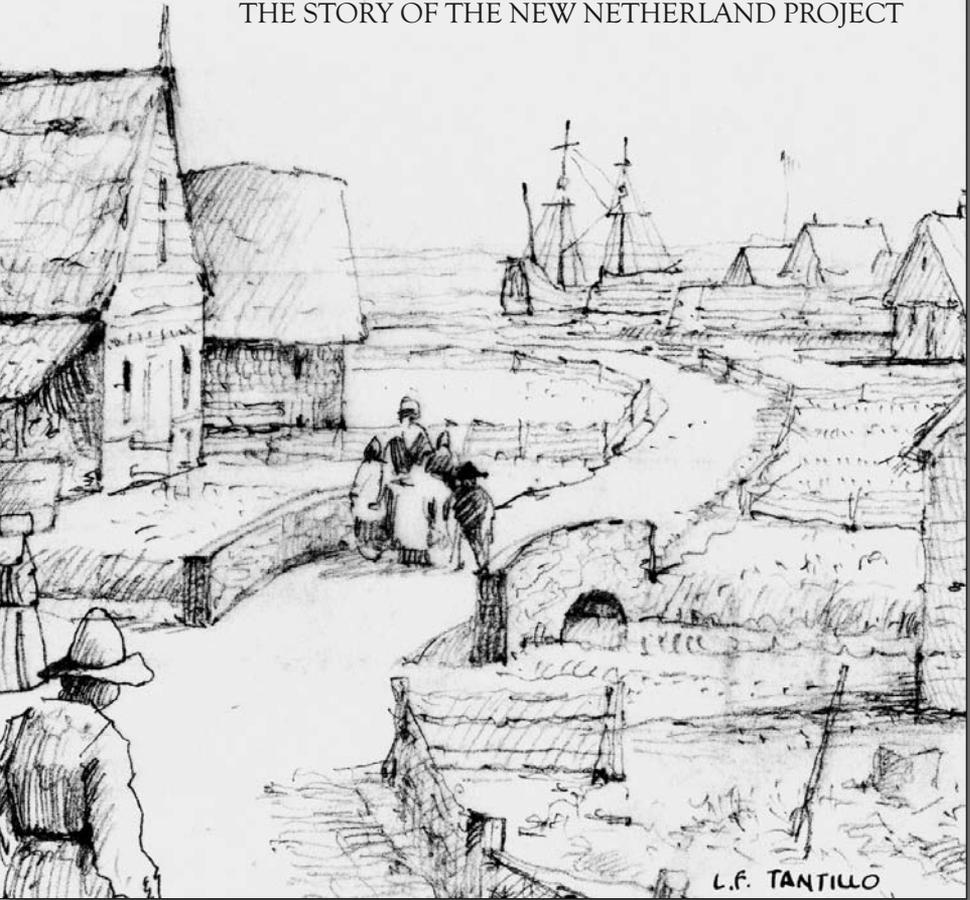


# Dutch Renaissance

THE STORY OF THE NEW NETHERLAND PROJECT



ANNALS OF NEW NETHERLAND 2009

Cover: Sketch of Beverwijck (Albany) by L.F. Tantillo, [www.lftantillo.com/](http://www.lftantillo.com/).

# Dutch Renaissance

THE STORY OF THE NEW NETHERLAND PROJECT

By Peter A. Douglas



*Annals of New Netherland 2009*

This publication helps mark the Hudson-Fulton-Champlain Quadricentennial and New York State's historical, cultural and environmental achievements of the past four centuries.





*“To get the truth one must . . .  
go into the archives for the past,  
and let those long dead speak  
in their own defense.”<sup>1</sup>*

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—William Elliot Griffis (1843-1928)

## Foreword

It is truly “one of the best-kept secrets in American history.” In this essay, author Peter Douglas enlightens us about the New Netherland Project and the light it has shed on how America’s Dutch heritage shaped the earliest years of our nation’s history.

From place names like Yonkers, Long Island, Harlem, and Rensselaer to notions of tolerance, religious liberty, Santa Klaus, and other democratic traditions and social customs, our past as New Netherland is reflected in our present. We are immersed in and surrounded by it every day. Yet Americans know little about this important period in American history. Long overlooked by a history dominated by New England and obscured by the 17th century Dutch language, the record of America’s roots in the Netherlands are slowly being illuminated by Dr. Charles Gehring and a small group of historians and translators at the New York State Library. As we celebrate the Hudson-Fulton-Champlain Quadricentennial, it is important that more people are aware of the work of the New Netherland Project.

Since 1974 Dr. Gehring has led the New Netherland Project with the support of the New York State Library, the Holland Society of New York, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. The goal has been to translate the earliest records of American history from 1609 to 1674 – those of New Netherland. Working with rare early manuscripts and records in the collections of the New York State Library and the State Archives, Dr. Gehring and the staff and volunteers of the New Netherland Project have revealed information that stands to change the way we understand our history. Encompassing what is now a large part of the northeastern United States, the early Dutch colony lies at the

roots of much of our nation's modern history.

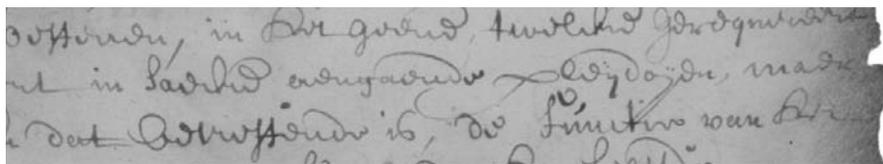
Peter Douglas presents an account of the New Netherland Project and the challenges, setbacks, disappointments, and discoveries of scholars working to uncover this early history, from Jacob Goelet in the 18th century to Russell Shorto in 2004. This story may well give you new insights into the multi-cultural, multi-faith, entrepreneurial, and dynamic Dutch colonial culture that shaped America.

