The Dutch, New Netherland, and Thereafter (1609-1780s)

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On March 30, 1624, the Dutch West India Company issued a Provisional Order of government for New Netherland, the area of North America that they claimed, corresponding roughly to the current states of New York, New Jersey, and parts of Delaware and Connecticut. Dutch rule applied to all of the territory’s inhabitants, regardless of origin, for forty years, until the provisional surrender of the Dutch colony to the English under Colonel Richard Nicolls on behalf of King Charles II on September 6, 1664 (August 27 in the old style still prevailing in England). From 1614, even before the West India Company had established a formal colonial structure, this privately explored territory bore the name Nieuw Nederland (New Netherland). Following the 1664 “takeover” the colony was renamed New York after its new owner, the Duke of York, the king’s brother. At the Peace of Breda (July 1667), New Netherland was exchanged with England for Suriname. But the Dutch fleet recaptured the colony on August 9, 1673, following the next declaration of war by England (1672). Dutch government was restored, no longer under the authority of the almost insolvent Company, but of the Amsterdam Admiralty. Fifteen months later, on November 10, 1674, the “restitution” period came to an early end when the Dutch ratified the cession of their colony to the English that they had accepted in the Treaty of Westminster (February 19, 1674).

All things considered, this was a rather brief period of Dutch rule, spanning as it did barely two generations. It nonetheless laid the foundations for a new society, at first colonial, then independent. The original framework, modeled on Dutch roots, forms of government, and customs, evolved with the growing influence of other peoples and cultures: the natives, who from the beginning were indispensable partners in the system of trade that was the West India Company’s main objective; the European settlers from other countries; and the blacks, brought from Africa as slaves, and who from the outset formed their own founding community within that colonial society.

The influence and significance of the Dutch, as a community of inhabitants, did not evaporate when Dutch rule came to an end. Under English rule and, indeed, until long after United States
independence, the community that had formed under Dutch rule continued to conduct its collective life with a degree of autonomy. It followed customs that came from the Netherlands itself and were adapted in America in response to the needs of that specific community. Some principles of the original Dutch community were adopted by the American state. They characterize American values and standards, and are an abiding source of inspiration for human and citizens’ rights. Although Dutch rule ended, signs of the colony’s Dutch origin survived in more lasting forms of Dutch law and Dutch *culture*. For some considerable time under English rule, Dutch law and jurisprudence continued to govern aspects of life in the colony, such as the local administrative agencies and forms of civil law that remained valid in the “Dutch” community, the descendants of the original “Dutch” settlers.

Long after the independence of the United States and the introduction of homegrown legislation and a legal system, Dutch *culture* was still influential in the everyday lives of many of the residents of these states, albeit with diminishing intensity. People in rural areas and the lower classes also continued to identify themselves as “Dutch” for far longer than the leading circles in New York City. Dutch culture manifested itself in the Dutch language, the Reformed Church, specific styles of building and furnishing, interior design, old-Dutch objects, customs, and stories, and old or reinvented Dutch traditions, such as Saint Nicholas’ Eve and other reminiscences of Dutch family life. The historical awareness of being descendants of the founders of the new state, regardless of their origin or race, and being the distant representatives of the national tradition of the Dutch, were the longest to endure. This can be seen clearly on the most basic level of cultural transfer, the family, with its group traditions, genealogical awareness, and myths of origin. It is not surprising that the first genealogical societies in the West were created as long ago as the early nineteenth century in the United States and the awareness of belonging to an extensive and intricate kinship underpins many lasting forms of sociability and public representation. At the first census, in 1790, about one hundred thousand Americans (3.4 percent of the total population) were labeled as being of Dutch descent.

