

The Dutch Battle for Higher Education in the Middle Colonies

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I begin this paper on a somewhat personal note; because although there are few qualifications that I can claim as a professional historian, there are some personal privileges that I can cite when it comes to education in New Netherland. For one thing I am a direct descendant of someone who is often listed as the first schoolmaster in the town of Midwout. Though I do not think that Adriaen Hageman's occupancy of that post has ever been fully validated, Erasmus Hall High School in Brooklyn, the successor to the Midwout School, apparently accepts it, since there is a plaque to him at its entrance. More importantly, I am the president emeritus of an institution which was the last result of the controversy which I am to describe. In October 1984 New Brunswick Seminary celebrated its 200th anniversary. Preparation for that celebration has given me some acquaintance with the roughly half century of struggle which preceded the foundation of the school in October 1784. It is with the details of that fifty year struggle that we are to be concerned.

Because the Dutch Church in New Netherland began quite simply as the religious department of the Dutch West India Company in 1628, there was never any question that its ministers should be products of Dutch university and theological training, sent to their posts in the New World by the Classis of Amsterdam, which was the ecclesiastical body charged with responsibility for congregations in both the East and West Indies. Whenever a congregation over here required a domine, it simply notified the Classis which in time found a suitable candidate and shipped him over.

The single exception to this rule was Domine Johannes Theodorus Polhemus who found himself in New Amsterdam in 1654 as a refugee from the conquered colony of Brazil. At that time the three newly organized Long Island congregations of Breuckelen, Midwout and New Amersfoort were looking for a minister. The arrival of the domine on these shores struck them as heaven sent so they put him to work immediately, even though the Classis of Amsterdam had not given its approval. Since

Polhemus was a recognized minister of the Dutch Reformed Church, his call to Long Island was ultimately approved by the Classis *post factum*.¹

With this single exception, however, all ministers in New Netherland during the Dutch period were chosen and sent by the authorities in Amsterdam. Cumbersome as it was, the system seems to have worked surprisingly well. To be sure, the number of congregations to be supplied was small, but the distinguished careers of men like Megapolensis or Selyns are good examples of how well the system worked.

It is not surprising, therefore, that after the British conquest of 1664 and the final cession of the province to Britain ten years later, the Dutch congregations in New York continued the system with little hindrance from the British government which was probably relieved that it did not have to supply Dutch Reformed ministers in the New World. There were occasional clashes as, for example, in 1675 when the British government tried to foist a Van Rensselaer who was in Anglican orders on the Albany congregation or again in 1705 when Lord Cornbury insisted on a royal license for Bernardus Freeman for service in Long Island.² But considering all the adjustments necessary between two cultures and two churches, occasions such as these were surprisingly few.

The first break in the system was not due to the British, but to internal problems in the Dutch community. A new congregation had been formed in Hackensack, New Jersey in 1686. After a brief initial ministry, the congregation was left leaderless except for occasional visits by a domine from New York. One of its members, William Bertholf, gradually assumed leadership until the congregation let the New York ministers know that their services were no longer necessary. When Bertholf, a man of no education but of a deep pietist persuasion, let his New York colleagues know that he intended to apply to Amsterdam for ordination, they were, of course, horrified and immediately warned Amsterdam against this ecclesiastical upstart.³

Bertholf was from a section of the province of Zeeland which had been deeply influenced by pietism. Certain that he would have a good reception there, he set sail for Middleburg in 1693. Doubtless he had made his arrangements in advance because the Classis of Walcheren examined and ordained him virtually on the spot and he returned to Hackensack in 1694 with credentials as impeccable as those of anyone.⁴ How the other domines received him is another story, but Bertholf was the first to demonstrate that there were other routes to the Dutch Reformed ministry besides that of Amsterdam. From time to time some ordinations were performed in the New World, but always with the previous consent of the Classis of Amsterdam which delegated its powers to the ministers in New York. All of these, however, were special cases of which it could fairly be said that the Classis of Amsterdam would itself have performed the ordination if the geography of the case had permitted.

It is not really possible to say when dissatisfaction with this traditional system began to spread. It is a question like asking who was the first Dutch settler in New York and New Jersey to say, "I am not a Dutchman; I am an American." We can, of course, state with some precision when the dissatisfaction had become so widespread that it became a matter of record, but before we come to that we should look at some of the tendencies that led to it. We shall consider them in three categories: theological, cultural and linguistic.

