The Transformation of the Albany Patricians, 1778-1860

Alice P. Kenney
Historian and Author

This article appeared in New York History, 68:2 (April 1987) and is reprinted here with permission of the editor of New York History.

Though Albany is the oldest city in the original United States, and has been significant for many reasons throughout its 350 years, nearly all the histories written about it concentrate on the period before 1800. These works depend heavily on published primary sources—Joel Munsell's collections of local materials, New York colonial and Revolutionary archives edited by Edmund O'Callaghan and others, and A. J. F. van Laer's translations of Dutch court minutes. The wealth of public archives, diaries, and personal correspondence, newspapers, maps, pictures, and other materials from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries which have been accumulating in local repositories, have remained largely unexplored. There have been a few biographies of civic leaders, of men prominent in state politics and of artists, some articles and unpublished theses on various ethnic groups, and recently, considerable interest in genealogy, material culture, and historic preservation. Since 1986 marked the tricentennial of the city charter, it is time now to learn more about Albany in the last two hundred years, and to tell the full story of its long, unique heritage. This paper will suggest one possible framework for the story by showing how the Dutch-descended patrician social order of colonial Albany was transformed by the growth of the city between the Revolution and the Civil War.

First, it is necessary to define the term "patrician", which originated in ancient Rome, where it denoted the group of long-established families who governed the city. In the medieval Netherlands, the wealthy merchants who controlled the commerce of each town, grouped together to purchase privileges of self-government, or "liberties", from their feudal overlord. These patrician families dominated the city councils which, though they were not elected by the people, found that politics promoting the prosperity of the entire community usually resulted in larger profits for their businesses. Nor was membership in this ruling class static, for craftsmen who became wealthy could encourage their sons and daughters to marry into patrician families, and their grandchildren would be accepted as born patricians. As time went on, some patrician families withdrew from commerce to live on their incomes from investments in banking or the trading ventures of others, and devoted their leisure to public service, scholarship, or the arts. Dutch patricians, unlike successful English merchants, who frequently bought country estates and joined the landed gentry, usually remained in the city for several generations, and led their fellow citizens in intense loyalty to their local community.

The first settlers at Albany were fur traders and Walloon farmers sent by the Dutch West India Company in 1624, while in 1629, wealthy merchant Kiliaen van Rensselaer began to send farmers to his "patroonship" of Rensselaerswijck. This frontier community acquired the status of a formally organized town in 1652, when Governor Petrus Stuyvesant granted "Beverwijck" civic privileges, to curb the pretensions of the Van Rensselaer family to quasi-feudal powers over the entire region. The most prosperous traders were appointed magistrates, and after the English conquest, these leading citizens purchased from Governor Thomas Dongan, in 1686, a city charter providing for an appointed Mayor and an elected Common Council. The charter also granted Albany a monopoly over the fur trade, which was dominated by Dutch families such as the Schuylers, Cuylers, Bleeckers, and Wendels, who were rapidly becoming wealthy and whose children were intermarrying. For many years, mayors and common council members came almost exclusively from fur-trading families, whose combination of economic and political power marked them as patricians in the Dutch tradition, within their English form of government. Though the Albany monopoly, challenged by other communities, was overthrown by a 1726 court decision, and in the eighteenth century the Indians moved farther west, the fur-trading patricians remained civic leaders until after the Revolution.

As the upper Hudson Valley filled with farmers, a new group of merchants and craftsmen, also descended from seventeenth-century Dutch settlers, became wealthy
selling the farmers' produce and supplying them with manufactured goods. Members of such families as the Douws and Gansevoorts began to be elected to the common council in the 1730s, and silversmith Jacob C. Ten Eyck's appointment as mayor in 1748 indicates their attainment of full patrician status. Though fur trading and mercantile patricians differed over some civic issues, their children soon intermarried, and they joined together to win all possible profit from the British armies stationed in Albany during the French and Indian War. There were also in Albany from the time of the conquest a number of English military and civil officials, some of whom consolidated their position by marrying into Dutch families, particularly the landed Van Rensselaers. Others, often Scots, came as merchants, like Robert Livingston and later James Stevenson, who married respectively a Schuyler daughter and a Cuyler granddaughter, and whose children participated in civic affairs as born patricians. Some of these, like Livingston, followed their wives into the dominant Dutch Reformed congregation, but others, like Stevenson, became leaders in St. Peter's Anglican church, established by the governor in 1715, despite vigorous protests from the city government.