Various values of the Dutch cultural tradition were perceived by the English majority as a form of “otherness,” and later appropriated by the community of Americans of Dutch descent as typically “Dutch.” Examples included the Dutch traditions of political representation, republicanism, striving for equality under the law, democratic decision making and democracy, tolerance, and freedom of conscience, if not of religion. It does not matter whether there is any basis in historical reality to the notion that these values are the Dutch legacy to America, or whether it is a form of invented tradition or wishful thinking. Either way, they are the core of the sense of identity of the American Dutch. In a new context, outside the homeland, the core values of a cultural community are always formulated more sharply, and felt more emotionally, than at home.
In fact, there was tension from the outset between two major sectors in the New Netherland colony and its successors. One was the core of West India Company employees together with the original settlers who benefited from the Company regime. The other was formed by groups of inhabitants of different origin, history, and tradition, such as the natives and the colonists of diverse origin including many Dutch themselves, the African slaves, and later the English rulers. This tension was related to the special administrative traditions and power relations that also held sway in the European homeland. The Dutch Republic was a union of formally independent states that were both difficult to hold together and driven internally by a variety of factions seeking power and influence. Contrary to Great Britain, hierarchical structures were of only modest importance in the political and social culture of the Dutch homeland, since decisions were usually reached through negotiation and consultation, and had to accommodate many forms of representation of interested parties. We can identify this in New Netherland too. The art of controlling this tension through communal effort, and the resultant dynamism and opportunities for innovation, continue to characterize the former New Netherland region, and may well be the most important legacy of the Dutch.

For more than two centuries the achievements and significance of the Dutch experience in America have been the object of complex, often contradictory, perceptions, which has produced an almost impenetrable tangle of history and memory of the Dutch. Vilification and glorification have alternated at regular intervals to the present day, to which the often lively, sometimes even grim, discussions in historical narrative about the representation of New Netherland and New York clearly testify. Whereas some emphasize what they see as the essentially English origin of current New York, others rediscover the lasting meaning of the old-Dutch institutions and values, not only for the settlers and their offspring, but also for the political establishment of independent America.

At an early stage, the tension between history and memory prompted historical investigation of the colony’s Dutch past. Washington Irving’s highly influential History of New York by Diedrich Knickerbocker (1809) acted as a catalyst. Irving drew his material from historical sources and the oral history of the Dutch American tradition. When the educated public realized how little they knew of the state’s Dutch past, New York state government commissioned the Dutch immigrant Francis Adriaan Van der Kemp to translate the seventeenth-century official government documents into English. Unfortunately, his work was poor quality and it was burned in 1911. However, there was eventually to be a Dutch answer to the image created by Irving: the first history of the colony by the Middelburg patrician Nicolaas Lambrechtsen, completed in 1818 and published in English in 1841 by the New York Historical Society. It would be more than another century and a half before a new history of New Netherland was published in the Netherlands itself, by Jaap Jacobs.
The almost constant rivalry in trade and navigation between England and the Netherlands is reflected in the English cartoon tradition, with its caricatures of the Dutch competitor and opponent from as early as the seventeenth century. Irving adopted and standardized these caricatures, and in the nineteenth century they created a stereotype of the Dutch in America: a fat, lazy, pipe-smoking dullard, a merchant with trivial tastes and no breeding, a parsimonious capitalist, or an uncontrolled thug – in all respects the complete opposite of the active, expansive, cultivated, and self-assured English gentleman. It is mainly because of these caricatures that no serious attention was given to the Dutch cultural tradition of former New Netherland for so long.

The variable perceptions of “the Dutch” have engendered many myths and much “invented memory,” and to the present day have lent an anti-Dutch bias to the historiography of New York. But it goes without saying that they occasionally worked to their advantage. An example of this ambivalence is the concept of tolerance and the Dutch attitude to it. Practical tolerance is a time-honored Dutch value with roots as far back as the founding charter of the Dutch Republic, the Union of Utrecht (1579), but it is certainly not true that the New Netherland community was always a model of tolerance toward other religions. Legal restrictions on the freedom of public worship were upheld in New Netherland, though personal freedom of conscience was respected better than elsewhere in America, and also expressly acknowledged as a value.

The perspective on “Dutchness” is in constant flux in the United States. The seventeenth-century Dutch from New Netherland have since been succeeded by more recent groups of Dutch immigrants in the Midwest and elsewhere, whose conduct and image have caused a review of the notion of “Dutchness.” Simultaneously, professional historians on both sides of the Atlantic are designing a new image of Dutch-American history with fresh perspectives and new historical methods. For instance, for the early modern period more attention is being given not only to ethnicity and gender, visual representation, mentalities, and material culture, but also to political representation, state formation, economic policy, and symbolic action in the public space. A careful description of the period in which the Dutch played their part in the creation of the area is therefore vital for a proper understanding of the later history of former New Netherland. This is not in the least because the Dutch experience still appears to provide material for today’s debates about America itself.