Loretta Ebert  
Director, New York State Research Library

New  
York State  
Library

The Annals of New Netherlands is a publication series developed by the New Netherland Institute, formerly Friends of the New Netherland Project, to enhance awareness of the Dutch history of colonial America





## “One of the Best-Kept Secrets in American History”

In the prologue to *The Island at the Center of the World: The Epic Story of Dutch Manhattan and the Forgotten Colony That Shaped America*,<sup>2</sup> Russell Shorto describes an early visit to the New York State Library, the home of the New Netherland Project. He says that to reach the Project’s quarters he had to find the library’s “missing floor.” It seems “missing” because the “eight” elevator button is disabled as there is no public access to this floor. The visitor to this bibliographic twilight zone must first get permission, then follow a roundabout route via an internal elevator and, finally, pad through the hushed carpeted acres of restricted book stacks. It seems that anything connected with the Dutch in America is harder to find than it should be. It is, says the author, “a nice metaphor for the way history has overlooked the Dutch period.”<sup>3</sup> It is this obscurity that the New Netherland Project set out to change through meticulous translation of the administrative records of the colony.

The Dutch period in North America began in 1609 with Henry Hudson’s exploration of the river that would eventually be given his name. The New World “province” of the Netherlands extended from the Connecticut River to Delaware Bay, comprising much of the current states of New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, and western Connecticut. It thus represents a significant slice of this continent, and yet its historical role in the development of this country has been little known. Today this important central region of the eastern United States still contains scores of communities whose names are of Dutch origin, and so its inhabitants must surely live with the constant quiet subliminal awareness that there is some lost part of their

history, something long submerged and only vaguely known.

Those who are aware of this country's Dutch era understand that it has undeservedly been a historical backwater for lack of usable primary source materials for critical examination and interpretation. In 1974 Dr. Louis Leonard Tucker, then State Historian of New York, lamented "the primitive state of this area of American historiography." He quotes George Zabriskie, who put it succinctly in 1971: "The story of New Netherland is one of the best-kept secrets in American history." "And so it is," adds Tucker. "American libraries bulge with accounts of the English phase of our colonial history, especially of the founding and settlement of New England, but they are conspicuously lacking in works on New Netherland."<sup>4</sup>

It was becoming clear that the story of New Netherland warranted a more extensive analysis. But how was that to be achieved? The answer was the New Netherland Project and the translations of Charles Gehring. To understand the importance of this work it is necessary to see how things were before.

## A Lost World

Until recently a schoolchild's—or anyone else's for that matter—knowledge of colonial America was typically limited to the long-familiar Anglocentric story. Even the usually better informed Bill Maher said on his television show, "America was started in Massachusetts... Massachusetts, Philadelphia, and Virginia..."<sup>5</sup> In 2000 historian Firth Haring Fabend, in her criticism of Ric Burns' film *New York: A Documentary History*, excoriated the filmmaker and so-called experts appearing in the film over "the deplorable state of ignorance concerning New Netherland, which unfortunately is not limited to this film, but is found in our very textbooks, our very classroom lectures."<sup>6</sup> The website of the New Netherland Project puts it thus: "New Netherland got underway at about the same time the Pilgrims were settling Cape Cod and the Jamestown colony was establishing itself in Virginia, but you wouldn't

know that from most history books.”<sup>7</sup> The implicit question is obvious: what was in the huge space in between—just wilderness and Indians? The English colonies are always endorsed as the unique beginnings of American society. Tucker writes that just a glance through textbooks on colonial American history shows how one-sided the treatment has been. “The story of early New York,” he says, “. . . is generally sketched in broad, superficial strokes until the English assume control, at which point the scenario is developed in lavish detail.”<sup>8</sup>

Once, historians of colonial America dismissed the Dutch colony in a few lines or relied on English sources, which naturally portrayed it from an adversarial stance. After all, the English were commercial rivals, and for much of the late seventeenth century were engaged in the Anglo-Dutch Wars for control of the seas and trade routes. The English got to tell their American story, while the Dutch, their language, and their once-thriving colony, withered into three centuries of shadows and distortion. It has been said that Adriaen van der Donck’s *Beschryvinge van Nieuw-Nederlant* (*Description of New Netherland*) of 1655 would have been hailed as one of the great works of American colonial literature had it not been written in Dutch. As Joyce Goodfriend puts it, the Dutch “surrendered control over not only the sword, but the pen.”<sup>9</sup>

In the early nineteenth century, it was the whimsical pen of Washington Irving that did a disservice to the Dutch when, the satire of his droll histories being misread, his quaint caricature characters entered the general imagination and were construed as fact. The cultural heritage of the Dutch was treated with amused condescension, boiled down to the fanciful buffoonery of its Knickerbocker image. To quote Joyce Goodfriend again: “The Anglocentric rendering of the history of New York and adjacent regions reduced the Dutch to comic figures, relics of a remote past, instead of portraying them as actors in a drama of empire.”<sup>10</sup> And, incredibly, Ask Yahoo! can even say today,

The English got to tell their American story, while the Dutch, their language, and their once-thriving colony, withered into three centuries of shadows and distortion.

“History tells us that the people of New Amsterdam were canny traders and wore funny pants.”<sup>11</sup> There is less excuse now for making ludicrous generalizations about the Dutch in America and for marginalizing their story, but clearly we still have a long way to go.

New Netherland has been called “the forgotten colony,” “a lost world,” and “history’s debutante.”<sup>12</sup> The reasons for this veiled role are not hard to fathom. First, the records are in seventeenth century Dutch, making them impenetrable to all but a handful of scholars who specialize in this rarefied linguistic interest. Despite fractional early translations, this simple language barrier eclipsed the Dutch story, preventing historians from giving it its full and rightful exposure. Early translations of parts of the Dutch records have been available for a long time, but they are incomplete, and most are flawed. The result was that the vast space between the English-held lands, the “Middle Colonies,” was largely overlooked and the facts long neglected or garbled by contemporary English versions. The story of the New World became the account of what happened in the colonies to the north and south of New Netherland.

