

For Steve

The noted historian Stefan Bielinski passed away in the early morning hours of August 27th. He spent his entire career chronicling the lives of the people of colonial Albany. Black, white, rich, and poor, he knew so much about so many of them. The devastating news of his death has left those who knew him with an overwhelming sense of loss.

My friendship with Steve spanned over four decades. In the 1980s Steve was finishing up his book, "Government by the People: The Story of the Dongan Charter and the Birth of Participatory Democracy in the City of Albany." Having met briefly some months earlier, he asked me if I would be interested in providing some drawings for the book. I agreed, and from that time on we were in regular contact. Kindred spirits are like that.

Looking back now I can't say who was the greater influencer. Was he the teacher and I the student or was it the other way around? In hindsight I'm now convinced that both scenarios were true. Steve taught me the art of critical thinking. (That's a nice way of saying that at times he was a pain in the tuchus.) My historical conclusions were always questioned. In the absence of documentable evidence, he would accept nothing. His intense skepticism drove me crazy, but it made me a better player.

The tables turned, however, when it came to picturing his beloved eighteenth century Albany. Steve's world revolved around the written accounts of lives lived and not so much on the details of the physical environment of the time. Doors and windows. Rooflines. Bricks, mortar, and clapboards were not his thing. If the graphic evidence I offered seemed compelling enough to him he was willing to accept my various depictions of that long ago and unpictured environment. We still argued, sometimes vociferously, but I stood my ground. (It's possible that he may have, at times, experienced the same anatomical discomfort mentioned above.)

Steve's historical contributions are great and many. He understood the important role each person played in the development of an emerging nation. His focus on the years after Dutch rule and before the industrial revolution gave him the opportunity to explore that era intensely. Taken together with the life work of Charles Gehring, the most accomplished and revered historian of New Netherland, along with the outstanding work of Paul Huey, William Starna, Joseph Meany, and many others, we are presented with an in-depth and invaluable documentation of this region.

That's how Steve and I connected professionally.

On a whole different level he was more than a friend, he was like a brother. Over all those years of fruitful collaboration, annoyance, and needling, we bonded. Karma or fate, we were born four days apart in the same year. Our fathers were born four days apart in the same year and our mothers were born in the same month of the same year. We were the sons of immigrant American families. We grew up in the 1950s, a time when hiding under your desk for protection against a nuclear attack was practiced over and over again. Polio was everywhere. By the early 60s it was Motown and the Beatles. That decade ended with an Asian war we both rejected. We never talked about that stuff much, but it was there and every time I was with him I felt the depth of our connection. I will miss him dearly.

Len Tantillo

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