The built environment of colonial Albany began with Fort Orange, on which construction started in 1624 at the mouth of the Rutenkill (present Hudson Avenue) on a site now covered by approaches to the Dunn Memorial Bridge. The center of Beverwijk was its blockhouse church, constructed in 1656 at the present intersection of State Street and Broadway, and soon surrounded by Dutch-style houses, one of which remained a State Street landmark until the 1880s. In 1676, during King Philip's War, Governor Edmund Andros ordered a new fort built on the hill, at the present intersection of State and Eagle Streets, near which soldiers and small craftsmen soon built houses. A palisade from the fort to the river, along the creeks which flowed down the present Hudson and Columbia Street ravines, was maintained cooperatively by the burghers during the late 17-century French and Indian wars. Within it clustered Dutch houses, side by side with their stepped or straight gables to the street, but each with an ample garden behind, and a post in front where the family cow was tethered at night, after grazing in the common pasture south of the site of Fort Orange. Patricians and plebeians thus lived side by side in a town like those of the medieval Netherlands, where, though patricians enjoyed more luxuries like fine silverware and family portraits, all produced locally, their way of life was not essentially different.

The Albany patricians remained Dutch at heart through most of the eighteenth century, using the Dutch language at home and in church services, though the younger generation became bilingual to deal with English-speaking officials—and customers. Though they bitterly resented British speculators who flocked in during the French and Indian War, and sometimes harassed them with "nuisance" taxes and legal actions, most Albany patricians scented profit in working with English civil and military authorities. But with the outbreak of the Revolution, most of the Dutch patricians rose above former differences and rivalries among themselves to unite solidly behind the Patriot cause and expelling as Loyalists many of the intrusive British newcomers. A conspicuous exception was Mayor Abraham C. Cuyler, of an old fur-trading family, who led the city's Loyalists until he was arrested and exiled, but other branches of the Cuyler clan became dedicated and active Patriots. The patrician status of General Philip Schuyler, though resented by egalitarian New England militiamen, helped him greatly in securing supplies from the people of the upper Hudson Valley to sustain the army which eventually defeated Burgoyne. Long-standing English residents who chose to become Patriots were accepted on equal terms, like John Barclay, grandson of the first Anglican rector, who in 1778 became Albany's first Mayor under the new state government.

After the Revolution, in Albany as elsewhere, the men who had worked together to win the war continued to work together to repair the damage, create a new nation, and exploit the advantages of independence. General Philip Schuyler served in several state offices and finally as U.S. senator, and worked with his son-in-law Alexander Hamilton to secure ratification of the Constitution and organize the Federalist party in the upper Hudson region. General Abraham Ten Broeck held the office of mayor for ten years, while Leonard Gansevoort served several terms in the state Senate and his brother General Peter Gansevoort became U.S. military agent, forwarding supplies to forts in the Northwest Territory. Public service became a route to patrician status for several lawyers of plebeian origin, like Abraham and Robert Yates and John Lansing, Jr., who won election to Revolutionary committees, held various state offices, and became leading Anti-Federalists. Close associates of Governor George Clinton, both Lansing and Abraham Yates, were appointed mayor in the 1780s and 1790s, and despite their political differences with other civic leaders, they and their families were thenceforth accepted as patricians. The roster of the common council,
which remained almost exclusively Dutch until after 1800, likewise reveals a mixture of formerly patrician and plebeian families, now united by Revolutionary service, and increasingly by intermarriage.

The trend of immigration from Great Britain which had begun before the Revolution also continued to bring to Albany young men who sought to make their fortunes as merchants by participating in the patrician system. Irish emigrant Dudley Walsh, for example, went into partnership with Barent Staats, allied himself with both Dutch and English patricians by marrying a daughter of John and Madgalena Douw Stevenson, and became a respected civic leader. William James, also from Ireland, married Catherine Barbour, sister of a local editor from an Orange County family closely associated with Governor George Hamilton, and prospered in trade and land speculation in developing western New York. In 1825, James was second only to John Jacob Astor among the wealthiest merchants in New York State, and most of his eleven surviving children married into patrician families in Albany and New York City. James Kane, though unmarried, had brothers in several New York communities, who could support each other's credit in periods of stress, but he eventually failed and spent his declining years in restricted circumstances, still respected by his many friends. Making their fortunes by selling imported goods wholesale to country storekeepers and by land speculation, these merchants had ample leisure for genial coffeehouse society, comfortable family life in their beautiful homes, and genteel literary pursuits.