The historiography of New Netherland has surged forward in recent decades. The nationalistic view of history also determined the oldest historical images of New Netherland. Until only a few decades ago, its population and culture appeared much more Dutch than later research has shown. This image of homogeneity hindered a proper understanding of New Netherland’s significance for the later, grand development of the English world around it. A subsequent image was that of a multinational settlement colony, which was accompanied by a greater importance of New Netherland for American
history. This new image was compatible with New York’s self-image of multi-ethnicity, as well as with new insights into the character of Dutch society in the Golden Age, as a migration community with high melting-pot content.

The retention of a certain degree of Dutch law and Dutch culture after the English takeover put the original European population of the colony in a position to develop a Dutch ethnic sensibility, which again leveled the multinational character of the Dutch community. In the Hudson Valley, Long Island, and East Jersey in particular, this ethnification process led to the gradual adoption of the term “Dutch” as the name for the remaining group of colonists from the Dutch period of whatever origin, including Scandinavian, German, English, or French. The later immigrants from the Netherlands went along with this usage. “Dutch” has since become an ambiguous term that refers to diverse identities. In New Netherland with its population from many countries, “Dutch” originally referred to the colony’s property. After 1664, the colonists’ geographical origin became less important than their common origin in “Dutch” New Netherland and their belonging to a tightly interwoven network of descendants.

However, other differences also gained in importance, both inside and outside the Dutch community. Some examples are religion and language, along with Dutch varieties of civic culture and a specific Dutch-American historical tradition. The role of Dutch pietism in the First Great Awakening is well known, and the language of the colonial Dutch was long upheld in the religious practice of the rural churches, despite its gradual divergence from the standardizing language in the Dutch Republic. But differences also emerged between the Dutch of urban New York City and those of the extensive rural areas. It would therefore be wrong to take only the urban tradition of the Dutch of New York City as the criterion for the development of the whole Dutch community of former New Netherland. The administrative structure of New Netherland was more consistent with that of the rural areas of the Dutch Republic than the urban tradition of Holland, and it can be identified only to a limited extent in the later developments in rural America. It goes without saying that the tensions and contradictions that these developments sometimes evoke in America itself and elsewhere must also be seen against the background of a growing awareness of the rights of all population groups to a collective memory and their own history, and of the struggle for their recovery. These rights are not always mutually consistent.

The most important message of the first part of our book is that the colony of New Netherland was not an isolated, fully autonomous, or marginal area of the Dutch alone, but was integrated along many lines in the network of relationships between the continents and the states, the regions and the colonies, the peoples and the nations, the migration patterns of the early modern period, the goods flows of the economy and the culture, and the value systems of the Old and the New Worlds. New Netherland cannot be understood purely as a separate entity. Its history, development, and later
significance must constantly be viewed in interaction, or in interference, with the world around it. Perceptions appear not infrequently to be just as important as objective historical data.

Although there were many and varied developments throughout the early modern period, some even extending far into the contemporary period, we can identify two turning points. The first was the takeover of the colony by the English in 1664, in a process that completed in 1674, and the second was the War of Independence in the 1770s and its immediate consequences for the structure of American society. Within these two periods we can observe developments on a shorter timescale. The period until the foundation of the West India Company and the establishment of a sustainable colony in 1623-25 was characterized by exploration and the rise of new images and representations of America. Then, until 1664-74, we see the colony’s expansion and consolidation under Dutch rule. From the takeover until Leisler’s Rebellion in 1689, the Dutch settlers developed a survival strategy, which used the opportunities provided by Dutch law and Dutch culture, to the extent that they were still enforced under the relatively open English rule. This shaped a Dutch community that underwent a process of ethnification in the eighteenth century, in which the identity of the Dutch Americans gradually shifted away from Dutch culture toward American citizenship, which large numbers of them enthusiastically embraced at the time of independence. The Articles of Confederation of September 15, 1777 actually expressed appreciation for the historical Dutch example. However, ten years later, in the Constitution of September 17, 1787, the new state demonstrated its independence by distancing itself from that example. This marked the end of the era.

