Final Voyage of the Kalmar Nyckel

somewhere in the North Sea off the east coast of Scotland, near Buchan Ness, lie the unmarked remains of the original Kalmar Nyckel, one of the great ships of the 17th century. In the service of the Dutch after a long and legendary career under the Swedish flag, she was sunk by an English fleet on 22 July 1652 in the opening engagement of what would be called the First Anglo-Dutch War. Flying Dutch colors as the Kalmar Sleutel, she had come full circle. A workhorse of a ship since being launched in Amsterdam in 1627, she would end her career with the people who had built her twenty-five years earlier.

After decades of guesswork and speculation, new research in the archives in the Netherlands and Sweden has revealed more details and allows us to complete the missing last chapter in the career of this remarkable ship, the final year when the Kalmar Nyckel left Swedish service until her ultimate demise fighting for the Dutch off Scotland in 1652.

by Sam Heed and Jordi Noort, Kalmar Nyckel Foundation

Today’s replica Kalmar Nyckel, the official Tall Ship of Delaware, was launched in Wilmington, Delaware, in 1997. Built, owned, and operated by the Kalmar Nyckel Foundation, the ship serves as a floating classroom and inspirational platform for a broad array of sea- and land-based educational programs that reach 30,000 people a year.

Epitaph for an Exceptional Ship

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Unlocking “The Key”

After twenty-two years of distinguished service to the Swedish Realm, Kalmar Nyckel (“Key of Kalmar”) was decommissioned on 19 June 1651 by order of Queen Christina and sold to a private merchant. A Swedish Admiralty inspection determined that she would not be sound enough to cross the Atlantic for a fifth time as a colonial ship for New Sweden. The buyer was Cornelis Roelofsen, a Dutch merchant living in Stockholm and known to members of the Swedish governing elite. This much we have always known, and Roelofsen is named in the decommissioning document.

We don’t know exactly what Roelofsen did with the ship immediately after he took possession of her, but we can be confident that he took note of the larger drama unfolding along the Dutch coast, some 900 miles southwest of Stockholm. Dutch maritime might had been irritating English pride across the Channel, and the wealth produced by Dutch trade and fishing proved an irresistible target for English predators. The dispute over control of the sea lanes around the British Isles increasingly led to warlike preparations among the English and Dutch forces. As English Admiral George Monck put it at the time, “The Dutch have too much trade, and we intend to take it from them.”

We do know that Roelofsen had Kalmar Nyckel outfitted for war; he upped her armament to twenty “pieces” and had her in Amsterdam available for hire by 11 April.

Turbulent Sea with Ships by Ludolf Bakhuysen, 1697, oil on canvas, 12.5 x 15 inches.

The original Kalmar Nyckel was built in Amsterdam in 1627 as an ordinary Dutch “Pina” (pinnace) of about 300 tons and 100 feet on deck, just one of a couple thousand similar vessels built by the Dutch in this period. She was purchased in 1629 by the Swedish Skeppskompaniet (Ship Company) with tax revenue from the strategic harbor town of Kalmar, on Sweden’s southeast coast, and renamed Kalmar Nyckel. She made a record eight crossings (four round trips) of the Atlantic for the New Sweden Company between 1637 and 1644. The first of these voyages launched the colony of New Sweden in 1638 under the command of Peter Minuit, who established Fort Christina at “The Rocks,” in present-day Wilmington, Delaware—the first permanent European settlement in the Delaware Valley. When not sailing on colonial voyages for the New Sweden Company, she served the Swedish Navy as an auxiliary warship until 1651. She was part of Gustav II Adolf’s famous invasion fleet at Peenemünde on the German coast of Pomerania in 1630, which marked Sweden’s entry into the Thirty Years’ War (1618–48). Swedish Admiralty records from 1634 list her as carrying a crew of 55 men and 12 six-pounder cannon, probably typical of her wartime strength. Toward the end of her career, she saw bloody action in Torstenson’s War against the Danes in 1645 and transported Swedish diplomats across the Baltic during the negotiations that led to the Peace of Westphalia in 1648.
The value of the 17th-century Dutch herring fleet cannot be overstated, to both the economy and the culture in the Netherlands. In addition to providing nutrient-rich sustenance for its population, the fishery produced a valuable commodity for international trade. Its value can also be deduced from the number of works of art that were made during this period by the Dutch masters.

