

Dutch Influence in New York

by David Lonborg

Visitors to the New York area encounter numerous reminders of the area's enduring Dutch heritage. The tri-state area, as well as much of the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States, was originally a Dutch colony. While Dutch control over the region was relatively brief, they left an indelible mark in the names of places, icons, and institutions, as well as the development of religious freedom.

The history of the Dutch in New York traces back to the 1609 voyage of the English sea captain Henry Hudson. Hudson sailed under the sponsorship of the Dutch West India Company. Like many explorers of his era, Hudson was searching for the Northwest Passage, an all-water route leading across North America towards Asia. As he began sailing north on the river that would later come to bear his name, Hudson noticed large numbers of beavers. His sponsors in Amsterdam believed the area would be a profitable center for the fur trade. By 1614, the area between present-day Delaware and Massachusetts had been chartered by Adriaen Block as New Netherland. In 1624, New Netherland became a province of the Dutch Republic. In the following years, ships carrying colonists began to disembark, populating the area with Dutch and other European colonists.

Around this time, Peter Minuit, a director of the Dutch West India Company, "purchased" Manhattan Island from the Lenape Indians. The southern tip of the island was chosen as the site for Fort Amsterdam. Around the fort was built a large defensive wall, leading to the commemorative name *Wall Street*. Only a few steps away was the arsenal in an area now known as *Battery Park*. The town outside the walls of the fort, New Amsterdam, became a major hub for trade between North America, Europe, and the Caribbean.

While better known by their Anglicized names, Staaten Eylandt (Staten Island) and Lange Eylandt (Long Island) were included in the New Amsterdam charter of 1653. The boroughs of Brooklyn and the Bronx both take their names from the Dutch. Names of towns, cities, and neighborhoods like Rensselaer, Harlem, Gravesend, Flatbush, New Utrecht, Flushing, Yonkers, the Bowery, Van Cortlandt Park, and Coney Island are all Dutch in origin. The Roosevelt family, which has several places named for them in the New York area, trace their roots back to the Netherlands. The Dutch word for stream, *kils*, is seen in names like Peekskill, Catskill, Westkill, Walkill, and Cresskill. Additionally, the word *hoek*, meaning point, survives in the names Red Hook, Sandy Hook, and Kinderhook. The Dutch colonists named the waterways of New York as well. The *Oost Rivier* became the East River and the *Hellegat* became Hellgate.

In addition to place names, the Dutch language is also apparent in New York culture and lore. The folktales of the Dutch peasants of the Hudson Valley gave literary inspiration to Washington Irving for his famous story about "Rip Van Winkle." The oldest high school building in New York City, Brooklyn's

Erasmus Hall Campus, located on Flatbush Avenue across from the Dutch Reformed Church, is named after the Dutch Renaissance scholar Desiderius Erasmus. The colors of the flags of the City of New York, Albany, and Nassau County are those of the old Dutch flag. The blue, white, and orange are also seen in the uniforms of the New York Mets, Knicks, and Islanders. Two of the most popular New York sports teams, the Yankees and the Knicks, take their names from the Dutch as well.

In the 1650s, the Dutch were spreading their language and culture, but they were not expanding their wealth and prosperity to the satisfaction of the West India Company. The company appointed Peter Stuyvesant, a hardnosed businessman and Christian fundamentalist, Governor-General of New Netherland. Ironically, it was Stuyvesant's religious *intolerance* that helped lay the groundwork for religious *tolerance* in America.

As a Dutch colony, New Netherland became home to a variety of European ethnicities, including Dutch Walloons, Frenchmen, Spaniards, Germans, Scandinavians, as well as religious groups, such as Calvinists (from the Dutch Reformed Church), Lutherans, Quakers, Catholics, and Jews. Along with the indigenous Lenape Indians and Africans, both free and enslaved, these groups made New Netherland one of the most ethnically diverse colonies in the world. At this time, people of most European nations were required to follow the religion of their ruler. In the 1650s, Stuyvesant, made the Dutch Reformed Church the official state church of New Netherland. He enforced a Puritan-like code of conduct in the colony, including strict observance of Sunday as the Sabbath. Public worship of any religion besides the Dutch Reformed Church was forbidden.