Nor is it possible to overlook the Van Rensselaer family, which owed its position to inheritance of the Manor of Rensselaerswijk comprising most of present-day Albany and Rensselaer Counties, as well as large tracts in Claverack in Columbia County. At the end of the eighteenth century, the manor had descended to Stephen van Rensselaer, called "The Last Patroon," who supervised his tenants from his manor house just north of the city near present-day Broadway. His younger brother Philip, whose gracious federal style home became a State Street landmark, served several terms on the common council before his nineteen years as Mayor, 1799-1816 and 1819-21. Another Philip van Rensselaer, of the younger Claverack branch of the family, moved to Cherry Hill in 1768, and bequeathed the present home, which he built in 1787, to his daughter Harriet, who lived there with her husband and cousin, General Solomon van Rensselaer. Solomon's occasional forays into city affairs were vigorous and even violent, as in 1807, when he and Lieutenant-Governor John Tayler caned each other on State Street, and in 1822, when President Monroe unleashed a storm by appointing him postmaster without consulting Senator Martin van Buren. The Van Rensselaers, especially the patroon and the mayor, contributed in many ways to the betterment of Albany, but they always retained the broader outlook of landed aristocrats, rather than the intense, parochial communal loyalty of city patricians.

Even before the Revolution, patricians with aristocratic ambitions began to surround Albany with gracious Georgian country houses—General Schuyler's "The Pastures," General John Bradstreet's "Whitehall," later owned by Leonard Gansevoort, the Van Rensselaers' Manor House and Cherry Hill. After the war, merchant princes like James Kane and political patricians like the Yates built suburban mansions on the edges of the city, of which General Abraham Ten Broeck's beautiful Federal-style home survives today as a historic house museum. Within the city, the old fort was soon demolished, along with French and Indian War and Revolutionary barracks north of the fort and storehouses along the river; the palisades surrounding the town had long since disappeared. The colonial Stadt Huys on Broadway and the Dutch Reformed and Anglican churches in State Street were outgrown, and replaced by new churches on their present sites and a combination City Hall-State Capitol on the former fort parade ground. As some—though by no means all—patrician families moved to fashionable suburban homes, they rented their old Dutch houses for shops, many of which went up in flames in seven disastrous fires in the 1790s. The substantial Federal residences which replaced them, where patrician families still in the city collected fine furniture and cherished inherited portraits and silverware, along with some surviving Dutch houses, are shown in paintings by James Eights of Albany in 1805.

Between the Revolution and the Civil War, Albany lived through a continuous population explosion, trebling from 3,506 in 1870 to 10,762 in 1810, more than redoubling to 24,238 in 1830, doubling again to 50,763 in 1850, and rising more slowly to 63,367 in 1860. Important reasons for this were the city's crossroads location on major routes to the west, its designation as the state capital after 1777, and the leading part played by its banks in the development of western New York. Albany's Dutch patricians, building in generations of experience in sophisticated mercantile activities, were
quick to follow the example of General Schuyler's son-in-law Alexander Hamilton, who established the First Bank of the United States in 1791. In 1792, they founded the Bank of Albany, with General Abraham Ten Broeck as its first president, oversubscribed its shares in two hours, and continued to control it until 1861, when it succumbed to the financial uncertainties of the Civil War. Another group of patricians with Jeffersonian leanings, including General Peter Gansevoort, incorporated the Bank of New York in 1803, and these banks, and later others, made loans and acquired assets all over northern and western New York. Through these banks, as well as through commerce and land speculation, many patrician families acquired interest and influence in frontier communities, where their children often went to live and married, sometimes returning to Albany in later life.

Albany had been recognized as a crossroads ever since the Dutch had settled at the head of navigation of the Hudson, and French and English armies had made it an objective during the colonial wars and the Revolution. The Hudson was its highway, as sturdy sloops owned by Albany patricians provided local transportation and communication, carried colonial farmers' produce to the West Indies, and after independence, voyaged as far from home as China. After Robert Fulton's Clermont, steamboats, mostly owned in New York, made travel to that city quick and easy, but the slower sloops were cheaper and more reliable for much heavy freight until the Civil War. Post-Revolutionary migration from New England to western lands brought many transients to Albany, especially in the winter when travel was easier; in the 1790s, five hundred sleighs a day often passed through the city. It was not long before patricians were investing in improved roads, such as the Great Western and Delaware Turnpikes, and encouraging the use of the latest plank and macadam (gravel) surfaces. They also patronized the makers of coaches, wagons, and sleighs—particularly "Albany cutters"—who made the city a center of vehicle manufacturing as well as of freight and passenger transportation.