It is surely not without some significance that of the more than forty Dutch domines who served in New York and New Jersey between 1628 and 1735, at least sixteen were graduates of Leiden University. The number may have been even larger since some names cannot be found in any Dutch university register. But sixteen was far and away the largest group of graduates from any Dutch university. Utrecht was represented by only four or five while the number from Groningen during that period was even smaller.⁵ The point of looking at university origins of the clergy is that at this time Leiden was considered the most "liberal" of the Dutch schools. Under the leadership of a teacher named Cocceius, a man heavily influenced by the new philosophy of Descartes, Leiden graduates were probably the most urbane and sophisticated graduates of the three Dutch theological faculties. There was a sizeable pietist influence at Utrecht, but it certainly never touched Leiden.

But in the New World, pietism was an increasingly strong strain in the Dutch Reformed churches especially

in frontier places like New Jersey, though by no means confined to that area. We have already mentioned Bertholf in Hackensack, but in a later generation there was the much more powerful influence of Theodore Frelinghuysen on the Raritan. Many of Frelinghuysen's clerical supporters and disciples had their background in German Pietism, like John Henry Goetschius who had come up from Philadelphia.

In a word, in the first half of the eighteenth century there was a growing theological suspicion of training in the Netherlands. The evangelical pietism which dominated the thinking of many domines here found it difficult to accept the supernatural rationalism which prevailed at Groningen and Leiden and was gaining influence in Utrecht. Congregations which wanted an evangelical new light ministry were not likely to find it in a Dutch university graduate. Pietist ministers were reluctant to permit sons of their congregations in America to study in the Netherlands. Not only were real risks involved in the transatlantic journey, but there was the greater risk involved in theological infection once they got there.

It has to be said that these theological objections were never clearly stated. One did not lightly criticize the orthodoxy of a Dutch university. But one was certainly suspicious of the methodology of a university graduate who, while he might preach orthodox sermons, did not know how to save souls. To all intents and purposes, Frelinghuysen and his colleagues on the Raritan were running revival meetings. How was a Leiden education going to help prepare a domine for those?

Closely allied with the theological problem was a cultural one. In settled societies like New York or Albany a Leiden graduate would have a congregation of well-to-do merchants who would appreciate the educational and cultural level of their domine's sermons. Henricus Selyns, for example, a Leiden graduate and one of the best-loved ministers in New York, was closely allied with the well-to-do merchant oligarchy and used to correspond in Latin with the celebrated Cotton Mather in Boston.

But what would have happened if Selyns had been asked to preach on the frontier in New Brunswick or on the Raritan? We have a partial answer to such a question from Hackensack where Selyns used to go on occasion to administer the sacraments when the congregation was without an ordained minister. In 1691/2 the congregation

told Selyns not to come back, saying "that they can live well enough without ministers or sacraments."⁶ Part of this rejection may have been the result of Selyns' stance during the Leisler Rebellion; part of it because of theological differences between the domine and Bert-holf, at that time the lay leader of the congregation. The larger part of the problem, however, must have been the impression left on a group of simple pious farmers living in what was then a rural frontier by a Leiden graduate accustomed to all of the luxury, convenience and culture of a comfortable New York home. It was like expecting a Fifth Avenue minister today to do well in a congregation in the Kentucky hills!

As the century progressed, an increasing number of church leaders in New Jersey or in the newer settlements in the Hudson Valley were beginning to ask the old question, "How do we keep them down on the farm once they've seen Paree?" European education and culture might be all very well in New York or Albany, but Raritan, Rochester or Tappan required American boys with an American training.

Unhappily, the situation was not quite so simple as I have been describing it. For the fact is that within many of the congregations I have been describing there were some people who still preferred the traditional European training. They did not want a domine who was "one of the boys," so to speak, but one who represented the culture and training of the Old World. That meant that often there was not only a growing distance between congregations such as New York and Raritan, but also a growing division within many other congregations.

The linguistic factor is one which has never really been researched. It was in fact our friend, Charles Gehring, translator of the New Netherland Project, who got me started thinking about it in a paper on developments in the Dutch language in New Netherland which he gave in New Brunswick in April 1984. In the half-century between the final cession to Great Britain in 1674 and, let us say, 1725, what had happened to the common person's understanding of classical Dutch? How many spoke classical Dutch and how many the Low Dutch dialect that became the *lingua franca* of the colony?

