Dutch Influences in America and on English

In this issue: Names, Words & Expressions of Dutch Origin

Zoom in on America
Dutch Influences in America and on English

The Dutch were among the first European travelers to arrive and settle the New World. In this issue, we zoom in on the influence of the Dutch language on American English including names, words and sayings.

Okay, Let’s Begin...

Okay (also spelled OK or ok) is ubiquitous in spoken English, but the origins of the word are not certain. Most people agree, however, that its popularity owes a lot to a U.S. president with Dutch ancestry and a town founded by Dutch settlers. Martin Van Buren (1782 – 1862), America’s eighth president, was of Dutch descent and was born in Kinderhook, New York. Kinderhook means “Children’s Corner” in Dutch (kinderhoek). During his campaign for president, Van Buren’s supporters said that OK stood for Old Kinderhook and encouraged voters to “vote for OK”.

Where Do Yanks Come From?

Americans likely owe their popular nickname Yankee to the first Dutch settlers who came to America in the early 1600s. The word probably comes from a nickname, Jan Kees that was given to Dutch cheese producers before they arrived in America. It is believed that after they settled near British colonists in New England, Dutch colonists started calling themselves by this nickname. In this way, New Englanders became Yankees. During the U.S. Civil War (1861 – 1865) the word Yankees was used to refer to Union soldiers from northern states. During World War I, the word “Yankees” was shortened to “Yanks,” a term used in a popular song from 1917, “Over There”:

Send the word, send the word over there
That the Yanks are coming, the Yanks are coming...

Today, the word Yankee is a popular nickname for Americans all over the world. It also is the name of the best-known baseball team in the United States: the New York Yankees, established in 1903 (see photo on p. 3).

New Route, New Netherland

In 1609 the Dutch East India Company sent an expedition under the leadership of an English commander, Henry Hudson. Instead of finding a new route to Asia, which was the expedition’s goal, Hudson reached America’s eastern coast and explored the river that now bears his name. Soon, the Dutch set up a colony that they called New Netherland and started building the settlement of New Amsterdam on Manhattan Island. The voyage allowed the Dutch to claim the region and to build an empire in the 17th century.
Naming Places

Names of many places on the east coast are of Dutch origin and were often taken from places in the Netherlands.

Brooklyn, the most populous borough of New York City, was named so after the town of Breukelen near Utrecht. Brooklyn’s official motto is Dutch, “Een Draht Mackt Maght,” which translates as In unity, there is strength.

Another New York City borough, the Bronx, was named after a New Netherland settler, Jonas Bronck, who had a farm there.

What is now a large neighborhood within the northern section of the New York City borough of Manhattan was a small village established by the Dutch in 1658 and named Harlem after the city of Haarlem near Amsterdam.

The section of New York known today as the Bowery got its name after the farm Bouwerij, which was owned by Peter Stuyvesant. It was there that Stuyvesant, the last Director General of the Dutch colony, signed a treaty ceding New Netherland to the English on September 9, 1664. After his surrender the city was renamed New York. The majority of Dutch settlers remained in New York and the community eventually became anglicized.

Cornelius Vanderbilt (1794 – 1877) was an American businessman of Dutch origin who built shipping and railroad empires during the so called Gilded Age. He was one of the richest men in American history. Vanderbilt University is named in his honor. Contemporary descendants of the Vanderbilt family include fashion designer Gloria Vanderbilt, her son, journalist Anderson Cooper, musician John P. Hammond, female singer Consuelo Vanderbilt Costin, and screenwriter James Vanderbilt.

Knickerbocker was a common surname of early Dutch settlers. The literal meaning of the word is “toy marble-baker”. It gained popularity in 1809 when Washington Irving used “Diedrich Knickerbocker” as a literary pseudonym in his satirical book, A History of New York. Irving borrowed the name from his friend Herman Knickerbocker. The term “knickerbocker” has been used in many different ways since then: first as a reference to the descendants of Dutch settlers of New York and then to New Yorkers more generally. It also denoted a style of pants. There is also a Knickerbocker Avenue in New York. Today the term is identified most closely with the New York Knicks (short for Knickerbockers), one of the most famous basketball teams in the U.S.
The Dutch may not have invented waffles (wafels, in Dutch) but they delighted in the dish and brought their recipes to America.

Waffles do not require sophisticated ingredients to make. The recipe consists of butter, sugar, eggs, milk, a pinch of salt, baking powder and cake flour. Success in preparing tasty waffles, however, does not lie in the ingredients, their proportions, or even the expertise of the chef. What is needed when the batter is ready is a special device in which to cook the dough: the waffle iron. In 1869 Dutch American Cornelius Swarthout of Troy, New York, patented the first waffle iron in the U.S. It was a simple device that was heated over a stove. First, batter was poured on the griddle and the cover was shut. After a few minutes, the iron was flipped over and the other side of the waffle was cooked. The electric waffle iron was a natural extension of the device with the arrival of electricity, but the overall design has changed little.