Secondly, in any conflict the victors write the history books. This means the English, who took over the Dutch colony, provisionally in 1664 and then permanently in 1674. New Amsterdam became New York, and the sun set on the Dutch trading empire in North America. When the administrative papers of New Netherland were turned over to the English, the new rulers kept them for purposes of legal continuity, especially for land titles, but official records and transactions were thenceforth in English. For all the struggling cultural persistence of the Dutch, it is likely that, within a generation following the takeover, the documents of New Netherland would have become indecipherable to those now running the colony and of less and less interest and consequence.

## Diverse Dangers and Misfortunes

Like any good bureaucracy, the Dutch administration kept copious records. These include Council Minutes, which are the records of the

executive, legislative, and judicial activities of the colonial government in Manhattan dealing with the affairs of the entire colony. The Council created laws and helped the Director General enforce them. It also served as a judicial panel for capital cases, heard the appeals of lower courts, and was the local court for New Amsterdam until 1653. The register of the Provincial Secretary contains court depositions, bonds, leases, deeds, and other legal instruments, forming the legal basis for land titles. The records contain matters of local communities as well as those dealing with various regions of New Netherland as a whole, such as Delaware and the Netherlands Antilles. There are also laws and ordinances and correspondence between the Council, especially the Director General, and various individuals, officers, and the board of the West India Company back in Amsterdam.

The story of the New Netherland Project is inextricably fused with these documents. They are its raw material. Had they survived in perfect condition, the translators' hurdles would still have been substantial. However, the documents suffered many brushes with destruction over the centuries, rendering them physically very difficult to work with. Translators faced, and still face, two basic problems—the translation process itself and the poor condition of the extant manuscripts.

After passing into the hands of the English, the records endured countless hazards. The first major losses probably occurred during the 1686 merger of the New England colonies known as the Dominion of New England. Two years later New York and both New Jerseys joined. The Dutch records were moved to Boston, its administrative center, and when the short-lived Dominion failed in 1690, the records were shipped back to New York. It can only be imagined what was left behind or lost on these journeys. The Council Minutes from 1648 to 1652, probably contained in one book, are missing. Charles Gehring, Director of the New Netherland Project, has semi-seriously speculated that this volume tumbled from one of the jouncing wagons on the way to or from Boston.

Civil unrest and urban strife can mean an uncertain life for official records. They may be regarded as symbolic of an abhorred government,

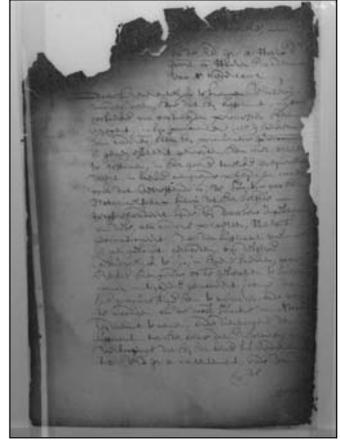
or they may suffer collateral damage amid the confusion and disorder. During the slave insurrection in 1741 in New York City, a fire broke out in the fort where the Dutch records were kept. To save them, the Governor ordered that the windows be broken and the documents thrown into the street. Inevitably, many were lost, and there are accounts of papers seen blowing down the street in a strong wind. The documents spent much of the Revolutionary War in the holds of English warships, the *Duchess of Gordon* and the *Warwick*, moored in New York harbor and consequently faced many nautical perils, including dampness and the gnawing of rats. Dr. Gehring has translated many pages edged with teeth marks.

After the diverse dangers of weather and warfare, relocation and rebellion, mold and mildew, rot and rodents, and varying amounts of wear and tear, neglect, carelessness, and indifference, the documents went to the Secretary of State's office in New York. When Albany became the capital in 1797, the records were moved to the Secretary's new office there. The restless documents were again moved to the Manuscripts Division of the New York State Library in 1881. However, with brutal irony, it turned out that the papers were far from safe there for it was their storage in the library that led to the worst misfortune of all to befall them.

In March 1911 the west end of the State Capitol in Albany burned. The calamity was all the greater because this was then the site of the State Library. The catastrophic fire was "the greatest library disaster of modern times,"<sup>13</sup> destroying some 450,000 books and 270,000 manuscripts, some of the latter being Dutch colonial papers. Those that were not burned up were singed or otherwise damaged. What remained of the records, once the fire was extinguished, were heaps of baked and charred papers, water-damaged and frozen into black clumps, so many of them now little but brittle ovals with the corners and margins blackened or burned away. Even documents that were not exposed to the flames suffered heat damage. What had been black ink on white paper one day, on the next had turned into light brown ink on beige paper. There is some irony in how so many of the Dutch

records survived. The English records, considered more important and thus stored on higher and more easily accessed shelves, fell on top of the Dutch documents and protected them.

Even before the fire, the existing documents were not a full inventory of the records. While there is a fairly comprehensive body of records, with some gaps, from 1646 to 1674, the minute books prior to Willem Kieft's directorship (1638-47) are missing. It is believed that they were taken back to the Netherlands and were lost when the West India Company's records were discarded in 1674. Despite the losses, primary source information on the Dutch colonies is not lacking. In fact, some 12,000 pages have survived, now preserved in the New York State Archives. The excess of paperwork customary of bureaucracy is fortunate for scholars today, given the number of Dutch documents that failed to make it to the twenty-first century. For all that has been lost, the body of existing documents forms a large, tantalizing, and exciting collection of hitherto little explored fundamental records of this Dutch colonial society—official governmental records that are more fascinating than that label suggests, being the very fabric of the colony's life in all its rich and essential human detail.



Though singed and brittle, many of the Dutch colonial papers survived the 1911 fire at the State Capital in Albany.

In fact, some 12,000 pages have survived, now preserved in the New York State Archives.

