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Daniel Denton (c.1626–1703)

Paul Royster
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, proyster@unl.edu

Daniel Denton

(circa 1626–1703)

BOOK: *A Brief Description of New-York: Formerly Called New-Netherlands . . .* (London: Printed for John Hancock & William Bradley, 1670; New York: Gowans, 1845)

Daniel Denton, son of the first Presbyterian minister in America, wrote a promotional tract in 1670 to encourage English settlement of territories lately seized from the Dutch. Denton's *A Brief Description of New-York . . .* gives an account of the geographical features and general economy of the country surrounding New York, relates some customs of the native inhabitants, and offers incentives and advice to prospective settlers.

Denton was born around 1626 in Yorkshire, England, son of Helen Windlblank and the Reverend Richard Denton. In the 1640s he accompanied his father to Massachusetts, Connecticut, and eventually Long Island. In 1650 he was made town clerk of Hempstead, where his father was

pastor, and in 1656 he held the same position in the town of Jamaica. When his father removed to Halifax, Nova Scotia, Denton remained on Long Island, and in 1664 he became one of the grantees of a patent at Elizabethtown, New Jersey. In 1665 and 1666 he served as justice of the peace in New York. Around 1659, Denton married Abigail Stevenson, who bore three children, and from whom he was divorced in 1672. The two elder children, Daniel and Abigail, remained with their father, while the infant daughter, Mercy, accompanied her mother, who subsequently remarried. Denton left New York for England in 1670 (which may have occasioned his divorce), and there he evidently participated in settlement enterprises and possibly in the newly acquired (by the English) fur trade.

A Brief Description of New-York: Formerly Called New-Netherlands . . . is a twenty-five-page pamphlet describing the topography, climate, soil, fauna and flora, settlements, crops, products, trades and occupations of the area between the Hudson and Delaware rivers, including Manhattan Island, Staten Island, and Long Island. Denton also included in his pamphlet some anec-

dotal relations of Indian customs and society. Quite understandably, he did not describe the Indians as a threatening presence, noting that “it hath been generally observed, that where the *English* come to settle, a Divine Hand makes way for them: by removing or cutting off the *Indians*, either by Wars one with the other, or by some raging mortal Disease.” Likewise, Denton gave little attention to the Dutch inhabitants of New York, other than to remark how much more effective British force would be in controlling the Indians.

The recurrent theme of Denton’s tract is the New World’s availability of land, and it lays its greatest stress on the material advantages and opportunities of colonial life: “here any one may furnish himself with land, and live rent-free, yea, with such a quantity of land, that he may weary himself with walking over his fields of Corn, and all sorts of Grain.” The pamphlet’s strongest appeal is to “those which Fortune hath frowned upon in *England*, to deny them an inheritance amongst their Brethren, . . . [who] may procure here inheritances of land and possessions, stock themselves with all sorts of Cattel, enjoy the

benefit of them whilst they live, and leave them to the benefit of their children when they die.” Denton identified America (specifically New York) with this particular trajectory of success, and his tract represents an early prototype of the myth of American soil as the “land of opportunity”: “How many poor people in the world would think themselves happy, had they an Acre or two of Land, whilst here is hundreds, nay thousands of Acres, that would invite inhabitants.”

Denton’s pamphlet reflects other characteristic colonial attitudes as well—most notably a sense of the self-reliant egalitarian flavor of American society, “where a Waggon or Cart gives as good content as a Coach, and a piece of their homemade Cloth, better than the finest Lawns or richest Silks,” and a typically Puritan reference to America as the new Promised Land: “I must needs say, that if there be any terrestrial *Canaan*, ‘tis surely here, where the Land floweth with milk and honey.” Denton was anxious in this last passage to be understood in a literal as well as typological sense, and indeed the secular note dominates throughout the tract. Denton’s early

vision of the westward expansion of English culture and his mode of representing the American wilderness as an agrarian frontier were well on their way to becoming conventional tropes in a formalized rhetoric of the New World. Denton's book exemplifies the migration of ideas from New England southward and westward across the continent, and also the capacity of those ideas to adapt and develop in response to local circumstances.

After *A Brief Description of New-York . . .*, Denton published nothing more. He returned to America in 1673, settling in Piscataway in East Jersey, where he was appointed magistrate. The next year, however, he removed to Springfield, Massachusetts, where he taught school and served as the town recorder. In 1676 he married Hannah Leonard by whom he had six children—Hannah, Samuel, Sarah, Elizabeth, Thomas, and Alice. He returned to Jamaica, New York, in 1684, became county clerk of Queens County in 1689, and died intestate in 1703.

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