The group that most threatened Stuyvesant was the Society of Friends, commonly known as the Quakers. They did not accept any earthly authority over religion and religious matters and would not swear an oath of allegiance. Their doctrine of peace, equality, and pacifism made them an anomaly in a community that feared attack by Native Americans and competing European powers. A group of English Quakers settled in an area of present-day Queens, which they named Vlissingen after the Dutch port from which they had originated. Over time, the name of the community was Anglicized and it became known as Flushing. Stuyvesant issued an edict forbidding anyone in the colony to entertain a Quaker or to allow a Quaker meeting to be held in their home. Those who violated the edict were fined. One Englishman was arrested and banished from the town.

Citizens, angered by Stuyvesant's intolerance and poor treatment of the Quakers, issued the *Flushing Remonstrance* on December 27, 1657. The letter called for an end to religious persecution and for freedom of all faiths in the colony. The signers of the document, many of whom were members of the city government, were brought up on charges, fined, imprisoned, or banished from the colony altogether. Stuyvesant then dissolved the town council and replaced it with his own appointed governing body.

A change came in 1662, when an English Quaker and Flushing resident, named John Bowne was arrested for holding Quaker meetings in his home. Stuyvesant, upon meeting Bowne, was angered by his refusal to remove his hat, a sign of deference contrary to Quaker teachings. Bowne was imprisoned, tried, and fined. In a continued act of defiance, he refused to pay his fine or to escape from prison

despite the fact that his cell door was usually left unlocked. Stuyvesant banished Bowne from the colony and he eventually made his way to Holland where he appeared before the Dutch West India Company. In a stunning blow to Stuyvesant's authority, the Dutch West India Company ordered him to cease all religious persecution and to allow full religious freedom to all settlers in the colony. The company realized that conflict created by persecution of different religious groups would disrupt trade and business activity. Religious tolerance could create a stability that would ensure continued prosperity.

When the English assumed control over the colony in 1664, and renamed it New York, religious tolerance was a fact of life that would permanently remain in the colony. The Articles of Capitulation that outlined the terms of the colony's transfer to English rule included a provision for the right to worship as one wished. This laid the groundwork for freedom of religion in an independent United States.

Jasper Danckaerts Views New York (1679)

Source: Richard C. Brown, ed. (1970). *The Human Side of American History*. NY: Ginn.

Jasper Danckaerts was sent from The Netherlands in 1679 to look for a place for possible settlement by a small Dutch religious group. These are edited excerpts from his diary describing New York City.

September 24. The church being in the fort, we had an opportunity to look through the latter. It is enclosed with a double row of palisades. There were some brass pieces still bearing the marks of arms of the Netherlanders. The fort is built upon the point formed by the East River, which is the water running between the Mannhattans and Long Island, and the North River, which runs straight up to Fort Orange [Albany]. It has only one gate opening upon a broad plain or street called the Broadway or Beaverway. Over this gate are the arms of the Duke of York.

September 29. We started for Long Island. The outer shore has before it several small islands .such as Coninen [Coney] Island. Nobody lives upon it, but it is used in winter for keeping cattle, horses, oxen, hogs and others. We went through the first village called Brenkelen. The people made us very welcome, sharing with us milk, cider, fruit or tobacco and especially miserable rum which is called by the Dutch kill-devil.

October 6. We went from the city, following the Broadway. Upon both sides of this way were many habitations of Negroes, mulattoes, and whites. These Negroes were formerly slaves of the West India Company, but, in consequence of the frequent changes and conquests of the country, they have obtained their freedom. We left the village called the Bowery and went through the woods to New Harlem.

October 11. We embarked early this morning in friend Symon's skiff and rode over to Staten Island where ships, ready for sea, stop to take in water. The woods are used for pasturing horses and cattle, for being an island, none of them can get off. Each person has marks upon his own, by which he can find them when he wants them. When the population of the country shall increase, these places will be

taken up.