## Early Translation Attempts

Over the last two centuries, several people made an attempt to organize and translate these papers. The first took place in the mid-eighteenth

century by Jacob Goelet (1689-1769), the bilingual son of a schoolmaster and bookseller. Goelet made selective translations of old records as well as Dutch wills and other documents in his official capacity following his 1754 appointment by Acting Governor James DeLancey as “Interpreter and Translator of Low Dutch, both for the Province of New York and all its courts.”<sup>14</sup> The first concerted effort to make the documents accessible for historical research was made in 1818 when Governor Dewitt Clinton commissioned Adriaen van der Kemp to translate the records.<sup>15</sup> But Van der Kemp’s work was unreliable thanks to his failing eyesight, numerous mistranscriptions and mistranslations, and the omission without editorial comment of passages that he considered dull or inconsequential. Though never published, this work nevertheless offered the only access to the New Netherland period throughout much of the nineteenth century, and secondary works that relied on Van der Kemp should have been used with great care.

The largest body of work was achieved by Edmund O’Callaghan (1797-1880), an Irish-born Canadian doctor, journalist, and political reformer, who in 1848 gave up medicine to accept the post of archivist of the state of New York. O’Callaghan devoted himself with indefatigable energy to the publication of documents relating to the colonial period. Before doing his own translations, he went so far in the 1850s as to dismantle and re-assemble the original Dutch record books in accordance with his ideas of chronology and record type, destroying forever their archival integrity. The forty-eight Dutch volumes were rebound as twenty-two numbered volumes, each with an introduction and index. As a translator, O’Callaghan was an improvement over Van der Kemp, but his lack of knowledge of seventeenth century material culture was a distinct limitation. Evaluating these translators in 1974, Peter Christoph, then Head of Manuscripts and Special Collections at the New York State Library, wrote: “Not only is the style of O’Callaghan strained by following the Dutch sentence structure word by word; more importantly, it is inaccurate in translating obscure and archaic terms, misspellings, and idioms.”<sup>16</sup>

Berthold Fernow (1837-1908) succeeded O’Callaghan. By 1883 he

had published his translations of three volumes, but they contained only records that Fernow considered significant, and he divided his translations into three geographical groupings, losing thereby all sense of contextual connection and continuity.

For all the admirable scholarly zeal displayed here, the work of these early translators is selective, including only a small part of the total New Netherland archives—about twenty-five percent according to Dr. Gehring.<sup>17</sup> Their attempts were gallant and ambitious, but also unreliable, “disappointing” (Tucker), and limited by their imperfect understanding of the seventeenth century Dutch experience, culture, and terminology. In addition, early translators sometimes censored or modified the documents. According to Dr. Gehring, “Personal matters, domestic records, litigation between individuals, and anything considered salacious or offensive to nineteenth century translators were passed over.”<sup>18</sup>

Systematic, careful transcription and translation of the documents were not undertaken until this task was approached by Arnold J.F. Van Laer (1869-1955), a learned Dutch immigrant, who became an archivist in the State Library in 1899. In 1910, dissatisfied with the previous shaky interpretations of the Dutch records, Van Laer decided to try his hand at translating and editing them himself. His plan was to produce a completely new series of translations, having concluded the work up to then was wanting. He judged Van der Kemp’s work “so poor that it could not be considered at all;” Fernow’s was “unsatisfying;” and O’Callaghan made “errors both of omission and commission.”<sup>19</sup>

Van Laer’s work has earned him the status of the brightest star in this early scholarly constellation. While he judiciously consulted the spotty work of his predecessors, he relied on his own encyclopedic background in languages and history, including the language and customs of the Dutch in the seventeenth century. Although the trauma of the 1911 fire made his work so much more arduous, his profound learning enabled him to decipher the meaning of misspelled words and ungrammatical constructions, and he was able to recreate the style of colonial Dutch writers in modern English. This became his life’s work until he retired

in 1939. Translations of twelve volumes of local records, not part of the New Netherland corpus, were published in his lifetime, and his translations of the first four volumes of the New Netherland archives were published long after his death.

The huge tragedy of the Capitol fire that caused the loss of so many manuscripts, as well as his translations, was heartbreaking to Van Laer, who until that fateful day had been working with good quality documents that were now ruined or gone. Van der Kemp's translation was destroyed, "but as the translations were imperfect, their loss is not serious."<sup>20</sup> O'Callaghan's survived. Van Laer salvaged many of the damaged documents over the three days of the fire and personally inspected every shovelful of debris as it was removed, fearing the loss of the smallest of vital scraps. That so many documents were saved can in large part be attributed to his knowledge of their location and appearance, as well as to his great efforts in the recovery process. His intimate acquaintance with the documents was crucial in enabling him, as no one else could have, to reconstruct the text of those that were damaged.

Of all the volumes of records, only the first was completely destroyed, along with its translation, as it was on Van Laer's desk on the morning of the fire. Volumes five to ten suffered the most damage because of their location above the other Dutch records. The Council Minutes in volume ten, containing more than a thousand pages and covering the years 1662-64, had three inches burned away at the top of each document, and several lines at the top of every page of volume six were lost. The result is that many of the current translations have gaps that even the best conjectures of the New Netherland Project staff cannot fill.

After Van Laer's death in 1955, any scheme for translating these Dutch records was all but forgotten. They were to remain, literally, a closed book for another nineteen years. Until the translations done by the New Netherland Project staff, historians had little choice but to rely on the small portion of the Dutch records that had so far been translated. For want of anything better, they were widely used, despite their deficiencies and omissions. Van Laer did his best, but most of the documents remained locked in their original language. A thorough

disclosure of Dutch America would have to wait.

The work that Van Laer accomplished was finally published in 1974 under the auspices of the Holland Society of New York, stimulating a welcome renewed interest in the manuscripts. This was not the only vital role that the Holland Society played in the creation of the Project, for Ralph DeGroff Sr., a trustee of the Society, was instrumental in the establishment of the Project. Peter Christoph of the State Library contacted Ralph DeGroff, who got in touch with fellow Holland Society member Cortlandt van Rensselaer Schuyler. Schuyler introduced DeGroff to Nelson Rockefeller, who, although no longer Governor, still had influence and connections. The result was the underwriting of the initial funding of the New Netherland Project. Christoph had money to hire a translator for a year.

