
Three Conversations

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One day in September of 2000 I picked up the telephone and dialed a number in Albany, New York. A man answered: a deep, caramelly voice undulating over the syllables of what was clearly a well-worn greeting, “New Netherland Project.” I’m a fairly thorough note-taker, and in this case, looking back through the file I kept, I see that I even recorded how I planned to introduce myself: “I’m a journalist. I write for the *New York Times* and other publications. I’ve been interested in the Dutch roots of New York City lately. I wonder if I might talk to someone about your organization.”

At the time, I was living with my wife and our two young daughters in the East Village of Manhattan, and the nearest open space to take our older daughter to play was the churchyard of St. Mark’s in the Bowery. One day, while Anna skipped among the tombs of some of the first families of old New York, I stood in front of the plaque marking the burial place of the graveyard’s most famous inhabitant, Peter Stuyvesant. As I read the arcane details of his life recorded on the plaque (several of which I would later realize are incorrect), I felt my own ignorance of New York’s Dutch beginnings. I didn’t even know that I was living in what had once been Stuyvesant’s *boerderij*, or farm (from which “the Bowery” would derive), though I had heard of Stuyvesant and his wooden leg. I asked a few knowledgeable people where I could go for information; few had anything to tell me—even the couple of historians I spoke to professed ignorance of the topic. I surmised the reason the Dutch period was so little known was that there were few records. Still, the historical hook had set in me, and I had a mind to do some exploring. Eventually someone suggested I contact a man in Albany who was leading a project to unearth New York’s Dutch roots.

It was Charles Gehring who answered the phone. He told me that the New Netherland Project was a tiny nonprofit organization founded in 1974 to translate and publish the archives of the Dutch colony that was centered on Manhattan Island. He said that most of this archive had never seen the light of day. He told me that this colony had given birth to New York City and much else. These archives, he said, consisted of 12,000 pages of wills, letters and court cases; that they comprised intricate, and sometimes intimate, details in the life of a nearly forgotten society.

I was bewildered by numbers; I asked him to repeat. “I have been working for twenty-six years now,” he said. “I’m about halfway through the archives.”

I wanted to know more, and as it happened I had called at an opportune moment. Gehring told me he hosted an annual seminar on the topic of New Netherland, and that it was to be held the following week in Albany. He suggested I drive up for it. The following weekend I sat in on every talk on offer, and in between I interviewed the attendees. There were maybe 120 people: historians, archaeologists, genealogists, teachers. New Netherland had ended its life three and a half centuries earlier, but here it was still alive. People were researching “Dutch foodways” in the Hudson Valley in the seventeenth century, the place of women in the Dutch colony, the application of Dutch law in New Netherland. The focus was intense, yet it was all a bit confusing. People made casual references—“Van Tienhoven,” “the South River”—that assumed familiarity. I felt I’d walked into the middle of a conversation that had been going on for years.

The next week, I phoned Charly Gehring again (we were now on a first name basis). I needed some context. Looking over my notes of that conversation, however, I see that I began on the opposite tack, asking about the particularities of his work, and especially about the archives that he was in the process of translating and publishing. Exactly where and what were these materials? “The records were kept in the office of the provincial secretary, above the main gate of the fort,” he told me. This would have been the fort at the southern tip of Manhattan, on the site of what is now the Old Customs House. “They were kept in bound ledger books, labeled *a* through *z*, then *aa* through *pp*. Each letter code indicates either a certain type of record or a series—that was the way the Dutch organized them. The records tell you on almost a day-by-day basis how the Dutch administered the province. They show aspects of how they administered government, the relations with the natives, with the English neighbors. New Netherland was later dismissed as an aberration, but the records show that something was developing there. People were transmitting their culture from the Old World to the New. There was a blending of cultures.”

This was what I wanted to hear more about: this mostly forgotten colony, it seemed, had *mattered* in some way. What the conference speakers were talking around—taking for granted, perhaps, as people who spend their lives in a subject are likely to do—was something whose outlines seemed so vast that I was a bit nervous stating it. “Tell me,” I said, “about the treatment of New Netherland in American history.” This colony developed alongside the Pilgrim settlement to the north and Jamestown to the south. Why was it overlooked?

“There’s a simple reason for that,” Gehring said. “The English won. To the victors go the textbooks. What you find in reference books is that the contributions of the Dutch are minimized. Meanwhile, over the years the Pilgrim story developed into a nice myth that everyone could feel good about.”

