Religion in Rensselaerswijck

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It was in the 16th century that the Dutch first became identified with an autonomous republic, following William the Silent's liberation of the northern provinces of the Netherlands from the tyranny of Spain's Philip II. This achievement was inspired by religious as well as political convictions and represented a triumph of the Reformation. From their inception, therefore, the States General of the United Netherlands were committed to the Reformed religion of Calvin and adherence to the Reformed Calvinist worship of the homeland became a standard mandate for all their overseas ventures. Under these circumstances, many have assumed that the earliest Dutch fur traders should be credited with bringing religion to our area. This presumption overlooks the fact that fur trading was a seasonal business, conducted in the late summer and fall. In the early years, transient traders operated without the support of any year-round settlement. To what extent these traders interrupted their carousing with the Indian women to conduct formal religious exercises during their annual excursions up the river must remain a matter for speculation.

The earliest official representation of the Dutch Church arrived at Fort Orange in 1624, when Sebastian Krol accompanied a group of Walloon immigrants as a "Comforter of the Sick". The Classis of Amsterdam, the arm of the Dutch Church responsible for its overseas activities, used this designation for individuals with minimal formal training who substituted for an ordained pastor. Krol had been given strict instructions to read scriptures, standard liturgies, and approved sermons "without presuming to compose anything himself". Because no one else was available to sanctify them, Krol was also given a special dispensation to perform baptisms and marriage ceremonies, although the legitimacy of these sacraments would be challenged by theological purists. Unfortunately the Walloons had scarcely settled in the neighborhood of Fort Orange when they were caught in a crossfire between the Mahicans and the Mohawks who were vying for control of the Hudson Valley. Most—if not all—of the Walloons fled to safer ground to the south. Krol responded to this flight of his congregation by negotiating an appointment as Commissary to the trading post at Fort Orange and thereby terminated his clerical career. It would be another two decades before the Dutch church was formally represented in this region again.

This brings us to the era of the patroonship of Kiliaen van Rensselaer. The Patroon was a fascinating admixture of idealistic dreamer and astute business man, as demonstrated in his voluminous correspondence. In contemplating his colony, he had the best of intentions "to have the Christian Reformed Religion proclaimed there in order that the blind heathen might also be brought to the knowledge of our Savior, Jesus Christ." Yet other pressing needs of his colonists to assure their economic survival, together with their own refusal to tithe themselves in order to support a minister, left the young colony bereft of formal religious worship. The Patroon was constantly berating his agent, Arent van Curler, for failure to collect these tithes and build a church. It is significant that Van Curler never defended himself against these scoldings by describing any organized religious worship in Rensselaerswijck during its first decade. One therefore suspects that the colonists did not take very seriously the Patroon's instructions "to cause the people to assemble every Sunday to train them in the commandments, the psalms, the reading of the Holy Scriptures and Christian authors in modesty, love and decency."

It was not until 1642, when discord between the partners appeared to threaten the survival of his colony, that Van Rensselaer became convinced that it was essential to send over a minister, not only to establish a church for his colonists but also to provide him with a mature representative of impeccable honesty whom he could trust. He recruited a minister who had been serving a couple of churches on the west coast of North Holland and who expressed a desire to see the New World. This domine had been christened with the good Dutch name of Johannes Grootstadt, but, in keeping with the custom of the times, he had hellenized his family name to "Megapolensis" when he assumed his clerical collar. Domine Megapolensis arrived in Rensselaerswijck on August 13 and conducted his first worship service on August 17, 1642. His initial services were held on the
east side of the river, probably in space improvised in the Patroon’s grain storehouse near the Mill Creek, although we lack detailed descriptions of these early services.\textsuperscript{6}

The first structure of which we have definite evidence was a warehouse on the west side of the river near Fort Orange that was remodelled in 1647 and provided with a pulpit and nine benches for the congregation in addition to benches for the Elders and Deacons.\textsuperscript{7} Unfortunately the annual spring floods, especially those of 1654, encouraged most of the townspeople to move to higher ground north of the Ruttenkil which flowed down the site of modern Norton Street. The citizens thereby isolated themselves from their church and from the fort intended for their protection. Representatives of the patroonship and the Dutch West India Company sat down together and decided to solve their problem in a very direct if unconventional manner: in 1656 they erected a “Blockhouse Church” in the very center of town to serve as both a fort and a house of worship. The ground floor of this building served as the main sanctuary for worship, with its benches assigned to the women of the village. The men sat in the overhanging balcony where cannon were mounted behind loopholes pointed north, west and south. In principle the men were “at the ready” to defend against any attackers; in practice there is no record that the cannon in the Blockhouse Church were ever discharged in the defense of the village. Yet it served the town well as a church for more than half a century, with as many as four hundred worshippers crowded into its sanctuary on a Sunday morning.