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And clearly it was time. Dr. Tucker heralded the publication of Van Laer’s translations by asserting in the preface that it was time to end “the intellectual blackout which has darkened the early history of the Empire State.” He fervently hoped that Van Laer’s *New York Historical Manuscripts: Dutch* would bring this much needed illumination. “If not,” he said, “the search must continue.”<sup>21</sup> Fortunately, the search was over.

## Charles Gehring and the New Netherland Project

Historian and librarian Peter Christoph wrote, “When I became curator of historical manuscripts at the New York State Library, I found it frustrating to have in my custody tens of thousands of ancient Dutch documents that nobody could read.”<sup>22</sup> It was an auspicious and fateful meeting when Christoph made the acquaintance of Charles Gehring, a scholar with a doctorate in Germanic linguistics, at a history conference in the early 1970s.

Charles Gehring seemed the ideal choice to be involved in the

rekindled translation project, though it could easily not have happened. Dr. Gehring has admitted, "It was the farthest thing from my mind to become a translator but out of necessity I took the job. They said they had money for one year. I figured I'd look for a job in the meanwhile and that would be it."<sup>23</sup> In the mid-1960s Gehring had been a Fulbright scholar in Freiburg, Germany. He had received a fellowship to study Dutch at Indiana University, had been a research assistant at the Instituut voor Dialectologie in Amsterdam (now the Meertens Instituut) in 1971, and was an instructor in German and linguistics at the University at Albany. Moreover, his 1973 doctoral dissertation at Indiana University was entitled, *The Dutch Language in Colonial New York: An Investigation of a Language in Decline and its Relationship to Social Change*. "It is a fascinating period," said Gehring. "I've always thought the Dutch history of New York has been given short shrift by historians and scholars. It's as if they weren't here."<sup>24</sup>

This association of Dr. Gehring with Peter Christoph was the first step that led to the establishment in September 1974 of the New Netherland Project, under the sponsorship of the New York State Library and the Holland Society of New York, and with the thirty-five-year-old Gehring as translator and editor of New York colonial documents. After thirty-five years, since the retirement of A.J.F. Van Laer in 1939, there was once more a translator of Dutch records. Charles Gehring's complex, demanding, and clearly long-term task was now to resuscitate the translation project and to help put the complete story of New Netherland squarely in the limelight.

The Project's purpose is to translate and edit for publication the surviving archival records of New Netherland created by the central administration of the colony, a major source for the study of early history, government, and culture in the Middle Atlantic and adjacent states. It has been an intense decades-long labor, continuing where Van Laer left off and reviewing these earlier translations in light of current knowledge. The focus is one corpus of documents—the official records comprising the remains of the archives kept in the Provincial Secretary's office in the fort in New Amsterdam, covering the whole of New

Netherland, not just the events on Manhattan Island. Despite what is often assumed, the Project is not translating every Dutch document around. There are numerous other collections, including those in Kingston, New York City, and California. A secondary activity of the Project is to collect copies of these seventeenth century Dutch manuscripts relating to New Netherland in other repositories, the idea being that centralizing the source material at the New York State Library will both support the translation Project and provide scholars with a single research location. Another objective is to publish New Netherland documents online, starting with volumes of translations no longer in print.

Charles Gehring, the Project's Director, and his staff are well aware that they are the latest torchbearers in a great enterprise to unbolt a new window onto American history. The torch is borne, too, by the New Netherland Institute, established in 2005. The New Netherland Institute was originally set up in 1986 as Friends of New Netherland to support and promote the Project and help maintain its financial security, as well as to help advance interest in the Dutch role in America's history. In its effort to push the Project's visibility, the Institute is devoted to increasing awareness of New Netherland through public programs, services, and publications. Institute President Charles Wendell asserts that on the work of the Project "rests most if not all that has been achieved in New Netherland scholarship to date."<sup>25</sup>

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## A Shaky Existence

Nothing happens without money, and from the start, the Project's financial support reflected the diversity of interest in the Dutch records. Of necessity, it came from a variety of sources that included individual and business donors, government agencies, and societies, including the

New York State Library, the Holland Society, the New York State American Revolution Bicentennial Commission, the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Even so, financial support was sporadic in the early days, and the Project led a shaky existence, living from hand to mouth, grant to grant. Dr. Gehring and his staff bemoaned the fact that scrounging for money in endless grant proposals and fundraising campaigns was draining much time and effort from the Project's real business.

Funding became marginally easier, though still precarious, as the value of the Project's activities was publicized and grasped. Even so, the struggle for money remains, and staff must still take time away from translating to shake the cup and work on grant applications—a regular and, one would think, by now superfluous ritual to prove that what they have accomplished over more than three decades is still worth backing. The State Library provides computers and pays the electric bill. Dr. Gehring was eventually added to the state payroll, though he must rely on grants to pay his assistants, fund travel and supplies, and cover administrative costs. The lack of consistent and dependable support is a grave matter, and without this there will always be problems. The instability of grants has meant staff cutbacks, and talented help has been deterred from joining the Project because of the insecurity of its financing. Without the distraction of relentless fundraising, the translations would now be much closer to completion.

## The Translation Process

The Project has had three homes, all located in the New York State Library, beginning as little more than a desk and a few bookshelves in an alcove in the Manuscripts and Special Collections section in the Education Building. When the State Library moved to the Cultural Education Center in 1978, the Project was at first quartered on the eleventh floor. As this environment lacks windows, it was a delight for

the Project to shift again in 1988, this time to the “missing floor. The heart of the Project now is an unpretentious cramped room whose windows, appropriately, offer a view east over the Hudson River, where it all started in 1609, and south to the Catskill Mountains, with their lingering associations of the Dutch colonial past. A keen imagination might yet see Fort Orange nestled amid the ugly concrete tangle of highway overpasses far below.