Today, National Waffle Day is celebrated on August 24 in celebration of the invention of the waffle iron. Of course in the United States waffles are most often eaten with sweet maple syrup.

There are many other English words that come originally from Dutch words and cooking traditions. For example, the Dutch word “koolsla”, meaning cabbage salad, evolved in English as coleslaw, while the Dutch word “koekie”, which means biscuit, lies at the origin of the word cookie. Americans love to snack and this word may be derived from “snakken”, meaning ‘to eat’. The word stove may come from a Dutch word meaning ‘heated room’.

Considering Dutch mastery in painting it is not surprising that Dutch words connected with fine arts also have left their impact on the English language.

The word sketch comes from the Dutch word “schets” and the expression still life is taken from the Dutch word “stilleven.”

Easel, which is the name for an upright support that a painter uses while painting or to display his finished work surely is related to the Dutch word “ezel,” which could be translated as ‘painter’s donkey’. The English word landscape comes from a 16th century Dutch word “landschap” (land and ship).
Early Dutch settlers depended heavily on reliable ships and navigation. The Netherlands was a sea power at the time and it is no wonder that many Dutch nautical words and expressions entered the English language.
The forward part of a ship or boat - **bow** - comes from Middle Dutch “boech”.

A floating navigational device - a **buoy** - comes from Dutch “boei”.

The word **cruise**, denoting a pleasant sea trip, comes from the Dutch word “kruisen.”

**Caboose** comes from “kambuis” or “kombuis” (the ship’s kitchen or galley).

Names for people in charge of a ship -- **skipper** and **commodore** -- also have Dutch origins. They are “scipper” and “kommandeur”, respectively.

Many people dream of having their own **yacht** -- a large motorboat used for pleasure cruising. This word comes from the Dutch “jaght”.

Other words of Dutch origin connected either with the sea itself or the sea shore or water are the ones below.

The word **dam** -- a barrier constructed to hold back water -- comes from Middle Dutch “dam”, as in Amsterdam and Rotterdam. The word **dune** -- a mound or ridge of sand or other loose sediment formed by the wind – is originally a Dutch word spelled the same way. The word **dock** – a structure to which boats are tied – comes from the Middle Dutch word “docke.”

A **kill** is a creek or a body of water. During the Dutch colonial era in America, the word was incorporated into many place names, especially in the Delaware and Hudson River Valleys. Examples include Kill Van Kull and Arthur Kill separating Staten Island, New York from New Jersey; Bronx Kill between the Bronx and Randalls Island; Wallkill River in New York and New Jersey and the Schuylkill River in Pennsylvania.

Last but not least, the legacy of the Dutch settlement of Manhattan is present in the form of one of America’s best known streets, **Broadway**. The name dates from the times of New Amsterdam and is the translation of the Dutch name, “Breede weg”. Today Broadway is best known as the heart of Manhattan’s theater district, but the street also runs through several other municipalities. Its total length is about 13 miles (21 kilometers).

---

**Not From But About Dutch**

English not only incorporated names and words from Dutch. Several expressions with reference to Dutch have entered into common usage in the English language. In these expressions the word Dutch is usually used as an adjective. Consider the following phrases:

**Dutch courage** means courage from drinking liquor,

**To take Dutch leave** means to desert,

**Dutch treat** means that each person pays for his or her own meal in a restaurant.
Exercise 1  National cuisine

What dish typical of your national cuisine is known around the world?

Prepare a list of dishes that are part of your national cuisine, but are known and popular worldwide.

Write a recipe for one such dish. Start with the needed ingredients.

What is your favorite foreign dish? Could you make it? Have you eaten out in a foreign restaurant? What did you like/dislike about it?

What are your eating habits?

Exercise 2  Speaking

Now work with another student and take turns to discuss your notes from Exercise 1.

Finally, choose the picture and describe it to your partner. Try to think of a story in which your heroes will sit down at the table to eat the dish in the picture. Write down a conversation at the table and finally act it out with your partner.

(Above): Dutch oven multigrain bread. Photo AP.

A Roasted Red Pear is seen in the photo on the right. Pears, wine and sugar have a happy marriage inside a Dutch oven, creating a tender, sweet dessert. Photo AP.
A windmill and tulips set the mood for a Dutch-theme skating gala at the Rockefeller Center pond and adjoining cafes in New York City January 18, 1966. Photo AP.