By 1715, the timbers of the old Blockhouse Church were starting to rot and a new fort had been constructed at the head of State Street. Although the town had now been an English colony for decades, the Dutch did not
wish to relinquish their prestigious location at the very heart of town. They therefore built a much larger stone edifice at the same site in the middle of the intersection of Broadway and State Street. This Stone Church remained in use until 1807.

The correspondence of the ministers who served these churches throws some interesting and not particularly favorable light on the early citizens of our town. Domine Megapolensis was profoundly disturbed by the dishonesty, immorality, and alcoholic dissipation which he observed in his flock. The Patroon had to explain to him that “the best people seldom go so far across the sea” and remind him that many of the colonists had elected to emigrate because of the troubles which their evil ways had created at home. The Patroon was also doubtlessly correct in his speculation that, in migrating to the wilderness, many people were seeking a licentious freedom from the censorship of their neighbors, a peer pressure which Van Rensselaer regarded as a greater deterrent to misbehavior “than the penetrating eye of the Lord.”

Drunkenness was a constant plague to be dealt with by both the civil authorities and the spiritual leaders, and stiff fines had to be imposed against “the scandalous practice that the Christians should mingle themselves unlawfully with the wives or daughters of Heathens.” A successor to Megapolensis, Domine Schaats, painted a similarly dismal picture:

Much could be said of the sinful ways of many. We have many hearers, but few are saved. We have been so grievously deceived by the sinful behavior of certain of our members that I have felt obliged to suspend them from the Lord’s table.

This earnest struggle to lead their Dutch communicants towards righteous living was not the sole endeavor of the domines. A call to Rensselaerswijck also afforded them an opportunity to carry on missionary work to convert the “heathen” Indians to Christianity. Megapolensis himself devoted considerable time to this missionary calling, although his valiant but unsuccessful struggle to master the Indian language handicapped his ability to convey his Christian message to the nature worshipers of the forest. A successor, Godfredius Dellius, solved the language problem by recruiting a number of interpreters among the Indian women. He also discovered that to attract their attention and gain the respect of his Indian audiences, it was essential for him to come bearing gifts “such as a brother should receive from a brother” before launching upon his evangelical message. His success is evident by the large number of converts he won over to the church at Rensselaerswijck. Among the treasured relics in the archives of the First Church in Albany is an old book of baptismal records in which numerous Indian names are interspersed between those of the Van Rensselaers, the Schuylers, the Van Schaicks, and the Livingstons.

Until the British takeover in 1664, the Dutch Church had a monopoly on religious observances in the town. The charter establishing the patroonship defined the Dutch Reformed Protestant Religion as the sole authorized religion within any territory controlled by the West India Company. Nevertheless, there were at least a few Lutherans in town from the time the colony was founded. The first of whom we have definite record were the Andriessen-Bratt brothers who arrived from Scandinavia in 1637, one of whom built a sawmill on the bank of a creek which would henceforth be known as the Norman’s Kill. After 1650 the Lutherans began arriving in greater numbers and were undoubtedly rankled by the prohibition against the practice of their own religious faith in the town. In 1649 they had joined with their fellow Lutherans in New Amsterdam in signing a petition requesting permission to establish a Lutheran church. Their plea went unrequited, but this petition has been formally recognized as the first official act of the Albany Lutherans, even though they would not be strong enough to support a church with a full time resident pastor for more than a century (1784). While many of the Lutherans moved on to other communities where they would not be so overwhelmed by the Reformed Dutch majority, their places were soon filled by other Lutheran immigrants following in their wake.