In New York and Albany there were Dutch schools which kept the classical language alive. In fact, we are told that in Albany it was not possible to find a competent teacher in English until after the Revolution. But in more rural areas the situation was quite different. The Rev.

Herman Lancelot Boelen was sent by the Classis of Amsterdam in 1766 to the four Queens County churches of Newtown, Jamaica, Oyster Bay and Success, all of them small farming communities. Boelen had previously been domine of the church in the farming village of Schoonebeek in the sleepy province of Drenthe. Obviously the Classis felt that he was well equipped to serve a rural community on either side of the Atlantic. But not too long after his arrival in Queens, the Consistory asked him to do something about his Dutch which they found "too pure and high flown."⁷ Why did his Dutch, which evidently had satisfied the farmers in Schoonebeek, bother the farmers in Queens? While no definite answer can be given, it would seem a fair assumption that by 1770 the Queens farmers were speaking *de tawl*, as the Low Dutch dialect was known, and found their domine's classical Dutch hard to understand.

In 1761 Jacob Rutsen Hardenbergh, who had studied with one of the Frelinghuysens and had been ordained by the rebellious group that was intent on the independence of the American Church, visited the Classis of Amsterdam to get his Dutch mother-in-law and to urge his cause. He did not make a good impression and was turned down completely.⁸ Again the question arises as to how much of his failure can be attributed to the crude Dutch dialect which he had spoken as a boy in Rosendale, New York. Where in the new world would he have learned classical Dutch? His total ministerial experience had been in Raritan, Bedminster, North Branch, Neshanic and Millstone, all of them rural communities in which "Jersey Dutch," a version of *de tawl*, was the common language. Obviously there is much research to be done in the importance of the linguistic factor in our topic. I hope enough has been said to demonstrate that it had its role to play.

There has been some question as to who was the first American domine to break ranks and begin training ministers over here. The great Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen is often cited,⁹ but I can find no evidence that he ever taught anyone. My candidate is Peter Henry Dorsius, a German graduate of Leiden, who was sent by the Classis of Amsterdam to a small congregation in Bucks County, Pennsylvania in 1737. Soon after his arrival, he became acquainted with John Henry Goetschius, a young Swiss, who had been preaching for several years with neither education nor ordination. Early in 1739 he brought Goetschius into his parsonage as a theological student. In a short time he was joined by John and Theodore Frelinghuysen, sons of the Raritan



Fig. 38. Dorsius House, Bucks County, Pennsylvania.
Courtesy of New Brunswick Theological Seminary.

evangelist. Two other students soon came to this kitchen seminary in Bucks County, David Marinus and Johannes Fryenmoet. We can be certain of the names of these five students, and there may have been at least two others.¹⁰ Dorsius himself came to a tragic end as an alcoholic who lost his congregation and returned to Holland in 1749, but not before he had established what was to be a significant educational pattern.

In 1747 the authorities in Amsterdam recognized the restiveness of their American charges by permitting them to organize a *Coetus*, an assembly which would enable the ministers to get together for a discussion of common problems, but was strictly forbidden to get involved with the business of education or ordination without the express authorization of the Classis of Amsterdam. At the very first meeting of the group in 1748, however, an event took place which boded ill for future control from the Netherlands, even though it occurred with the full approval of Amsterdam.

Three persons were presented at the Coetus meeting for ordination, John Henry Goetschius, John Leydt and Benjamin vander Linde. Goetschius, a student from Dorsius' kitchen seminary, had been ordained some

years earlier by a self-appointed group consisting of Dorsius, the great Frelinghuysen and Gilbert Tennent, the evangelical Presbyterian. Since the Classis of Amsterdam questioned the validity of that ordination, it authorized the new Coetus to reordain Goetschius at its 1748 meeting. Leydt and Vander Linde, who had both studied with Dorsius and Goetschius, were allowed to be examined and ordained although the Classis made it clear that these were exceptional cases that should not be repeated.¹¹

But the American education and ordination of these three domines raised all kinds of questions as to why a European education and ordination were still necessary. A lively discussion continued for the next several years until 1754 when the Coetus decided that the time had come to cut the umbilical cord with the Netherlands and establish its own school of the prophets in this country. The younger Theodore Frelinghuysen, the minister of Albany, was deputed to go to the Netherlands to raise money for such an institution.¹²

