

356 Years of Formal Education in New York City: The Origins of the First Dutch School in New Amsterdam in the Year 1628

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We at the Collegiate School in New York City have long sought the school's origins in the early years of the settlement of New Amsterdam by the Dutch. We have been aided in our research by the pre-eminent cultural institutions that fall under the aegis of the New York State Board of Regents which is celebrating its bicentennial this year [1984]. Our research would have been difficult without the support and publications of staff and scholars at the New York Historical Society, the New York Public Library, Columbia University, New York University and Cornell University and, not the least, the New York State Library. Early on in our endeavors about six years ago, we received encouragement and a thoughtful reply to our inquiry for research guidance from Charles Gehring of the New Netherland Project of the New York State Library. It is a pleasure to express our appreciation and admiration to the many institutions and scholars who helped us along the way.

Having expressed appreciation for research support, we at Collegiate School may have given promise of scholarly results greater than we can produce. If there is any agreement among scholars of the pre-1640 history of New Amsterdam, it is how difficult it is to ascertain the facts. The reasons are clear. First, both in Holland and in New Amsterdam builders favored wood in the construction of churches, houses and public buildings. Fires eventually took their toll of many letters, diaries and documents which could have revealed details about life in those times. In what seems to be a further response to some mystical command of silence, the Dutch West India Company in 1821 disposed of the bulk of its records prior to 1636; and for many years the custodians of relevant documents in this country put little effort to their care.

Second, unlike the Massachusetts Bay colony, New Amsterdam did not at first attract university graduates. The Puritan leaders were educated men who left England in protest against the English establishment. In contrast, the early settlers who came to New Amsterdam were a

rougher sort, sent by the Dutch West India Company to exploit the natural resources of the adjoining areas. The Puritan leaders concentrated on creating institutions on these shores to sustain an ongoing civilization—and proudly left written records of their endeavors. With one exception the early Dutch had neither the background nor the motivation to leave traces for posterity about ventures in education. The one exception was the first, and for some years the only Dutch university graduate to arrive in New Amsterdam. His name is Reverend Jonas Michaelius, the first Minister of the Dutch Reformed Church in New Amsterdam from 1628 to 1632. More of the Reverend later.

But, even if there were records from early New Amsterdam of the kind that exist for the Massachusetts Bay Colony, there would still be controversy about the starting date of the first educational initiative in New Amsterdam. Samuel Eliot Morison in his magnificent book, *The Founding of Harvard College*, describes in detail how the date of the founding of Harvard College was not agreed upon until late in its existence.¹ Professor Morison and other scholars have pointed out that prior to the 18th century it is difficult to pinpoint an exact date for the founding of an educational institution. The Universities of Oxford and Cambridge and many on the continent were not created in one stroke by religious, governmental or private initiative but, rather, to use Professor Lawrence Cremin's apt phrase, "were not so much founded as they founded themselves."² They evolved slowly out of humble beginnings until they were transformed into the institutions we recognize as the framework for what exists today. To say that they were founded in a particular year reflects not so much the precise act of founding in the modern sense, but rather an agreement that this was the earliest date the origins of the institution can be discerned. Thus, the good news we are presenting in this paper is that scholars can have a more fruitful discussion about the dating of New York's oldest educational institution if the focus is on origins rather than on a founding date.