Possibly with some memory of an important Netherlands tradition, probably from practical knowledge of the difficulties of repeatedly unloading boats to carry cargoes between waterways, Albany patricians were early advocates for canals in America. General Philip Schuyler, with much experience transporting military
supplies in the upper Hudson and Mohawk Valleys, in 1792 organized the Northern and Western Inland Lock Navigation Companies, to connect these rivers by short canals with Lakes Champlain and Ontario. These companies in fact completed all-water routes to the lakes, but it was still necessary to pole heavily freighted "Schenectady boats" upstream against swift currents by brute manpower, and to cart cargoes going further west around Niagara Falls. A local Yankee journalist, Elkanah Watson, first published the idea of a canal to Lake Erie, but the Albany patricians eagerly seized upon it, and enthusiastically supported DeWitt Clinton's efforts to finance and construct it. At the gala opening celebration in 1825, Albany reaped rich profits, as canal boats freighted with the produce of the entire Great Lakes region passed through its basin on their way to New York City. The canal also made moving west easier and cheaper for migrants from New England and immigrants from Europe, while promoting travel by tourists seeking pleasure or health and improving communication among members of families in different communities.

As great numbers of New Englanders passed through Albany, some of them settled down there, bringing an energetic enthusiasm for civic improvement, which the Dutch patricians, quite satisfied with their city as it was, called the "Yankee invasion." Elkanah Watson, for example, was attacked with brooms by irate Dutch housewives after he campaigned against the long waterspouts on their houses, which admittedly impeded vehicular traffic, but once cut off, spilled rain water back into their cellars. Other Yankees made themselves welcome by their industry and ingenuity, like Ezra Ames, who earned a fortune, local respect, and a national reputation painting portraits of patricians, and whose daughter married a son of William James. Ames, and many others like him, certainly advanced their careers by participation in Albany's Masonic lodges, where patricians, plebeians, and newcomers mingled fraternal, and many important business, political, and personal friendships were formed. Yankees also got acquainted with their neighbors in existing churches, primarily the Presbyterian, founded by Scots before the Revolution, though some became Dutch Reformed or Episcopal, but the small Congregational meeting-house never attracted many families. Depending for advancement primarily on their own ingenious, bustling, hard-driving pursuit of the main chance, Yankees formed families among themselves and made fortunes for their children, leaving it to the next generation to intermarry with earlier patricians.

Another Yankee, architect Philip Hooker, transformed Albany's built environment by designing public buildings in the Federal style, including the new Dutch Reformed, Episcopal, and Presbyterian churches, two banks, the state capitol (1804–09), and the city hall (1829). The original Albany Academy building (1814), reflecting the patricians' dedication to superior schooling for their sons, is now preserved in Academy Park, as the headquarters of the city Board of Education. Hooker also designed town houses for such patricians as General Peter Gansevoort and Stephen Van Rensselaer, and probably constructed some of the comfortable homes in the new "Pastures" district south of Madison Avenue, where he himself lived. He participated extensively in civic affairs, being elected alderman in 1817–19 during a brief plebeian revolt against patrician domination, and was active in several mechanics' organizations, but he apparently left no children to intermarry with patricians. His successor Henry Rector, about whose life little is known, brought the Greek Revival style to the city with the Albany Female Academy (1834) and State Hall (1835–42), now the Court of Appeals Building. Rector also designed Albany's first gothic revival church, First Presbyterian (1849), and probably two monuments to the patrician business tradition, Sunwix Hall, on the Broadway lot inherited by six generations of the Gansevoort family, and Douw Buildings on State Street.

