legal rights. Another interpretation of the name "Wykhoff" holds that it comes from this Wyk in Marienhofte, because the Wykhoff, as a transshipment point, was of special significance to this Wyk. The oldest existing drawing of Marienhafte, dated June 9, 1632, when Pieter Claesen was alive, shows the mill of Upgant and the gate towers on the wall around the wyk.

In 1829 the church was very dilapidated, especially the eastern gable and the roof. The then governing Kingdom of Hannover did not want to give any money for repairs, and the inhabitants were unable to pay for them without help, so it became necessary to reduce the size of the church. Looking at the church today, you must imagine that the tower was originally three stories higher, with a spire, and that the church was as long as the tower was high.

Before the organ of 1711 was installed, the church had the oldest organ in East Friesland, dating from 1437. The baptismal font dates from the 13th century, when the church was built. If I am correct that Pieter Claesen was born here, he was baptized at this font.

It is said that Stoertebecker did much for the church. He had the roof recovered with copper, and he renewed the tower as well. In the tower today there is a museum devoted to the church and to Stoertebecker. It is very interesting because it displays artifacts of the original church and of Stoertebecker. From this church tower the pirates were on the lookout for ships to capture.

The church record office is in the old parsonage. The

church books date only from the end of the 17th century because they were burned, together with eighty percent of the houses, during the Thirty Years War. Therefore one cannot obtain any exact information here about the birth of persons who lived before that time.

However, in the old church books you find that the name of Peter Classen and Claes Peters were very common in this vicinity.

More documents can be found in the Public Record Office in Aurich. In tax lists, contracts of purchase and of marriage, inheritances, and the like, the name of Peter Classen often appears. Peter Classen van Norden was mentioned in the 16th century. The name appears in 1622, when a Peter Classen van Norden appears as a witness to a contract. He was probably the grandfather of your ancestor. In 1631 Peter Classen van Norden appears again as a witness to a contract. (In those days only important persons became witnesses.) Peter and Pieter, incidentally, are the same name in High and Low German, respectively. Another Claes Peters is mentioned together with Gerd Gerdes, who bought the Wykhoff in 1769. It is also interesting for me that a Claes Claessen is mentioned together with my ancestor Johan Jacob.

Pieter Claesen is listed as Pieter Claesen "van Norden" in the log of the ship Rensselaerswyck. "Van" means "from," but is also often a part of the name itself. I believe the supplement "van Norden" was a part of Pieter's name.

There are connections between a Heiske Peters, who is mentioned in the valuation register of Upgant, and Pieter Classen van Norden. This Peter Classen was probably Heiske Peters' father. It is said that he lived on the farm of Jennel Agena, next to the burned down Wykhoff. This register was written at the beginning of the 17th century.

In a further register of 1617 Heiske Peters is again mentioned. I think he was the second or third son of the old Peter Classen, the grandfather of your

ancestor. As you may know, the first son was named, in patronymic fashion, after the grandfather on the father's side. The second son was named after the mother's father. Subsequent sons could have any other name. It is definite that all sons named their first son after the grandfather. The name of Heiske Peters' first son was Peter Classen. There were also other persons with the name "Peter Classen" and "Claes Peters" because the other sons did the same. It may seem strange that our Peter Classen did not name his first son after his father. In my experience, however, almost all emigrants from East Friesland stopped the patronymic naming. Most of them changed their own names. With the emigration they left behind the tradition of the Old World. Maybe Peter did the same.

In 1618 Heiske Peters is mentioned again. The name "Johan Peters" appears as well, perhaps the name of a brother. In 1634 Heiske Peters no longer appears. Ebko lives, together with his wife, in Heiske Peters' house. In 1638 Hans Harmens shows up as a tenant on the Wykhoff.

There is an explanation for the disappearance of Heiske Peters and his family from the tax registers. During that time, the plague raged in the area. There is a book about the preachers of East Friesland printed in 1796 in the third edition. The text dates from 1740, about 100 years after Heiske Peters disappears. The first page says that the family of Tzerclaes (son of master Claes) built the church. On the second page there is something about the pastor of Buehne. It says that in 1636 two hundred thirty persons died of the plague within six months. That was nearly the entire population.

I presume that the parents of Peter Classen died at this time also. Perhaps, as an orphan, he stayed with his grandfather in Norden and emigrated to America later on. According to Kenneth Scott, in an article in De Halve Maen (published by the Holland Society of New York), many orphans were sent to New Amsterdam in the 17th century at government expense. Simon Hart writes in the same publication that at most fifty percent of

emigrants to the New World were from the Netherlands. Most of the others were from Low German speaking areas such as East Friesland. Van Laer's translations show that a Berend Dirksen, formerly of Norden, was in New Amsterdam in 1639, showing that there were other Frisian connections at that early date.

It is my theory that Pieter Claesen called himself and his farm in America "Wykhoff" because he came from the Wykhoff. Nearly all emigrants who originated from this farm did the same.

We can prove that the Wiekhoffs, who lived on the Wykhoff in the 18th century, and who eventually emigrated to America in the 1920s, took this name because they had lived on the Wykhoff. The contract for purchase of the farm dated 1769 shows that Casjen Janssen was a tenant on this farm. When family names were introduced he took the name "Wiekhoff." Hans Schrader's family is among the descendants of this branch.

In The Washington Ancestry, C.A. Hoppin reproduced a letter from a Dr. Max Wickhoff of Vienna. This family also apparently came from Upgant and adopted their name in the same fashion. Sabina Catherine, a daughter of East Friesland's Duke Enno III, married into the upper Austrian nobility. It is quite possible that an East Frisian horsebreeder from the lower nobility went along to Austria. According to the maps of the time, in that period the name was written either "Wickkoff" or "Wiekhoff."

Another example involves a second "Wykhoff" in Borssum, near Emden, where my ancestors lived for two hundred and fifty years. Ohling found a relationship between this and the other Wykhoff. One of my ancestors bought this other farm in 1669 and called it Wykhoff, taking that as the family name as well.

I hope that I have been able to give you some insight into my research findings and resultant theories. I would like to continue to work with your association in further research, in order to shed further light on the origins of Pieter Claesen Wyckoff.

* * * * *

Wilhelm Wykhoff traveled with his family to the United States in order to attend the 350th Anniversary of the arrival of Pieter Claesen Wyckoff in New Amsterdam. He lives in Scharnebeck, West Germany. Hans Schrader lives in Smithtown, Long Island, New York, and was largely responsible for securing Wilhelm Wykhoff's manuscript for us. We hope that in the near future we will also be able to secure copies of the one hundred and fifteen slides that accompanied the text as it was delivered at one of the anniversary dinners, so that Wyckoffs around the country will be able to visualize the people, places, and documents that are mentioned.



A signpost in East Friesland