

To Be A Burgher or Not To Be A Burgher that is the Question

In today's climate there are those whom are proud to be called Dutch Burghers, some whom see no connection to being Dutch Burgher and other still whom will cringe at the mention of Dutch Burghers.

So where did the term 'Dutch Burgher' originate and why all the fuss: -

Historically the English word Burgher in this case refers to the Dutch word Burger meaning *citizen, commoner*¹ [not a nobleman]. While the Dutch or VOC (Dutch East India Company) ruled Ceylon they had either employees of the VOC or 'vrijburgers' (free citizens). In essence when the British in 1796, took over the island the people who decided to stay on the island of Ceylon became free citizens as ties of oath and allegiance were severed². The British made the distinction over time between 'Dutch Burghers' and other minority groups choosing to continue the use of the term burgher conveniently to segregate groups of non-indigenous people. As the social systems were established many other sub-classifications took place for people whom could be seen together officially or otherwise eg Police Burghers, Railway Burghers, Shop Burghers etc. Somebody who was classed a 'Dutch Burgher' was held to a certain esteem and would be entitled to some pretty high ranking jobs (but not as high as the British in most cases) over other sub groups and indigenous people. It was this distinction that helped to ferment either a fondness for being a Dutch Burgher or the distain of the people whom weren't. Equally there is many an instance to be found where 'Dutch Burghers' would anglicise their surname³ in order to get the British roles.

The Dutch Burgher Union was formed in the early 1900's in an effort to form a group that would discuss and retain ties with the Dutch Heritage of their ancestors. Topics covered were Dutch Culture, Dutch Language (never really gained a great interest), and Dutch traditions like St Nicholas Day. To be a member of the Dutch Burgher Union you needed to cover certain criteria and thus further segregated people⁴. Furthermore there was the creation of the Dutch Burgher Union Journals, which produced several family genealogies that gave some the impression their origins were Dutch. While for some people they could proudly reflect their lineage others were 'dropped off' the family tree for a number of social, political and unknown reasons. There were even instances of distortion of fact or omission of information available. The results left equally good or ill feelings amongst the community.

¹ There are many Dutch Burgher families connected to Noble or Royal lineage

² Some employees did receive pensions from Holland later on.

³ Others have also erased any trace of a Dutch Burgher surname

⁴ This criteria is debatable and in certain cases people were cut out regardless if they were entitled to be members.

The **Dutch Burgher Community** contributed an enormous amount to Ceylon and in fact as their descendants who migrated to different countries, the contribution has continued. It is the isolation both by the British and within that contributes to the love/ loath and indifferent relationship that exists today.

The two big questions

'Are there still Dutch Burghers today?' in short the answer is 'no'- What is more correct is there are numerous people whose ancestors are of Dutch Burgher origin and have much to be proud of.

'Are the Dutch Burghers all of Dutch Origin?' again in short the answer is 'no'- It should be considered that the term Dutch Burgher means all people of origin from instigation of either employment or immigration by the VOC (Dutch East India Company) during their rule of Ceylon. The nationalities include Dutch, German, Swiss, French, Hungarian, and Italian to name a few. Essentially European origin and even Jewish sub-communities can be found amongst the 'Dutch Burghers'.

Another commonly discussed question

'The Colour of skin of the Dutch Burghers is it from the hundreds of years living in a tropical environment?' in short the answer is 'No'- What is best to understand is that when the Dutch first came to Ceylon it was as an Army or 'Fighting Force' and hence only men were in the first waves. Holland was also very prosperous at the time and a four-moth treacherous ship journey was not very romantic for the women of Holland and Europe. In later waves and enticements females came from Europe and married personnel of the VOC. So what happened to the men in Ceylon already - well they married into Portuguese/ Singhalese mix or Singhalese people and later were encouraged to remarry back into VOC lines. The colour of skin became a matter of genes and regardless the colours of skin the quality of people were the same, it is the short sightedness of a social era that darkens the mind.

It is the historic background and the contribution to Ceylon that should create the interest and where the focus should be rather than whether offence is taken to a linkage with the 'Dutch Burghers' or not. It is also a irony that while the British treated this group and others in Ceylon as a lesser that in fact there are several families connected to a line which bears the mother of King George III!