The patrician system developed within the framework of Albany's colonial charter, as the few freeholders qualified to vote for the common council elected and re-elected, often for many terms, sons and sons-in-law of the leading Dutch families. Though craftsmen eligible to vote customarily followed patrician leaders, there were fierce contests when patricians disagreed, as in 1773, when investigation of the disputed poll for third ward alderman revealed several electors who had accepted substantial bribes. In 1778, the legislature restored the charter, vesting the choice of the mayor in the Council of Appointment, which meant that a local leader of the party in power in the state would be chosen. Those appointed were all patricians, with one brief exception, until 1821, when a new state constitution abolished the Council of Appointment, and the election of the mayor devolved upon the common council. At the same time, the base of the electorate was expanding, the state adopted universal manhood suffrage in 1826, and in 1840 a new charter provided for election of the mayor by the people, and the common council was growing, from two aldermen and two assistants for each of three wards in 1778 to two aldermen apiece from two wards in 1860.
Throughout this period, the mayors continued to be patricians or from families on the verge of becoming so, while the common council, at first also patrician, increasingly reflected the population of the wards it represented.

During these years, Albany was participating in, and sometimes leading, the development of the American political system from factions of independent gentlemen to parties with mass electorates organized by professional politicians rewarded by patronage. Differences among colonial patricians recurred in divisions between Federalists and Anti-Federalists and dissensions among groups of followers of Thomas Jefferson, while supporters of Governor George Clinton and his nephew DeWitt Clinton sought local allies. Loyalties within and antagonisms between these groups were highly personal, and individual quarrels could inflame public feeling, as in 1807, when the Solomon van Rensselaer–John Tayler canning incident set off a major riot in State Street. With the adoption of expanded suffrage, Martin van Buren and Ambrose Spencer moved to Albany from Columbia County and, with their associates, developed the system of party organization which came to be called the Albany Regency. This system, which marshalled masses of voters through professional politicians disciplined by patronage, required experienced and thoughtful, as well as adroit leadership, and Van Buren and Spencer recognized the importance of securing the support of influential patricians. Their success is indicated by Spencer’s election as mayor in 1824, by the marriage of children of both into patrician families, as well as the firm establishment of the Democratic party’s domination of city affairs, except for periods when Democrats divided among themselves.

But though many older patricians became Democrats and many newcomers aspiring to become patricians gravitated into that party, their personalities, policies, and party organization often provoked vigorous and well-organized opposition, especially in the mid-nineteenth century. In 1831, the Workingman’s Party, a plebeian protest group, joined with opponents of President Jackson and, locally, of the Albany Regency to win control of the common council and choose patrician Francis Bloodgood as mayor. Van Rensselaer-Dewitt Clinton sought local allies. Loyalties within and antagonisms between these groups were highly personal, and individual quarrels could inflame public feeling, as in 1807, when the Solomon van Rensselaer–John Tayler canning incident set off a major riot in State Street. With the adoption of expanded suffrage, Martin van Buren and Ambrose Spencer moved to Albany from Columbia County and, with their associates, developed the system of party organization which came to be called the Albany Regency. This system, which marshalled masses of voters through professional politicians disciplined by patronage, required experienced and thoughtful, as well as adroit leadership, and Van Buren and Spencer recognized the importance of securing the support of influential patricians. Their success is indicated by Spencer’s election as mayor in 1824, by the marriage of children of both into patrician families, as well as the firm establishment of the Democratic party’s domination of city affairs, except for periods when Democrats divided among themselves.

But though many older patricians became Democrats and many newcomers aspiring to become patricians gravitated into that party, their personalities, policies, and party organization often provoked vigorous and well-organized opposition, especially in the mid-nineteenth century. In 1831, the Workingman’s Party, a plebeian protest group, joined with opponents of President Jackson and, locally, of the Albany Regency to win control of the common council and choose patrician Francis Bloodgood as mayor. This temporary coalition collapsed when former supporters of President Adams, including many Yankees, joined the Whig party after 1833, but since Albany was a Masonic stronghold, many were uneasy with the new party’s Anti-Masonic component. So when former Anti-Masonic Thurlow Weed moved to Albany and became the state Whig boss, he supported the congressional aspirations of Daniel D. Barbad, a Yankee lawyer from Rochester who had entered the patriciate by marrying a daughter of Dudley Walsh. The Anti-Rent issue, the slavery question and other reform movements placed great strain on both parties, for while patricians often favored considered, gradual change, many plebeians urged immediate, drastic action with little thought of its unintended consequences. In these decades, Albany’s Yankees debated many issues vigorously in the press and on the hustings, and as their leaders worked into the existing patriciate, they gave the city its one period of strong two-party government.