This space seems too humble and confined an environment for the work accomplished here and the epic production that has emerged. It is a simple shrine to Dutch culture. The walls are covered with old maps of New Netherland and New Amsterdam. There are postcard images of Stuyvesant and Admirals Tromp and De Ruyter and a calming reproduction of Vermeer’s *The Milkmaid*. There is a telephone, a computer tower and screen, a good lamp, and a sick-looking plant. A stack of classical CDs sits next to a radio/CD player, and on and under the desk and spilling onto tables and book trucks outside are all forms of paper—magazines, correspondence, files, books, notes, posters, publication announcements, museum brochures—in the orderly disorder of the dedicated scholar lacking adequate space for his needs. The nearby shelves are tight with hundreds of books in many languages and assorted reference works. Closest of all are the well-worn multivolume dictionaries, the *Middel Nederlandsch Woordenboek* and the monumental *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal*.

In all these years thousands of delicate pages have passed through Dr. Gehring’s hands. He takes a document now from a filing cabinet drawer. The bindings are long gone, the leather covers and O’Callaghan’s front and back matter having been discarded after the fire, leaving only the documents themselves. Before the fire damage they measured nine by thirteen and a half inches and are now between transparent protective sheets. When he gently removes the document from its folder, one is not quite sure if the smoky smell of the 1911 fire again hangs faintly in the air. If it’s still there, Dr. Gehring says he doesn’t notice it any more.

The fragile paper is baked to a tan color and scorched black and

cracked around its edges. To the modern eye, the page looks lopsided. To prevent the insertion of additional text, it was customary for the Dutch clerks to write to the very edge of the page, leaving a wide margin on the left. The fire damage thus means that every other page suffers loss at the end of each line. The text is first painstakingly transcribed and then translated, the form and meaning of the writing wrung from the faint curlicues of ink at a rate depending on the nature of the text and the condition of the manuscript. Gradually the centuries rewind, and as the translator reads, the words, lives, and events of a distant era take shape and seem to hang and shimmer momentarily above the page.

To the appalling physical condition of the pages, other problems must be added, to such a degree that, for the uninitiated looking at these poor discolored pages crammed with bewildering squiggles, one stands in awe of the fact that the attempt to decipher them was even made and that so much has been achieved. The translator's art is a difficult and frequently dissatisfying one. Skill and patience are required to grasp the subtle layers of meaning within the words and to extract and convert the intended sense of the writing, balancing the literal meaning of the original with the correct and natural equivalent expression in English. Add to these customary problems of the translator those met when confronting a language spoken centuries ago, and it becomes much more than a cultural and linguistic issue, it becomes a historical one, too.

The translator must have an acute cultural sensitivity and be steeped in the history and customs of the writers.

Like any language, Dutch has changed in the last 350 years, leaving its distant colonial forebear frozen as it was back in the seventeenth century, so knowledge of modern Dutch is only part of the answer. Historical documents contain words that have not survived to the present day. Some refer to objects and concepts unknown or unfamiliar to twenty-first century readers, and the meaning of others subtly shifts over time through a variety of linguistic processes. The significance and usage of a word must thus be carefully derived as much from the historical context of the document

as from the dictionary. The translator must have an acute cultural sensitivity and be steeped in the history and customs of the writers. “This work is a combination of linguistics and history,”<sup>26</sup> affirms Charles Gehring.

Some of the writers, including Stuyvesant, used numerous metaphors and puns, exacerbating the translator’s headaches with the need to distinguish the real from the figurative. The orthography is not English, and this adds an initial unfamiliarity to the usually florid and sometimes challenging penmanship, which is very different from German *Frakturschrift* and English secretary hands. The Dutch had devised their own distinctive secretarial style, which is evident from the manuscripts, though variations and irregularities were inevitable and often attributable to the techniques and personalities of numerous individual clerks over the many decades. Often phonetic spelling occurs rendering the same word or name in a variety of ways, in the same and in different documents. Capital letters are tossed in at random, and this, along with idiosyncratic ideas of



It takes skill and patience to discover the daily life of a vibrant 17<sup>th</sup> century society from documents written in a centuries-old language.

PHOTO: DIETRICH GEHRING.



Dr. Charles Gehring, translator and Director of the New Netherland Project, has brought the impact of the early Dutch colony on American history out of the shadows and thrown new light onto how that dynamic colonial culture shaped the nation’s foundations.

PHOTO: DIETRICH GEHRING..



Assistant Director of the New Netherland Project Dr. Janny Venema is a Dutch native whose access to the early Dutch language has been invaluable in the translation and publication of the early documents.

PHOTO: DIETRICH GEHRING.

punctuation or its absence altogether, adds to the difficulty of knowing where one sentence ends and the next begins.

Translating is only part of the work, for after this comes editing and more. The finished work must be guided through all the stages of publication. In 1987 Charles Gehring stoically commented, “Once the translating is done, the real work begins—indexing, annotating, and writing the introduction. I can’t imagine an end to this project.”<sup>27</sup> Time and money have been saved by producing page-ready copy for Syracuse University Press, though this puts a greater burden on the staff to provide perfect text. Happily, Dr. Gehring has had help over the years from a parade of interns and, most notably, since 1985, the invaluable expert assistance of his colleague and now Assistant Director Dr. Janny Venema. She is a Dutch native, author of a book on Albany during the Dutch period, and translator of deacons’ accounts of Albany’s First Dutch Reformed Church from 1652 to 1674. Dr. Venema has grad-

uated from transcribing the documents to translating them, too, and her access to the primary materials was a huge advantage in the writing of her book on seventeenth century Beverwijck. Since 1988 the demanding and essential tasks of research, editing, and indexing the translations have been accomplished by Dr. Martha D. Shattuck.