The conflict between the “High Dutch” Lutherans and the “Low Dutch” Reformed should neither be ignored nor exaggerated. The domine who served the Dutch Church from 1652 until 1695, Gideon Schaats, was an inflexible personality with limited vision; he was hard pressed to accept the presence of Lutherans in his community. On one specific occasion, the Domine was subjected to a sharp tongue-lashing if not actual physical abuse by the mother of a Lutheran child whose religious beliefs he had questioned, an episode which led to charges and counter charges which finally had to be resolved in court. For the community as a whole, however, the citizens appear to have extended typical Dutch tolerance towards their Lutheran neighbors. In a congregation which was welcoming African slaves and Indian converts into its service of worship, one would scarcely expect to find antipathy towards Lutheran cousins. Nevertheless, the strict adherence to Calvinist theology in opposition to the precepts of Luther was not
acceptable to many Lutherans, and it has been surmised that during the Dutch era "most of them fretted away the Sabbaths at home."14

One specific issue, moreover, were particularly vexing to the Lutherans. They took seriously the common Christian concern that their children be baptized, a service which could only be legally performed in the Dutch Church during the Dutch era. In the liturgy of the Dutch service, the parents of the child were required to provide an affirmative declaration to the question as to "whether the doctrines taught in this church are the true doctrines".15 To resolve the dilemma in which this placed the Lutheran parents, they adopted the practice of naming Dutch Reformed neighbors as godparents of their children and having them present the babies for baptism. Most of the Dutch were quite willing to bend the letter of the law and accept this practice, although it sorely troubled old Domine Schaats.

After the colony came under English rule and it was decreed that Lutherans "may freely and publicly exercise divine worship according to their consciences," they set about to establish their own churches.16 The Lutherans purchased property at Howard and South Pearl Streets and in 1670 began holding public worship services, aided from time to time by visiting preachers from New York City. The few English in 17th century Albany were largely confined to the British troops quartered at Fort Frederick, and they were supplied with a chaplain who conducted Anglican services within the fort. Nevertheless, one of the more notable of these chaplains, Rev. Thomas Barclay, was inspired to extend his ministry beyond the walls of the fort. He organized a congregation within the town which, in 1714, received a grant for a plot of land just east of the Fort for erecting an Episcopal chapel, the forerunner of modern St. Peter's Church. In restoring the rights of the Lutherans and the Anglicans to conduct their own religious observances, however, the

Fig. 53. White Pulpit, First Church in Albany. Photo by R.S. Alexander, Newsgraphics of Delmar, NY, 1988.
English imposed one annoying restriction. For the support of both the churches and the church-run schools, towns could levy a tax on the citizens of their community, the proceeds to be allocated to the church favored by the majority. In Dutch communities, this meant that the Lutherans and Anglicans were required to contribute to the support of the Dutch Reformed Church.

The Dutch Church of Rensselaerswyck not only remained the town’s dominant religious institution, but also provided the town with a number of essential functions in addition to serving as a house of worship for those who professed the Reformed faith. As was characteristic of the culture of that era, a minister was one of the only learned men in the town. The high degree of illiteracy in Rensselaerswyck is evident from the frequency with which one encounters an “X” opposite “His Mark” for the signature on official documents. The arrival of Megapolensis brought the first library of books to Rensselaerswyck, consisting of 17 volumes, half of which dealt with theological material while the remainder were concerned with natural science and philosophy. The Dutch Church also recognized a positive obligation to provide for the education of the youth of the community, not only in classes of religious catechism, but in secular schooling as well. As early as 1650, a schoolhouse had been erected and a teacher hired who came under the supervision of Domine Schaats. A
succession of other schools would follow, the last being the establishment of a Dutch Church Academy in 1787. Unfortunately the teachers that were hired were not sufficiently inspiring to overcome the apathy of the students and their parents towards the classical education that was being offered; all of these schools died on the vine after rather brief tenures.

Of more profound impact on the community was the Deacons' Poor Fund. Although the Dutch were always reluctant to pay taxes, they readily accepted their responsibility towards their less fortunate neighbors and contributed regularly to the collections taken in the Dutch church for the aid of the poor. It was the responsibility of the deacons to dispense these funds, paying the burial expenses of paupers, providing food and clothing of the sociological conditions of the era may be obtained equivalent of modem food pantries and soup kitchens to provide nutritious supplements for the meager rations poor, during the British era funds were allocated to serve the temporarily impecunious. A fascinating study of the sociological conditions of the era may be obtained by poring the account books of the Deacons in which all of these transactions were meticulously recorded. In addition to disbursements on behalf of individuals, funds were allocated from the Poor Fund to provide a stipend for a physician to provide medical care for the poor, during the British era funds were allocated to provide nutritious supplements for the meager rations which the city offered those who were committed to the town jail.