As the Albany patricians extended their social order to include families of British and Yankee as well as Dutch extraction, they shifted the base of their political power to the American foundation of popular election. Entering the era of the common man, they recognized that if they were to continue to rule, their conception of the best interests of the community must articulate the wishes of all the people. “All the people,” furthermore, were becoming increasingly heterogeneous, as large numbers of Irish and other immigrants flocked in to work in the port and lumber districts and in factories. Like political leaders in other cities, the Albany patricians began to organize these immigrants to support their candidates, in a manner which adapted the family-based structure of Irish rural communities to American city wards. By 1860 a considerable proportion of names on the common council roster were Irish, and most of them were Democrats, perhaps because that party concentrated on practical politics or organization more than abstract issues of reform which meant little to new citizens. Eventually, these two systems proved to be so compatible with each other that there developed what has been called a “dyarchy” in which Dutch, Yankee, and Irish families worked together to perpetuate patrician community organization.

The effects of Albany’s political position on its built environment appeared primarily in the district around Philip Hooker’s State Capitol in present-day Capitol Park, which housed seasonal meetings of the legislature and the few state officials. Many legislators boarded at Congress Hall, a famous hostelry on the site of the present Capitol, while governors rented various houses in the neighborhood and judges and other officials bought houses on Elk Street, upper State Street and Washington Avenue. The Irish clustered in slums around the canal basin at the North End and the port at the South
End, changing the nature of these neighborhoods drastically in only a few years. Philip Hooker's Greek Revival St. Paul's Episcopal Church at South Ferry and Dellius Streets in the fashionable "Pastures" district, for example, was dedicated in 1829, and sold to a Catholic congregation only ten years later. The Catholics were keenly aware that impressive church buildings would heighten the self-respect of their people, rebuilding and enlarging St. Mary's behind City Hall, and erecting a beautiful new structure for St. Joseph's on Arbor Hill. In 1852, they dedicated the city's first important gothic monument, the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception on Madison Avenue, in a fashionable new suburb, but only a few blocks from its people in the crowded river wards.

Another source of wealth for nineteenth-century Albany patricians was the manufacture of iron, brought from the Adirondacks by the Champlain Canal, smelted and fabricated with locally produced lime and charcoal, and shipped to market over the waterways. Several ingenious Yankee families made fortunes and joined the patriciate on the basis of this industry, which spread over both sides of the Hudson from furnaces in Troy to foundries and machine shops in Albany. John and Isaiah Townsend, whose family operated an iron works in Orange County before the Revolution, became ironmasters in Albany early in the nineteenth century and lived side by side on the site of the DeWitt Clinton Hotel. They were also active in banking and insurance, and John made an advantageous marriage with a daughter of Chief Justice and Mayor Ambrose Spencer, and served as mayor himself in 1829-30 and 1832. John's son Theodore, a lawyer, and Isaiah's grandsons Franklin, Howard, and Frederick all married daughters of patrician families and lived in the same block on Elk Street, across Academy Park from their childhood home. Franklin was elected mayor in 1850, Howard became a physician but died early in his career, and Frederick, after serving in the Civil War, rose to the rank of general in the New York State National Guard.

Throughout the nineteenth century, Albany and Troy were a national center for the manufacture of cast-iron stoves, with elaborate decorations made possible by exceptionally fine molding sand secured from the banks of the Hudson River. Eliphalet Nott, during his sixty-four year tenure as president of Union College in Schenectady, invented a stove capable of burning anthracite, which his son produced at a factory in Albany where Central and Washington Avenues meet. An unanswered question is how this and a nearby Townsend iron works brought in their heavy raw materials and fuel when even passenger horse cars required four to eight horses to climb steep State Street hill. Joel Rathbone was so successful in manufacturing and selling stoves that in 1841, at thirty-five, he had accumulated a sufficient fortune to retire to his beautiful gothic revival country estate, "Kenwood", later a Catholic convent and girls' school. The Rathbones frequently intermarried with other families in the iron trade; Joel married a cousin of Mrs. Erastus Coming, and his daughter and niece married sons of Isaiah and John Townsend respectively. His nephew John F. Rathbone also went into the stove business and, in partnership with Grange Sard, manufactured the famous Rathbone-Sard "Acorn" stoves which were marketed well into the twentieth century.