Fishing Boats in Choppy Waters, ca. 1630, by Jan Porcellis (1580/84–1632), oil on panel, 10 x 14 inches.
On 23 May, Dirck Vijgh assumed command. He would serve as the ship’s last captain. On 31 May, the crew came aboard and were brought under oath. There were ninety of them, and they were each given one month’s wages in advance.

“Buss Patrol” — Last Voyage of the Kalmar Nyckel (14 June–22 July 1652)

The following day, Kalmar Sleutel was ordered to join the escort squadron protecting the Dutch herring fleet, which was out sailing off the Shetland Islands, north of Scotland. The herring fleet—“the Great Fishery”—was the first to develop industrialized fishing. Its influence on the Dutch economy in the 17th century was comparable to the more famous Dutch trading fleets, the East India Company (VOC) and the West India Company (WIC). The scale of the Great Fishery was enormous, with 2,000 fishing boats at work in the North Sea and 150,000 tons of fish exported from the Netherlands for profit in 1614 alone. One-fifth of the Dutch population was employed in the fishing business, and Dutch capitalism contributed many innovations to the industry, including the development of drift nets to catch shoals of herring, which are still used today. The fishing vessels, called busses, were innovation all their own, sturdy ships with flat bottoms that could be beached for quick and convenient offloading. About seventy feet in length and manned by fifteen crew, busses were often worked by whole families, women and children included, making them a kind of floating cottage industry.

For the next two weeks Captain Vijgh and crew undertook a flurry of final preparations, taking on 1,000 pounds of gunpowder and four more guns, for a total of 26. On 7 June, Kalmar Sleutel moved to Den Briel, a staging harbor located at the mouth of the Maas River, where Captain Vijgh took on more gunpowder and awaited the command to sail.

A week later, with the winds of war upon them, Captain Vijgh and his crew set sail for the Shetlands on what would be the Kalmar Sleutel’s last voyage. They were joined by the Sphaera Mundi, which would serve with them as part of the “buss patrol.”

It was likely the early part of July by the time they met up with the fishing fleet. They joined the escorts under Admiral Dirck Claesz van Dongen in the Sint Paulus Bekeering and began to shepherd the 600 herring busses. All was well as the fishermen went about their business, setting drift nets and hauling back vast shoals of herring, the “silver of the seas.” The fishers knew to be wary of the English, but probably did not know that war had erupted into open warfare with running gun battles in the Channel on the 22nd and 29th of May. The conflict would be made official with declarations of war on the 10th of July and later given the title First Anglo-Dutch War of 1652–54.
been declared on 10 July 1652. They sailed undisturbed as they headed south of Fair Isle, reaching toward the Scottish coast. They were somewhere near Buchan Ness on Thursday morning, 22 July 1652, when 66 English ships were spotted hull-down on the southern horizon.

**Battle of Buchan Ness — 22 July 1652**

The scene off Buchan Ness that third week in July, with stiff breezes and bright Scottish skies, could have come straight from the pen of Robert Louis Stevenson: the romance of ships under sail, the anticipation of a “battle of encounter,” and the smell of adventure in the salty air. But from the decks of the Dutch escort squadron, the view that morning must have been terrifying.

As the English fleet of 66 capital ships bore down on the sixteen Dutch escorts protecting the 600 boats of the herring fleet, Dutch Vice-Admiral Reinout Veenhuysen of the *Sphera Mundi* opened fire prematurely, and then abruptly fled the scene. Leading eight frigates of the English vanguard, Captain John Taylor of the *Laurel* was the first to answer with a broadside of 24 guns, and the battle was begun. Veenhuysen’s cowardice was made up for by some of the other Dutch warships that fought back. The Battle of Buchan Ness turned into a bloody three-hour affair, a seagoing slaughterhouse with both sides taking heavy casualties and many English ships put out of action. *Kalmar Sleutel* was at the center of the action. Captain Vijgh and his crew were among the most heavily engaged, fighting desperately against overwhelming English firepower. The smaller Dutch escorts, mostly armed merchant vessels, were no match for the English frigates, new purpose-built warships that each carried 36 guns or more and doubled the weight of the Dutch broadsides. Skilled Dutch seamanship could not for long overcome such a discrepancy in firepower.