Needless to say there was a sizeable minority, led by John Ritzema, one of the ministers in New York, who sharply disagreed with such a decision. Realizing the

inevitability of an American education, they took advantage of Anglican difficulties in obtaining a charter for King's College (Columbia) in New York to come up with an alternative. There is no time here to tell of their political maneuvering to get the charter to contain a provision for the inclusion of a professor of Dutch divinity in the new institution, but they were finally successful. They therefore countered the proposal for an American Dutch Reformed institution with a chair of Dutch divinity in the new Anglican College in New York.¹³

With two proposals on the table, or more literally three, the Dutch Reformed Church was torn asunder. There were those who favored an all out effort to found their own institution, those who favored the King's College alternative, and neutral brethren, who sided with neither party but wished to continue to walk in the old paths. Enthusiasm for the King's College proposal soon waned when the New York Consistory, anxious only that education not fall into the hands of those wild-eyed enthusiasts in New Jersey, withdrew its support and joined the so-called neutral brethren. Frelinghuysen did not make his visit to the Netherlands until 1759, returned empty-handed and mysteriously lost his life in an accident off Sandy Hook on the return voyage. His successor in Albany did not share his enthusiasm for an American institution; so that important congregation became part of the neutral brethren.¹⁴

The death of Frelinghuysen meant that leadership in the drive for an American academy passed into other hands, most notably those of Samuel Verbruyck, the American educated and ordained domine of Tappan. With his colleagues, Goetschius, Marinus, Leydt and Hardenbergh, all of whom had declared their complete independence from Amsterdam, Verbruyck kept petitioning successive governors of New Jersey to charter a school for them. They met with no success until 10 November 1766, when Governor William Franklin, one of Benjamin's illegitimate sons, finally yielded to their request and granted a charter for a new school to be called Queen's College. No copy of that charter exists today and the school which it called into being seems to have existed largely on paper. Trustees were appointed and they held a few meetings, but the new institution never came into being. A lack of funding was the primary reason, though there were also disagreements among the sponsors as to where the new institution should be located. A further delay was occasioned by what might be called the Princeton Diversion, a proposal which met

with some favor in Amsterdam, that instead of a totally new college there should be a chair of Dutch theology in the relatively new College of New Jersey in Princeton. The scheme was not unlike the discredited King's College proposal, but this time the cooperating school was Presbyterian, a fact which made it more palatable to some, including the Classis in Amsterdam.¹⁵ But it really satisfied no one. The *coetus* party was still intent on having its own school and would settle for nothing less; the somewhat aristocratic New York party, accustomed to the privileges of establishment, looked down its nose at any affiliation with what it termed a "Scotch Presbyterian Academy" and the neutral brethren remained neutral.

By 1770 the New Jersey party had petitioned Governor Franklin for a second charter which he granted on March 20. The new charter made specific provision for a professor of theology who should also serve as president. In the words of the charter of 1770, Queen's College was to be "for the education of youth in the learned languages, liberal and useful arts and sciences, and especially in divinity; preparing them for the ministry and other good offices."¹⁶ By 1771 the new school had secured quarters in New Brunswick and appointed Frederick Frelinghuysen to serve as the tutor.

The whole question of theological education remained unresolved, however. A plan of union designed in the Netherlands by John Henry Livingston, the last American student to study and be ordained in Holland, to bring together all of the warring factions in the American Church, was adopted by most of them in 1772.¹⁷ Among other things it proposed the creation of a theological faculty of one or two persons who would train students for the ministry after their graduation from college. Keenly aware of the bruising battles that had involved King's, Queen's and Princeton, the plan specified that the proposed professorate should have no connection with any existing school but be totally independent. That provision was a realistic assessment of the situation. The New York churches, whose financial support would be absolutely essential, did not want ministers trained in that hotbed of pious evangelicalism in New Brunswick and the New Jersey churches returned the compliment by wishing to avoid any Anglican taint in King's College. It should be noted that what was envisioned here was the European model of theological education as a post-graduate course. The candidates for it were assumed to be college graduates who would then devote themselves to three years of theological study. Up

to this time theological education in America at Harvard, Yale and Princeton had followed the British model. A ministerial candidate studied divinity as part of his college course B.A. degree, apprenticed himself to a local pastor who ultimately certified him for ordination. Often he was granted an M.A. degree in a couple of years as a reward for good behavior. The system which the Dutch were seeking to start was the European one, which has since almost totally prevailed in this country; three years of graduate theological study after a college career.