All in all, we may identify three main interpretations of New Netherland. The old interpretation, still dominant in the Anglophone historiography of New York and the surrounding states, emphasizes the rapid adaptation of the colonial community to the New World, and, after the takeover, to the rule and culture of the English. There is a contrasting revisionist view that emphasizes the fundamental and sustainable Dutch character of the colony. While acknowledging the growing interaction with the English social world, along with the Dutch community’s gradually declining autonomy, the gist of this view is still the autonomous development of Dutch culture, which imparted its own color to the community of former New Netherland.

Even more recent is the Atlantic perspective. It breaks the myth of the autonomous development of the continents and likewise makes light of the bilateral relationship between the Dutch Republic and New Netherland, pointing instead to the totality of links between all players in the Atlantic zone. Only a broad transatlantic network analysis of this kind can actually do justice to the role of the slave trade and the links between the individual colonies: those of the West India Company, but also those of England, France, Portugal, Spain, and even Sweden. From 1639 until its incorporation into New
Netherland in 1655, there happens to have been a Swedish colony on the Delaware, originally under Director Pieter Minuit, who had gone over to the Swedes.

Right to the end, the West India Company treated New Netherland as an area that, while commercially interesting, was not its greatest priority, and on which it expended only limited resources. The war with Spain, one of the Company’s primary purposes when it was founded, remained remote from the North American territory. Yet it profited occasionally from the spoils of war and received the first captured slaves from this source. There were also few push motives for the inhabitants of the Dutch Republic to migrate to New Netherland. At most, America offered pull motives, such as the craving for adventure that played a large part in the growth period of the Dutch economy. There never was a collective, mass migration of citizens from the Dutch Republic. The Dutch emigrants were mainly individuals with private interests in trade, agriculture, or a craft, not to mention those who simply remained in America in service of the Company as officials, sailors, or soldiers. The political regime of the Dutch Republic was extremely moderate, and the social climate provided more opportunities for ordinary citizens than in most other European states, with their usually rigid hierarchical structures and proclivity for absolutism.

How Dutch were the Dutch of New Netherland indeed? Questions of this kind are always of the greatest importance for a nation’s self-awareness. The question has been asked clearly, and answered in very different ways in recent decades, with great emotional charge. Sometimes it is ignored at purpose, as an unwelcome dissonance in prevailing historical perceptions. A scientifically sound approach to the history of New Netherland and its successors would do well to recognize the competition between a Dutch-minded and an English-oriented history of New York, and more generally of New Netherland. However, New York’s militant self-assurance as having been created from an English colony, often tends to ignore any previous Dutch history. In this dialogue of the deaf, values such as citizenship, democracy, and tolerance are alternately put forward as originally Dutch or typically English.

A second question is the extent to which the mature community of New Netherland continued to reflect later developments in the homeland. How Dutch did the Dutch of New Netherland remain? In general terms, our answer would have to be: quite a lot. But New Netherland differed fundamentally on two points from homeland society. As a trading colony it relied strongly on contact with the original inhabitants of the area, the native Indians, who assured the fur trade’s success. Agriculture (corn), monetary exchange (sewant or wampum), and the material culture and lifestyles of Europeans and natives influenced each other in a way that made New Netherland into more than a mere copy of “Old” Netherland. Besides, the settlement colony of New Netherland differed profoundly from the homeland in the import of slavery, which was forbidden in Europe itself and led Calvinists in the
Dutch Republic to heated discussions. Although its introduction had more to do with the ups and downs of international politics than with economic necessity, slavery nonetheless developed in New Netherland on the same footing as elsewhere in America. For both reasons, interculturality is a central theme of current research. From the very first decade society and culture of New Netherland were formed by interaction with the natives and with the blacks, whether enslaved or manumitted. Both communities now rightly claim their “memorial return” in history.

The interaction of coincidental factors and the somewhat remote location of the colony gave New Netherland quickly its own identity and a growing autonomy, in both economic and socio-cultural terms. The ultimate nonviolent takeover by the English was an unsurprising finale. Perhaps we may call it a paradox of New Netherland history that this relatively marginal area in the homeland’s international strategy managed nevertheless to develop into one of the key areas in the global world order, precisely because of conditions for economic growth, political organization, and cultural development created in the homeland itself.