The most successful of Albany's ironmasters was certainly Erastus Coming, who after beginning his career in Troy, where he married, moved to Albany and became a partner in a store which sold ironware. He soon moved into manufacturing, establishing the Albany Iron Works on the Wynantskill near Troy, which began by making nails and then branched into other lines, particularly rails for the newly introduced railroads. Later, Coming invested in iron furnaces in other states, and while in Congress during the Civil War, secured for the Albany Iron Works the contract to make the armor plates for the pioneer ironclad Monitor. He was also active in banking, being chosen first president of the Albany City Bank when it was chartered in 1834, during the first of his four terms as mayor. But his interests ranged far beyond the city, including many investments in the west, particularly Michigan, where he played a leading part in the construction of the "Soo" Canal around the rapids at the entrance to Lake Superior. He lived across State Street from St. Peter's Church, of which he was a generous supporter, and formed important alliances with patrician families through the marriages of his two sons and his wife's four nieces, who were in effect adopted daughters.

Corning's most significant accomplishment was the 1853 consolidation of several shorter railroads into the New York Central System, spanning the state and creating a $30 million corporation at a time when most enterprises were capitalized at about $5 million. His associate J. V. L. Pruyn, a patrician lawyer deeply conscious of Albany's Dutch heritage, had married Corning's niece, Harriet Turner, and was in the middle of a distinguished career in Democratic politics and civic service. Long an advocate of a new capitol reflecting the
wealth and dignity of the Empire State, he chaired the Senate committee which advertised for plans in 1863 and, as congressman, helped lay the cornerstone in 1869. But the New York Central was only the greatest of the railroads that fanned out from Albany after the successful run of the pioneer "DeWitt Clinton" on the Hudson and Mohawk line to Schenectady in 1831. Among these was the Albany and West Stockbridge (later incorporated in the Boston and Albany), in which Marcus Tullius Reynolds, a leading lawyer before the Supreme Court and Court of Appeals, was a prime mover. Reynolds' children intermarried with the Cuyler, Hun, and Van Rensselaer families, and two of his grandsons, historian Cuyler Reynolds and architect Marcus Reynolds, led early twentieth century efforts to preserve records and relics of Albany's patrician heritage.

Albany's built environment at the outbreak of the Civil War included some patrician homes downtown and others near City Hall—a few still survive in the Elk-Columbia Street National Register historic district. New homes were going up around the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, overlooking what was still beautiful Beaver Falls in present-day Lincoln Park; the home which is now the Governor's Mansion was built in 1850. The Ruttenkill ravine separating that ridge from Capitol Hill was filled in 1848, and the houses on Hudson Avenue and adjoining streets restored by the Historic Albany Foundation in the 1980s date from the years which followed. But city and country were still close, as the farmers' market was held in the middle of State Street, the citizens' hogs roamed the streets until 1853, and Elk Street patricians owned cows which pastured in Sheridan Hollow. But the more magnificent, more historically conscious Albany of the later nineteenth century was heralded by the new French Gothic St. Peter's Church designed by Richard Upjohn, which replaced Philip Hooker's modest edifice in 1859. The newest patricians wanted their city's architecture to display its newly-won wealth—though unexpected local and national financial crises caught some of them so short that local wags dubbed St. Peter's "The Church of the Holy Bankrupts."

While these bustling newcomers developed various ways of making fortunes, some older patricians carried the tradition one step further by retiring from commerce and devoting themselves to the professions. In the state capital law and government were particularly attractive, and Harmanus Bleecker, descended from a fur-trading patrician family, was a distinguished lawyer and statesman, many of whose students in turn became ornament of the bar. Several descendants of Revolutionary heroes, including General Solomon van Rensselaer and four grandsons of General Peter Gansevoort, continued family tradition by pursuing careers as officers in the army or navy. Some went into medicine, notably Dr. Thomas Hun, his two sons and his grandson, all of whom were distinguished practitioners and leaders on the faculty of the Albany Medical College. Patricians generally supported education on all levels, founding academies, endowing colleges, establishing schools of law and medicine, and encouraging such scientific research as the electrical investigations of Joseph Henry and astronomical discoveries at the Dudley Observatory. And, two of America's greatest authors, Herman Melville and Henry James, were grandsons of Albany patrician families who spent part of their youth in the city and depicted the patrician tradition in some of their works.