In three hours of fighting the English seized twelve of the Dutch escorts and scattered the fishing fleet, taking thirty of the busses. Six of the captured Dutch warships were taken into the English fleet; three others were sent to the city of Inverness carrying the English wounded; and three were so badly shot to pieces that they could not be salvaged and were sunk by the English after being seized. *Kalmar Sleutel* was one of the three “so much shattered” that she couldn’t stay above the waterline. Many contemporaneous sources, both Dutch and English—including the testimony of Captain Vijgh, who survived and was taken prisoner—as well as detailed reports from victorious Admiral Blake bear this out.¹

**Aftermath**

Having scattered the herring fleet and disposed of the twelve captured Dutch warships, Admiral Blake headed southward looking for Admiral Tromp’s main Dutch fleet. Twelve hundred Dutch survivors were taken prisoner by the English. Over 300 Dutch wounded were sent home directly aboard thirty captured herring busses. Captain Dirck Vijgh and 900 Dutch seamen were taken to Newcastle-upon-Tyne, then.

The replica ship *Kalmar Nyckel* underway. She flies the flags of the four countries her history represents: the Netherlands, Sweden, Finland, and the United States. The Delaware state flag flies from the sprit topmast.

¹Admiral Blake reported that he had seized twelve ships: six were taken into the fleet, three were sent to Inverness, and three were sunk. *Kalmar Sleutel* was repeatedly noted in Dutch documents to have been “shot to the bottom,” making her one of the three to have been sunk by the English. (The National Archives of the Netherlands, in The Hague, 1.01.46 inv. 147 dd 1 October, 30 October 1652; and 20 January 1653; and NA 1.01.46 inv. 5551 dd 20 December 1652).
paroled and sent to walk home by way of English ports along the Channel. When they arrived back in the Dutch Republic in late September, Admiral Dirck Claesz van Dongen, commander of the escorts, was arrested for the failure of his objective. Captain Vijgh had his own court of inquiry with the Admiralty Board. Things got messy when Vice-Admiral Veenhuysen, in trying to clear his own cowardly reputation, sued Captain Vijgh for being drunk while leading his men into battle, causing the Kalmar Sleutel to sink. Vijgh obtained declarations from his officers and crew that he was in fact sober, and the case was dismissed. Vijgh was reinstated as a captain and given another ship, the Overijssel.

In October, Cornelis Roelofsen submitted demands to the Admiralty Board of Rotterdam for the loss of his ship. Listed in the records as a “merchant living in Stockholm in Sweden” and as “owner and renter of the Kalmar Sleutel, formerly commanded by Captain Dirck Vijgh, sunk by the English on 22 July 1652,” Roelofsen requested payment for the sum of 20,100 guilders. The Board noted that it would have the claim examined. At the same time, the surviving crew of the Kalmar Sleutel claimed reimbursement for their lost possessions on the sunken ship and four months of lost wages. These claims were denied by the Admiralty Board.

On 13 December, after additional hearings, the Admiralty of Rotterdam finally authorized settlement to Roelofsen. He was paid for two months’ lost rent and an additional 15,700 guilders for the loss of his ship, based on the value of the inventory prepared and signed by Roelofsen dated 11 April 1652.

We think Roelofsen was eventually paid the full amount; after a final demand to the Admiralty Board through an agent on 20 January 1653, neither he nor his case is ever again mentioned in the documents. After that, the name Kalmar Sleutel slips back into the mist of history.

Epilogue

The last voyage of the Kalmar Nyckel came to an end on 22 July 1652 after she was sunk in a sea battle in the North Sea just off the Scottish coast. Ordinary in stature and design, Kalmar Nyckel set extraordinary records for versatility and trans-Atlantic endurance. Her exceptional 17th-century career serving so many so well in such different roles—colonial ship, gun-armed merchantman, and warship—still inspire the people who sail her replica today.

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Kalmar Nyckel’s home berth is at the Tatiana & Gerret Copeland Maritime Center on the Christina River, in Wilmington, Delaware. (www.kalmarnyckel.org)