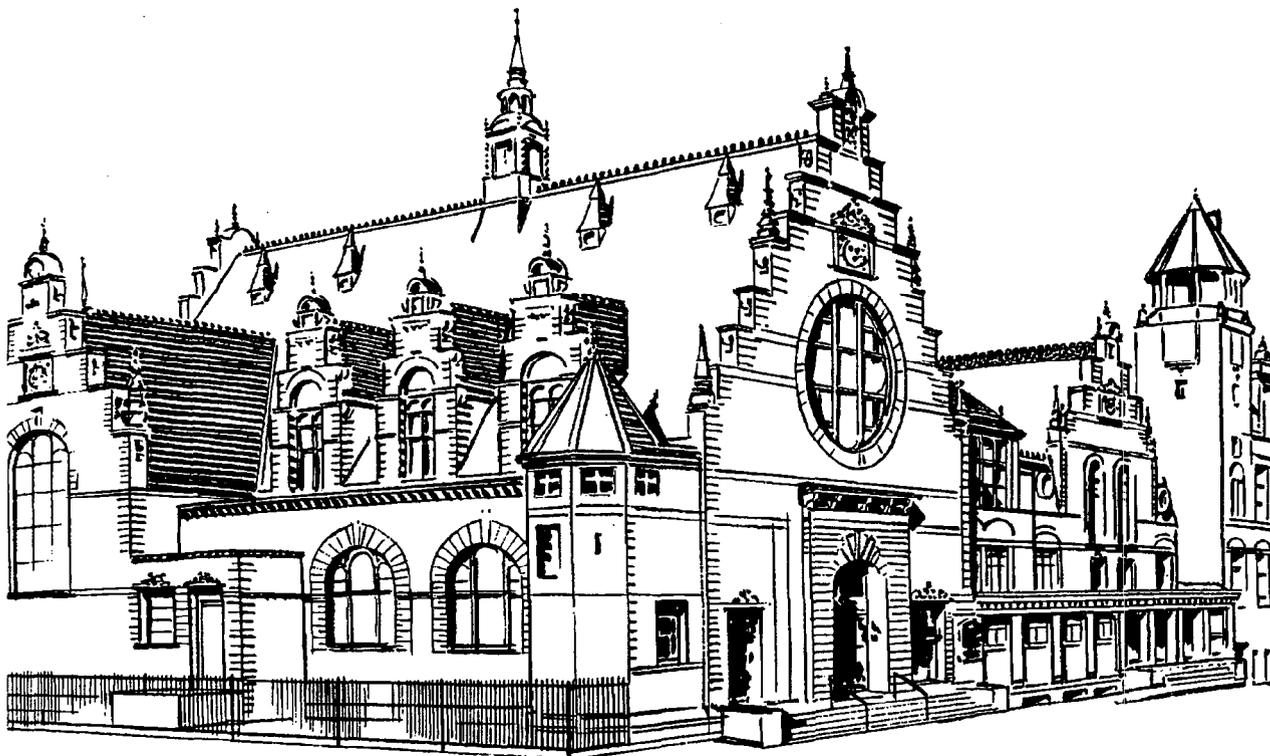


Fig. 32. West End Collegiate Church & Collegiate School.
Copy of the *Vleeshal* in Haarlem, built 1600. Courtesy of Collegiate School.

Having introduced the problem, we can now proceed to the facts. There exists between Broadway and West End Avenue, 77th and 78th Street, on the Island of Manhattan a school for about 550 boys from first grade through the senior year. It is our contention that the origins of this school, the Collegiate School, go back not to 1633 nor 1638, as previously maintained, but to 1628, when the Dutch West India Company sent Reverend Jonas Michaelius to New Amsterdam.

The Collegiate School's history and progress paralleled the development of New York City from its Dutch origins to the present. The first quarters of the School were in lower Manhattan. As New York City expanded to the north, the School moved its quarters near the Battery to sixteen different locations successively. In 1892, it finally settled on its present site next to the West End Collegiate Church. Until 1940, Collegiate School was, in one form or another, part of the Dutch Reformed Protestant Church. Incorporated in 1940 as a non-profit organization under the Education Act of the State of New York, it is now governed independently by a twenty-five member Board of Trustees. While Collegiate School has for many years welcomed students regardless of religion,

it continues to value its historic association with the Dutch Reformed Church.

I became acquainted with Collegiate School in 1976 when my son, Robert, entered first grade. If this personal note seems irrelevant in a scholarly presentation, kindly keep in mind that since I had a role in causing the School to shift originating dates from 1638 to 1628, my participation in the process becomes a fact of history itself. A description of how an originating date is selected is surely the stuff of history even if there is controversy about the accuracy of that date!

Each morning upon arrival at the School, my son and I would go through the red doors between Broadway and West End Avenue on 77th Street. There, just beyond the entrance, is a handsome marble plaque affixed to an interior wall. On the plaque are listed the headmasters of the School from 1633 to 1883 led by the alleged first headmaster, Adam Roelantsen 1633-39. Having long had an amateur's interest in the history of New York, I could not understand why if Roelantsen started the School in 1633, the current seal of the School had the year 1638.

It did not take long to ascertain the basis for the discrepancy. It arose out of a conflict between two groups of scholars, one associated with former headmaster, Henry W. Dunshee, and the other by William Heard Kilpatrick, late professor at Teachers College of Columbia University. Each agreed that there was evidence of some kind of education in New Amsterdam early on, but both, in a desire to pinpoint an exact date for the founding of what is now Collegiate School assembled arguments, Dunshee for 1633 and Kilpatrick for 1638. Dunshee's date of 1633 had been accepted by the school until 1965 when Kilpatrick's date of 1638 replaced it.