When asked by the American churches to nominate someone who could serve as a professor of theology, both the Classis of Amsterdam and the theological faculty of Utrecht unanimously suggested John Henry Livingston, one of the New York ministers. A member of the celebrated Hudson Valley manorial family, Livingston was a Yale graduate who had spent three years studying theology in Utrecht, thus modeling exactly the pattern which the church was seeking. A meeting was called in October 1775 to consider this nomination, but in our national history that was no time to consider a new move. The minutes of the meeting state it eloquently. "By reason of the pitiful condition of our land, the consideration of the subject of the Professorate is deferred."¹⁸ It remained on the table until October 1784 when the bright hopes of a new republic made it possible to be taken up again. A faculty of two was selected, Livingston and Hermanus Meyer of Totowa, though for the present each was to work only part time. Any connection with an existing institution was again avoided and the theological department operated out of Livingston's home in New York. It was only in 1809 that

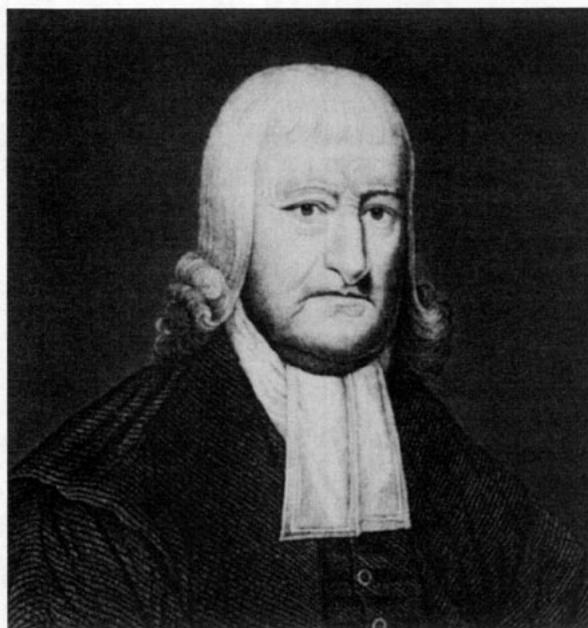


Fig. 39. Portrait of John H. Livingston.
Courtesy of New York State Library, Albany.

the misery of Queen's College forced the Synod to move its theological department to New Brunswick, much against the wishes of the church in New York. But that is another story.

The point is that by 1784 the Dutch Reformed Church had achieved its long-sought goal, an academic and a theological education of European pattern on these North American shores. In this way it had pioneered in what was to become the model for ministerial training in this country.

Notes

¹Edward T. Corwin, ed., *Ecclesiastical Records of the State of New York*, 7 vols. (Albany, NY: James B. Lyon, 1901–1916), I: 332. (Hereafter *Ecclesiastical Records*.)

²*Ibid.*, III: 1607.

³*Ibid.*, II: 1072.

⁴Benjamin C. Taylor, *Annals of the Classis of Bergen*, (New York: Board of Publication of the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church, 1857), 172–74.

⁵Edward T. Corwin, *A Manual of the Reformed Church in America*, 4th ed. (New York: Board of Publication of the Reformed Church in America, 1902), 1073–74. (Hereafter referred to as Corwin, *Manual*.)

⁶*Ecclesiastical Records*, II: 1043.

⁷Corwin, *Manual*, 309.

⁸*Ecclesiastical Records*, VI: 3883–84.

⁹Cf. Corwin, *Manual*, 475.

¹⁰Joseph Henry Dubbs, *The Reformed Church in Pennsylvania* (Lancaster: Pennsylvania German Society, 1902), 93.

¹¹*Ecclesiastical Records*, IV: 3001ff.

¹²Corwin, *Manual*, 470–72.

¹³*Ibid.*, 108–11.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 906–7.

¹⁵*Ecclesiastical Records*, VI: 4128–29.

¹⁶Richard P. McCormick, *Rutgers, A Bicentennial History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1966), 8.

¹⁷*Minutes of the Original Particular Synod of the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church, 1771–1799* (New York: Board of Publication of Reformed Protestant Dutch Church, 1859), 25.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 61.