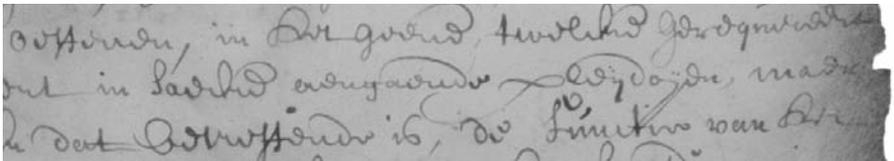
We cannot ignore the human touch. One of the covert delights of translating is getting acquainted with the documents’ writers—the personality of each as revealed through his writing. Dr. Venema says: “I’m so close to the person who wrote this. It’s the part of my job that I like the most.” Pointing to the exaggerated flourish of a signature on an ink-blotchy page, she says, “I’m sitting at the same distance from the paper, looking at the same words. There’s a whole story behind this

moment.”<sup>28</sup> There is a strong personal relationship here, and Dr. Venema can’t help but wonder about the writers with whom she might spend days or weeks, speaking of them as if they were old family friends, each with his quirks and individuality. Was this one, at that moment, with the candle burning low, in a hurry, sleepy, drunk, in love, or bored with so much officialese? And perhaps we can empathize and wonder a little deeper, detecting dimly what was beyond the window as he pauses to sharpen his quill—a boisterous crowd below, a cart rumbling by, the sound of gulls in the harbor, and far away, the sharp horizon where a ship bound for *patria*, the old country, is running with the tide.



Editor and Researcher for the New Netherland Project, Dr. Martha Shattuck leads the research, editing, and indexing of translations.

PHOTO: DIETRICH GEHRING.



## The Achievements of the Project

The translations uncover hundreds of intimate vignettes and the workings of a long defunct society now revealed and close-focused. As the Project’s website says, the translations give “access to hearts, minds, and concerns of the men and women of New Netherland.” Some accounts are as pompous as only official documents can be, and yet for all that the scenes are enlivened by the novelty of their historical perspective and our fresh glimpses of a departed world. Some succeed

in being animated and engaging beneath the stilted bureaucratic prose, the lives and a way of life now discernible with much captivating human detail, awaiting recognition and review, a rich new vein of raw material for enlightened and inspired historians to notice, investigate, analyze, and integrate into their teaching and writing.

While they are administrative records and not social history, a careful examination reveals a lively image of this aspect of the era, the daily life of a vibrant 17<sup>th</sup> century society. Charles Gehring remarks: “. . . the social history is bubbling up between the lines.”<sup>29</sup> As each volume is published, it offers access to a fairer perception of the country’s early history, the story of a non-English company colony containing a broad spectrum of nationalities, races, and religions, uncovered now from many viewpoints—archaeology, architecture, anthropology, politics, material culture, criminal justice, relations with the Indians, economics, and agriculture. As Charles Gehring put it, “The New Netherland documents fill in more and more of [the] picture, the picture of day-to-day existence. If you think of political history as the skeleton of the story, then social history is what puts flesh on the bones.”<sup>30</sup>

One major problem was recognized from the start. For all its seemingly ascetic, almost monastic aura, the Project could not succeed as a purely “ivory tower” operation. The objective was both to create the material and make sure that the world found out about it.

Unfortunately, the impact of such projects in the humanities is not always immediately apparent, for these undertakings have a slow fuse, creating very deliberately the building blocks for generations of scholars and not making sparks or quick headlines. To fulfill their mission and stay sane, the Project staff require communication and interaction with the world they are helping. In 1991 Dr. Gehring neatly summed up the task he faced, then seventeen years into the Herculean work and God knows how many from its conclusion. “The challenge,” he said, “was to transfer the perception of translating seventeenth century Dutch as an exotic exercise into a means of understanding American heritage.”<sup>31</sup> The challenge is more than just adding volumes to library shelves but to broadcast the availability of this new source material far and wide.

## Seminars

Beginning in 1979 the Project, in conjunction with the New Netherland Institute, furthered interest in its work and in the period's history by organizing the annual Rensselaerswijck Seminars—named for the historic patroonship in the Albany region—on numerous topics relating to New Netherland. For all the work thus far, few knew of the Project's existence and achievements, and that had to be changed. After five years it was time to go public.

Originally the seminars lacked an operating budget and the scale was small. Local scholars and researchers gave talks on the history of the Albany area, and the seminars were open to the public at no charge. Eventually it became clear that a wider horizon was necessary, and the seminars were opened up as a forum to present and share research on the broad theme of the Dutch experience in the New World. The seminars continue, offering an outlet for each year's fresh accumulation of New Netherland scholarship. Speakers are invited, both from the US and abroad, often from the Netherlands, to give papers on aspects of an annual theme.

## Newsletter

Another form of outreach, since 1985, is *De Nieu Nederlandse Mercurius*, a quarterly newsletter that contains news of the Project and details of associated activities, including exhibitions, conferences, publications, sources of information, general interest articles on Dutch matters, and research in progress. In this and other ways, a community of scholarship and public interest is fostered and maintained on both sides of the Atlantic, in Netherlands old and new.

## Historical Interests and Community Resource

The work of the Project has proven of use to a variety of entities with historical interests. These include the city of Albany, whose mayor has appointed Drs. Gehring and Venema to committees developing a historic trail and identifying future sites for archaeological excavations. Specialists in restoration and preservation have consulted Project staff

concerning Dutch barns, descriptions of house interiors, and decoration. Manuscript curators and archivists nationwide have been helped in the organization and description of their Dutch holdings, and museums in the US and abroad have received support in furthering various research projects. Staff have taught courses and given numerous lectures. Assistance has been given with television documentaries, museum exhibits, books, newspaper articles, field archaeology, and lawsuits. Dr. Gehring has even exposed forgeries in the manuscript market. While time-consuming and a distraction from the essential business of translation, such activities help raise the Project's profile and influence in many areas, which is equally vital.

### School Curriculum Resource

It was always considered important to make this source material available to the public and to schools. To inject the information into the world of formal children's education, Project staff worked with local schools and helped develop teaching guides and fourth and seventh grade "Curriculum Packets Using Primary Documents." This enables students and teachers to make use of these new primary materials in learning about the early Dutch settlers.