And what exactly was the overlooked significance of the Dutch colony? Gehring talked a bit about it then, and later I was to explore it for myself. The

Dutch Republic of the seventeenth century was the melting pot of Europe: people who were fleeing oppression or war or seeking freedom to publish made their way to its relatively liberal cities. As a result, the populations of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Utrecht, and The Hague had unusually high concentrations of minorities. Diversity was almost universally frowned on as a weakness at the time; it was generally held that in order for a society to be strong it had to be unified, which meant, above all else, being comprised of a single religious bloc. The Dutch being an eminently practical people, they made a virtue of their diversity. They gave birth to the notion of “tolerance.” This Dutch tolerance was not anything like what today would be called “celebrating diversity.” It was a far more limited notion—something more like “putting up with” people of different religions and ethnicities. In the scheme of things, however, it was a step forward—a major step in the development of modern society, which includes as hallmarks individual freedom and tolerance of differences.

When the Dutch Republic founded a colony in the New World, then, it took on many of the features of the multiethnic society of the home country. The colony of New Netherland had a mixed population from the start: Dutch, English, German, Swedish, and Norwegian settlers figured in its narrative, as well as Africans, Jews, and American Indians. It was America’s first melting pot. You might say its capital, New Amsterdam, was New York City right from the beginning. But New Netherland gave birth to more than New York City. Eventually, of course, the English took control of the colony, but its character by and large remained, and over time its influence extended. As Europeans emigrated to America in great numbers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many came first to New York, and the mixed society they found there—turbulent, vital, fecund—they took to be a hallmark of “America.” As they migrated further west—Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and beyond—they brought this notion with them. So it was that the legacy of the Dutch colony became magnified; its impact would grow.

All of this, Charly Gehring told me in our second phone conversation, was to be found there in the records. “New Netherland was an inconvenient problem for historians, but the records show that something was taking root here before the English arrived,” he said. “And this persisted for generations, and became part of what we call American culture.”

I wanted to know more about the documents themselves. Why were they forgotten? How had they survived? In 1664 the English took over the colony, and they were very matter-of-fact about maintaining its archives. “What happens is the English provincial secretary takes over the quarters of the Dutch provincial secretary, over the gate, and the English secretary just begins to add to them, with one administration blending into another,” Gehring said. “So you get a very continuous series of books. The first major disruption occurs in 1688. James, the Duke of Albany, becomes king of England, and he decides to reorganize the colonies under the ‘dominion of New England.’ This makes Boston the capital, and in order to supply records for the new administration, they take all the records to Boston. A lot of records were lost during that transfer—maybe they fell off a

wagon. Then the dominion fails during the Glorious Revolution, when William and Mary come to the throne, and all the records are brought back to New York again. More are lost: entire books.”

The papers were housed once again in the fort at the tip of Manhattan. In 1741, during one of the most infamous episodes in early American history—the so-called slave revolt on Manhattan (it’s unclear exactly what ignited the chaos, but it was blamed on rebellious slaves)—someone set fire to the main gate of the fort. People rushed to the secretary’s office and began tossing documents out the window, down onto the street. “There was a heavy wind that day,” Gehring told me. “Papers were seen flying off up the street. So you had more records lost.”

The records even played a part in the American Revolution. With fire and mayhem in the streets of Manhattan, New York’s British governor, William Tryon, had the archives of the colony—including those documenting its Dutch beginnings—brought with him onto a ship in the harbor, where he spent much of the war. “They were there for a number of years,” Gehring said. “It was damp in the hold—a very unaccommodating environment for paper. So there is more damage, this time from mold and rot.”

Eventually the papers were brought to New York’s capital, Albany. “By this time their value is considered negligible, because they are in a poor state, not to mention the fact that they are in Dutch, so nobody can read them.” A Dutchman named Francis Adrian van der Kemp was asked to translate them. Despite failing eyesight, he did a rapid-fire longhand translation, glossing over what he thought unimportant or scurrilous, focusing on political material and ignoring social and personal matters, summarizing without annotation. His work was never published, but it was catalogued under the title “Albany Records,” and historians relied on it in creating some of the first histories of New York.

Another attempt at translating and making available records from the New Netherland period began in the 1840s. The state of New York sent an agent named John Romeyn Brodhead on a mission to European archives in search of materials related to the founding of the state. Brodhead returned with thousands of pages of material, and in 1849 Edmund B. O’Callaghan, who had taught himself Dutch, set to work on it. O’Callaghan eventually produced a four-volume work entitled *Documentary History of the State of New York*. O’Callaghan and another translator, Berthold Fernow, then produced a fourteen-volume work of material on the state’s early period, entitled *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York*.