From my readings of the controversy, I favored Dunshee's case and went to the current Headmaster of Collegiate, Dr. Richard F. Barter, to argue for that side. Dr. Barter, as it turned out, had long been interested in re-opening the controversy to permit further research. He left no stone unturned in an attempt to locate additional support for the Dunshee position. Over the next seven years, School representatives wrote to and conferred with leading scholars both here and abroad. Dr. David Mallison, then of Collegiate's faculty, travelled to the Netherlands in search of additional materials. Many books and documents were re-read for possible clues.

The end result of our endeavors is set forth in a resolution paper read to the Collegiate School Board of Trustees on April 18, 1984, and in a scholarly paper prepared by Dr. Massimo Maglione of Collegiate's Faculty attached to the resolution and following this paper. Like a good detective story, it turned out that both Dunshee and Kilpatrick had led us astray because they had known little of the central figure, Reverend Jonas Michaelius. We presented our conclusion to the Board of Trustees as follows:

To: The Board of Trustees of Collegiate School
From: W.L. Frost, Vice-President

For the past seven years, we have studied intensively the origins of Collegiate School. The "we" includes Doctors Maglione, Clarke, Mallison and Barter of the School's faculty, and myself. We have read the original sources in translation, we have surveyed a broad scope of secondary works and commentaries and we have communicated with leading scholars in the field both in this country and in the Netherlands. Dr. Mallison visited the Netherlands in pursuit of our inquiries.

We have concluded that the origins of Collegiate School are firmly based in the arrival in New Amsterdam in 1628 of the first minister of the Dutch Reformed Protestant Church, Jonas Michaelius. The analysis that supports this conclusion is set forth in a paper

prepared by Dr. Massimo Maglione which has been distributed to Trustees at this April meeting.

Dr. Maglione adopts a methodology which differs from that applied by earlier students of the School's history. His methodology is based on the assumption that in the pre-colonial era educational institutions were not *founded* in any formal fashion. They were, to use the word Lawrence Cremin suggests for medieval universities, "not so much founded as they founded themselves." By shifting the search from the difficult task of pinpointing an exact year of founding to the more realistic analysis of origins, Dr. Maglione has set the earliest beginning of the Collegiate School in its proper setting. We have been persuaded that there are two compelling reasons to adopt 1628 as the year of Collegiate's origins. First of all, the previous dates given for the School's so-called founding—1633 by Dunshee and 1638 by Kilpatrick—rest on less than certain foundations. Both scholars agreed that the School's origins go back to 1628, if not earlier, but they could not resist the urge to locate a specific year for the School's so-called founding. In doing so, they permitted what Maglione calls "powerful inferential evidence"³ of the School's origins in 1628 to be superceded by guesses from single, somewhat unclear lines of evidence that the School had been founded in 1633 or 1638.

The second, and even more compelling reason, to adopt 1628 is philosophic, in the sense that a choice of dates is also a choice of values. We know from existing letters that Reverend Jonas Michaelius arrived on this island in 1628 to, as he wrote, "establish a form of a church."⁴ He did establish that church and by so doing, he had also to be a teacher. As Dr. Maglione notes, "literacy [for Jonas Michaelius] . . . was not a cultural option but a religious necessity."⁵ By citing 1628 as the origin of Collegiate School, we emphasize the central role of the Dutch Reformed Protestant Church in establishing the School. Such an affirmation is particularly appropriate in this, the 400th year of Michaelius' birth. Collegiate School is now independent of the Church, but it shall forever more accept its origins with pride.

We did not ask the Board of Trustees to vote formally on the 1628 date. All the votes in the world cannot alter the terms of the historical analysis nor of the philosophic alternatives. But, having assured the Board of Trustees that during the past seven years we have reviewed the issues with diligence, we requested that the Board not object to the school's use of 1628 as the date of its origins on seals, emblems, ties, literature, etc., as determined by the school's staff from time to time.

The Board resolution and this paper set the tone for Dr. Maglione's paper which follows. Dr. Maglione cites documentary and contextual evidence in support of Reverend Jonas Michaelius' role in originating the Collegiate School in 1628, and I recommend this paper as a more formal presentation of the founding controversy. Long live 1628!

Notes

¹Samuel E. Morison, *The Founding of Harvard College*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935), 168–69 note.

²Lawrence Cremin, *American Education: The Colonial Experience 1607–1783*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 197.

³Massimo Maglione, “The Evidence for the Establishment of Collegiate School in 1628” *Education in New*

Netherland and the Middle Colonies: Papers of the 7th Rensselaerswyck Seminar of the New Netherland Project eds. Charles T. Gehring and Nancy Anne McClure Zeller (Albany: New Netherland Project, 1985), 7.

⁴J. Franklin Jameson, *Narratives of New Netherland 1609–1664* (New York: Scribner’s, 1909), 124.

⁵Maglione, *ibid.*, 6.