In years when good harvests minimized the drain on the Deacons' Poor Fund, substantial surpluses accumulated. Since the town lacked any other financial institution, the Poor Fund began to function as the bank for the community, launching its investments by loaning a sum to no lesser a person than the Patroon himself at an interest rate of 10%. In time the Poor Fund built up quite a sizable portfolio of such investments to help meet the cash needs of many of the community’s enterprises. The scarcity of defaults recorded for these loans suggests that uniquely persuasive pressure could be exerted on its clients to honor their obligations to the church.

Last but certainly not least, the church was the social center of the community. Evidence of the scope of these functions survives in the accounts of the expenditures for the frequent church suppers that were held. A typical gathering was served 32 pounds of ham, 41 pounds of roast beef, 5 loaves of bread, 7 1/4 pounds of butter, 8 pounds of cheese, 7 pounds of crackers, and 2 bottles of mustard, to be washed down with 2 gallons of wine, 3 gallons of ale, 1/2 gallon of burgundy and 1/2 gallon of spirits, not forgetting the characteristic supply of 3 dozen clay pipes and two pounds of tobacco. In contemplating the gala occasions which these festivities must have represented in a town devoid of other entertainment, however, we should remind ourselves that this ebullient Christian brotherly love still did not break down the relatively strict social hierarchy which dominated the town. As one scans the marriage certificates issued by the old Dutch Church, it is striking to observe how universally the young people married their social equals, the offspring of leading families always marrying partners from other leading families.

Clearly the Rensselaerswijck Dutch Church was the vital center of community activities. Some writers have portrayed a scene dominated by tales of intrigue and conflict, with the religious leaders constantly at odds with the civil authorities and with the several religious groups which came to be established in the community continually squabbling among themselves. Though the Dutch were a contentious lot who did not require much encouragement to precipitate an argument, the picture of significant ongoing strife between religious factions cannot be confirmed by a critical study of the record. The Dutch had the wisdom to recognize that they were members of a declining ethnic representation whose prestige and power in the community would quickly evaporate if they did not judiciously share that power and thereby make other groups beholden to them. With very rare exceptions, religious life in Rensselaerswijck and early Albany was characterized by striking ecumenical harmony and cooperation between its different religious groups, a tradition which happily survives to the present day. Conflict between the secular authorities and the church was similarly rare for the simple reason that the leadership of the two groups were substantially the same. During the English era from 1674 to 1776, when some have conjured up visions of bitter suppression of the Dutch by the Anglicans, 24 of Albany's 25 mayors selected by the English governors were from among the lay leaders of the Dutch Church. This fact constitutes an impressive refutation of the suggestion that the English were employing repressive tactics to curb the Dutch influence in colonial Albany.

The City of Albany has evolved into something of vastly greater scope than the Colony of Rensselaerswijck of which Kiliaen van Rensselaer had dreamed. Its religious life has flourished under a philosophy of pluralism and religious tolerance which Van Rensselaer could
not have conceived. Nevertheless, the Dutch Church which the Patroon established served a vital role for his community of three centuries ago, a vitality which embraced sufficient flexibility to survive and prosper through the successive transformations in its evolution towards the modern city.

Notes

3 Ibid., 493–94.
4 Ibid., 454, 459, 551, 561, 563, 662.
5 Ibid., 323.
6 Ibid., 619, 652.
8 *Van Rensselaer Bowier Manuscripts*, 647.
9 Ibid., 647.
19 Uncatalogued item, First Church in Albany Archives. In citing these archives, documents are in three categories: (1) bound volumes, such as the one listed in note 18, which are available on microfilm in some libraries, (2) catalogued items (anything from scraps of paper to small books) with finding cards and identification numbers to permit ready retrieval, and (3) uncatalogued items, about equal in volume to #2, that are physically preserved but otherwise unprocessed. Unfortunately there is no efficient way to identify or retrieve the third category.
20 This statement ignores the bizarre Leisler Rebellion and its aftermath (1689–1699). For a full discussion of the role of the Albany Dutch Church and its minister, Godfrey Dellius, in this affair, the reader is referred to: R.S. Alexander, *Albany's First Church and its Role in the Growth of the City.* (Delmar, NY: Newsgraphics Printers, 1988).