By the mid-nineteenth century, Albany patricians were beginning to become conscious of their city's antiquity, its important place in the history of the state and the nation, and its unique Dutch heritage. The Dutch patricians already had a vigorous St. Nicholas Society when Harmanus Bleecker's long and successful career in law and Democratic politics was crowned by his appointment as chargé d'affaires to the Netherlands by President van Buren in 1839. In this position he reestablished contact with the Dutch patricians—one of whom he married and brought home to Albany—and encouraged his secretary, John Romeyn Brodhead, to collect source materials for New York colonial history from the Netherlands archives. These documents, translated by Edmund B. O'Callaghan, were published by the state about the same time that Joel Munsell, a Yankee editor with deep antiquarian interests, was bringing out his Annals and Collections illustrating Albany's local history. These books told Albanians about the colorful characters who had lived in such landmarks as the old Schuyler house on the southeast corner of State and Pearl Streets, built in 1667, which stood until 1887. Patricians such as Peter Gansevoort and J. V. L. Pruyn made systematic efforts to investigate their family genealogy, maintain traditions such as Dutch Christmas customs, and pass on relics, records, and traditional folktales to their children.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the Albany patricians, old and new, developed a taste for foreign travel on business or public service, in search of adventure, as
missionaries, for health, pleasure, or the education of their children. Some went to sea for their livelihood, like Herman Melville, who spent several years as a common sailor, while others engaged in commerce in Europe, or in more distant countries such as Peru and China. Patrician political leaders received diplomatic appointments from various parties: the Democrats commissioned Harmanus Bleecker to the Hague, the Whigs sent Daniel D. Barnard to Berlin, and the Republicans appointed Robert C. Pruyn the first U.S. Minister to Japan. General Solomon van Rensselaer's son, who went to Columbia in 1827 as a diplomatic attaché, became involved in a revolution and, with the rest of the American legation, was expelled from the country. His sister, Catherine van Rensselaer Bonney, married a missionary and went with him to China, returning there alone after his death to continue their work until she too was expelled, along with other foreign missionaries, during the Tai-Ping Rebellion. J. V. L. Pruyn took his ailing first wife to Europe repeatedly in the 1850's, and when Peter Gansevoort and his family toured the continent in 1860, they met twenty other Albanians spending the winter in Rome.

The limits of this paper permit only this brief sketch of the transformation of the Albany patricians, which raises far more questions than it answers and emphasizes the urgent need for further research. The only book covering the entire period in any detail is Cuyler Reynolds' *Albany Chronicles*, which is often inaccurate, and now seventy-five years out of date. In addition to existing lives of Erastus Corning and Harmanus Bleecker, there is great need for a biography of J. V. L. Pruyn, a study of the later Van Rensselaer family; and histories of the iron and lumber industries and the city's built environment. There are many important subjects beyond the scope of this article—local political organizations and controversies, banking, insurance, and the Port of Albany, the contributions of churches, social and fraternal organizations and educational and cultural institutions, and life among the Irish and other ethnic groups, especially black. There have been a few specialized studies in these areas, but by and large the spadework, requiring many different hands and points of view, for a comprehensive history of nineteenth century Albany remains to be done. Anyone interested in these subjects, or in a position to suggest research topics to others, should be aware of the rich bodies of information awaiting investigation in local repositories.

What, then, is the significance of the transformation of the Albany patricians between the Revolution and the Civil War? The most obvious, and perhaps the most fundamental answer, is that they continued to exist in a period when the American nation in general replaced government by the few with government by the many. Continuing families maintaining wealth and power over several generations are rare in American history, and communities governed by coherent groups of such families, and choosing to continue to be so governed, are rarer still. That a city like Albany, growing so rapidly in population and changing so much in function, could retain its patrician social structure and adapt it to changing needs and circumstances is a remarkable phenomenon. It is a tribute to the versatility, adaptability, and vision, as well as to the practical common sense, of the Albany patricians, that they were able to maintain their local identity while rising to state and regional responsibilities. Like the patricians of the Netherlands, they directed the orderly growth of their community in the best interests of all its citizens, and so created a unique continuity between Albany's historic heritage and its present position.
A Note On Sources


Very little work has been done on the origin and development of Albany's Democratic organization. Studies of Martin van Buren and other Albany Regency leaders concentrate on their contributions to state and national politics, and hardly mention city affairs. Sherry Penney, *Patrician in Politics: Daniel Dewey Barnard of New York* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1974) presents a self-made Yankee patrician who was more conscious of having attained elite status than most Albany patricians allowed themselves to be, and therefore eventually lost touch with the people and with political realities. William E. Rowley, "The Irish Aristocrat in Albany, 1798–1878", *New York History*, 1971, describes the development of an Irish family system analogous to the Dutch-Yankee patrician social order, and introduces the term "dyarchy" to denote the symbiotic political relationship between them.