In 1881, meanwhile, the Dutch colonial records themselves were moved to the New York State Library in Albany. In the early twentieth century another translator set to work on them. This time, the man—A. J. F. van Laer—was thorough, painstaking, and highly skilled. He translated four volumes of material, but then in 1911 a fire broke out in the library—one of the major losses to American historical records, in which two million volumes would be destroyed. Most of the Dutch records, however, survived. “Ironically, they survived because

of their lowly status,” Gehring told me. “They were kept on the lower shelves, because nobody used them. So when the shelves collapsed the English records came down on top of them, and they protected them.” Only one volume of Dutch records was lost, because it was on Van Laer’s desk at the time the fire broke out.

The fire seems to have unsettled Van Laer. “After the fire, he came close to a nervous breakdown,” Gehring said. “He gave up on the translation work.” Meanwhile, the earlier, rushed, handwritten translation burned up. The Dutch records themselves survived, but, once again, were forgotten.

The practice of history changed dramatically in the 1970s. Before, history meant political history: the affairs of presidents and kings and armies. In the 1970s a gap was discovered: the rest of humanity. Slaves, carpenters, children, women: the new thinking was that the lives of ordinary people affected the course of events and were as worthy of historical interest as the deeds of the mighty. At the same time, Americans became interested in looking at their own history more broadly. Before, Americans had been proud to see their beginnings as English. For all its pride in its immigrant society, America had had Anglocentrism at its heart. This was expressed most pointedly in the reverence for the Puritans of New England as the progenitors of the American saga. The Puritans had traveled from England bringing with them their conviction that they were God’s chosen people. As they began to succeed in their new home, they declared it the Promised Land. Over time, this came to be applied to the continent. As America spread westward and encountered native peoples with prior claims to the land, they clung to the Puritan conviction that it was theirs by sacred trust. In the nineteenth century this was given the name Manifest Destiny. One might argue that the concept continued to apply throughout the twentieth century as the United States spread its might around the globe. After World War I President Woodrow Wilson gave frank expression to the belief, declaring that America had “seen visions that other nations have not seen” and become “the light of the world.”

By the 1970s—after Vietnam and Watergate, after the Civil Rights movement, after a revolution of thinking in history departments—many were ready to think about the country’s origins in a new way. African American history became a burning topic. The contributions of Hispanics to the country were of interest. People wanted to correct the record. One offshoot of this interest in the role of minorities in American history was felt in Albany when a movement was begun to understand the Dutch roots of New York and other parts of the East Coast. A first step in this direction was to pick up where A. J. F. van Laer had left off. A small pool of money was made available, and a translator found to begin work anew on the archives of the colony of New Netherland. “I had recently gotten my PhD in Germanic linguistics, with an emphasis in seventeenth-century Dutch,” Gehring told me. He seemed the right man for the job. He was hired for what was to be a one-year assignment. The year of the Hudson celebration—2009, the four hundredth anniversary of Henry Hudson’s voyage—will also mark Gehring’s thirty-fifth year as translator of the archives.

By the end of my second phone conversation with Charly Gehring, I had an idea about writing something on the topic of New Netherland. I had had a vague thought to write a magazine article about this search for the Dutch layer of New York history. I emailed an editor at *The New Yorker* with whom I'd worked. He suggested I write a "Talk of the Town" piece about Gehring and his work: something very short and pithy about the man and his solitary historical enterprise. I thought it over and couldn't imagine how to do it. The scope was too big. What I was considering, what Gehring and his colleagues had been telling me, not only encompassed the beginnings of New York—what made it so big, so fecund and vibrant, so impossibly rich—but was also a key to understanding American history, America's uniqueness. This, I began to feel, was a secret to appreciating the mad, staggering, contradictory, flawed genius of America.

My notes from those weeks tell me that I contacted and interviewed several historians: Martha Shattuck about Dutch legal systems in New Netherland, Cynthia Van Zandt about the Indians of the Delaware River Valley, and Firth Haring Fabend about the Reformed Dutch Church in New Netherland and in early New York and New Jersey. And I was reading others. One note runs as follows: "Reading O'Callaghan, Gehring, Van Laer, Huntington volume, Van der Donck, Huizinga, Goodfriend, Geyl, Ritchie, John Murrin, *de Halve Maen* and Bonomi; studying Dutch; planning trip: Bangs, others: Jaap Jacobs." I was deep into it now, immersing myself, committing myself. The subject had tentacles; it reached forward in time; it wove itself into the fabric of American history in a way that I had never imagined when I stood with my daughter in the churchyard where Peter Stuyvesant was buried. When I had been at the seminar in Albany, I had asked various scholars what they were working on. Their special subjects were fascinating, but I felt that there was something larger at stake. The broad story involved American beginnings, how the whole story had gotten started. It encompassed the saga of Europeans reaching the New World, encountering Natives, buying and selling slaves, exploiting and inhabiting and languishing and longing; it encompassed a dream, or a long set of dreams. It was a story that moved from Europe to Manhattan and from that fulcrum westward across the North American continent, all the way to the Pacific.