### Academic Resource

Most crucial has been the effort to penetrate the halls of academe, engaging the scholars who write the history books, getting the real Dutch story told within the broader scope of the country's formative years by writers for whom the heretofore impenetrable language of the source material was the sole impediment. Years pass. The words pile up. The translations amass. Shelves practically groan under their weight. Yet all this painstaking labor and abundant output is in vain unless the translations are made use of, absorbed into a new continuum of America's story, and eagerly pounced upon by historians and writers who can finally get to grips with what has for so long been mostly inaccessible and rescue the Dutch contribution from "the dustbin of American history."<sup>32</sup>

It seems to be working. Profiting from the availability of new information as the colony emerged from its shadowland, the more recent books on New Netherland have been markedly different from the older histories. In 1987 John J. McCusker wrote: “The recent spate of studies of the Dutch in America ... has been provoked by the efforts of archivists to make Dutch-language documents more accessible.”<sup>33</sup> This trend is also noted by Firth Haring Fabend, who brings to our attention “the quantity of research—both dissertations and published works—that has appeared in the last quarter century. This is for the most part research inspired by the New Netherland Institute’s [sic] translations and/or re-translations of the documents of the seventeenth-century colony.”<sup>34</sup> New Netherland is our new Cinderella, once undeservedly neglected and now, aided by the Project’s efforts, lifted from anonymity to respect and significance.

### The Search for Letters Home

It is worth noting an important enduring dream of the translators, for it carries the prospect of future work. While official records relating to New Netherland in the Hague, Amsterdam, and other Dutch repositories have been investigated and copied for the Project’s purposes, what is still lacking is the private correspondence that the colonists sent to their friends and relatives back home. Personal letters from ordinary settlers would reveal a great deal about life in New Netherland and would add another—and unofficial—element to the colony’s story. To locate such documents is an ambition of the Project, though a systematic search has never been undertaken. Students and researchers abroad have been encouraged to look for such correspondence, but to no avail so far. These letters, which may not even have been identified as originating in New Netherland, would likely be found in local archives, historical societies, and private collections in the Netherlands. For a methodical search, a list of settlers’ family names and towns of origin would first have to be compiled. That such letters existed is well known, for by 1659 transatlantic correspondence had reached the point where Stuyvesant passed an ordinance to regulate the conveying of letters from

New Netherland and established a mail drop box in New Amsterdam for depositing letters bound for *patria*.

### Published Volumes

Nineteen volumes of the New Netherland Documents series have so far been published, representing approximately sixty-five percent of the total. The Director estimates that it will take another twenty years to fulfill the project's mission, though many variables affect such a timeline, including the condition of the material, the availability of funding, and the vigor and endurance of the staff. In 2001 journalist Paul Grondahl wrote, "The work has become Gehring's Sistine Chapel."<sup>35</sup> In fact, Michelangelo spent a mere four years on that ceiling, but we get the point.

### Honors

In 1994, twenty years after the Project's inception, Dr. Gehring's work on behalf of New Netherland was formally recognized when he was made an Officer of the Order of Orange-Nassau (*Orde van Oranje Nassau*) by the Netherlands' Queen Beatrix, a prestigious order dating from 1892 and the Dutch equivalent of the Order of the British Empire. This honor is for outstanding service to the Netherlands, and for the same reason was awarded to A.J.F. Van Laer in 1937.<sup>36</sup> The award is the highest honor the Queen can bestow on someone who is not a Dutch citizen. This recognition speaks volumes for the significance of the Project.

## What Really Happened in Old New York

We began and we end with Russell Shorto's book, of which at least three discerning reviewers have posited the "tenacious scholar" Charles Gehring as "this book's true hero."<sup>37</sup> We have here a neat scholarly symbiosis. Shorto's bestseller focused a new popular attention on the Dutch in America and simultaneously illuminated the work of the

translation project that made the book possible.

In the prologue, Shorto writes that over the last few years the work of the New Netherland Project has reached “critical mass,” the Project presumably having created sufficient translated material and earned a reputation prominent enough to sustain momentum and fuel future growth. One hopes that this is true, and that those who approve the Project’s life-sustaining grants are of the same opinion. Shorto’s book’s very existence and his admitted debt to the Project are sufficient proof of this new high point of awareness and appreciation. In the book he describes Charles Gehring and his translations as having become “the center of a modest renaissance of scholarly interest in this colony.”<sup>38</sup> It was a renaissance certainly, though given the enduring significance of this work among the comparatively limited but growing group of New Netherland historians, one trusts that “modest” will ultimately prove too modest an adjective for this inspiring accomplishment.

In 1974 the New York State Historian wrote: “Some day the obscurity surrounding the beginnings of the Empire State will pass and we shall be in a position to determine what really happened in ‘old New York.’ ”<sup>39</sup> That day dawned with the founding of the New Netherland Project. Now using the original sources in English, historians can make a more informed, objective, and balanced assessment of the Dutch impact in North America. The translation project is ongoing, and the information that has been brought to light has already contributed much to the clarification and rehabilitation of the Dutch role in America’s story. Thanks to more than thirty years of industry and diligence, the New Netherland Project has pried open the past to create a new historical dimension, allowing us to read the actual words of those no longer so enigmatic colonists, making, at last, vivid and clear this new Dutch landscape in the west.



## Endnotes

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<sup>8</sup> Tucker, op. cit. p. vii.

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<sup>17</sup> Charles T. Gehring, interview with Theodore Bouloukos II, "Yesterday—For Tomorrow," *Albany Magazine*, December 1986, pp. 37-42.

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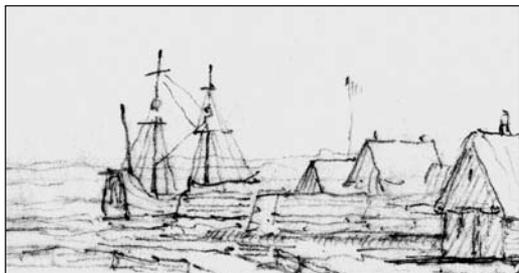
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<sup>38</sup> Shorto, op. cit., p.5

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Map of New Netherland from the 1656 edition of Adriaen van der Donck's *Beschryvinge van Nieuw-Nederlandt* (Collection of the New York State Library).

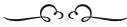
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