I placed a third call to Gehring. I asked about the archives again, and he began to talk about them in a way that made me want to see the actual documents. I knew by this time, near the end of 2000, that the New Netherland Project consisted of three people: Gehring, Dutch historian Janny Venema, and editor Martha Shattuck. "We work from the original documents," Gehring said. "We make a transcription, line by line, indicating what is lost, if an edge is broken, where there was fire damage. The documents were written on very high quality rag paper. The Dutch were one of the best paper producers in the seventeenth century. Because of the fire in 1911, the paper turned a brownish color, so there is now minimal contrast between the ink and paper. I've seen some examples of pages that didn't go through the fire, and they are snow white. Hillary Clinton

sponsored a program to preserve our national heritage. We applied for funding and got money to preserve the manuscripts. So, after being neglected for much of American history, they are now considered a national treasure.”

Eventually, with a bit of trepidation, I told him I was thinking about writing a book. Far from scoffing, he suggested I come to Albany for another chat. Thus it began. In the space of three phone conversations, a new path had opened up.

Soon after, I visited Gehring and Venema at their office in a corner of the State Library in Albany. I was taken, first, with the fact that while they were located on the eighth floor of the building, there was no button marked “8” in the elevator. The explanation was that the floor was off-limits to the general public, so that you had to ride to seven and then change to another elevator. I liked the symbolism: the history to which they had devoted themselves was similarly hidden from the general public. I soon discovered that over time seemingly all books and materials in the library’s vast collection that were relevant to their work—on Dutch art, seventeenth-century shipbuilding, the Anglo-Dutch wars—had migrated to one vast wall that stood opposite their offices. Janny Venema’s desk also caught my attention. The surface was a makeshift map. She was then working on her dissertation, on the city of Beverwijck, which would become Albany and which would be published as *Beverwijck: A Dutch Village on the American Frontier*. She had arranged on her work surface every house in the village and knew who lived in each and what they did.

I talked about what I proposed to do—write a book that told, in narrative form, the story of the New Netherland colony and tried to fit it into the overall story of American beginnings—and Charly Gehring said he would be happy to help. He offered me space to work. He gave me access to the files. We had already begun what would be, over the next three years, a friendship and collaboration. I was an outsider, with all the limitations of an outsider, but I hoped that position could also give me some perspective in retelling the history. I began making regular two-hour trips between my house—I was by then living in the Lower Hudson Valley—and Albany. In the morning Charly or Janny would point me in one direction or another, and I would begin reading. We would break for lunch. Then I would read all afternoon, pausing repeatedly to pose questions to my mentors.

Eventually I felt I had enough of a grasp on the subject that I wrote a book proposal. It sold at once. Bill Thomas, the editor-in-chief of Doubleday, saw in it what I had felt in those first conversations with Charly Gehring: that this was an entirely new way of understanding America’s origins. Now that I had a publisher, I devoted myself full time to the project. My circle of acquaintances expanded to include many of the historians in the field. I traveled to the Netherlands and visited Texel Island, from which most of the settlers of New Netherland set out, the American Pilgrim Museum in Leiden, and the canals of Amsterdam. I took my daughters to the West India House in Amsterdam, from which the West India Company administered its colony; there is a statue of Peter Stuyvesant in the

courtyard at its center, but my daughters were more interested in the playground at the back. I sat with Janny Venema as she pored over the original pages of the archives of the colony; she gave me a primer in how to read seventeenth-century Dutch handwriting. I attended seminars. And I read constantly. Charly and I had a lot of lunches together, in which we talked about the personality of Peter Minuit, the cultural differences between the Dutch provinces of Brabant and Friesland, currencies in use in New Amsterdam, slavery, piracy, log-cabin construction, childbirth in the era, orphanages, bricks, timber, salt, horses. Those were some of the happiest moments of my life. I felt a new world opening up inside me—or rather, I felt that my own appreciation of the world in which we live was being transformed. I had a teacher and guide, and I had a publisher who was ready and eager to promote the result.

The book I wrote, *The Island at the Center of the World*, focused on Manhattan, on the Dutch influence on its history, and in turn on its influence on American history. It became a bestseller, much to my surprise. It won awards, which surprised me even more. It sold in several countries, was adopted by schools and universities, was optioned for a feature film, and in many other ways achieved far more than I could have imagined. It has led to new avenues for me. I now live in Amsterdam, the city to which I was drawn as I began my work on the book, and I have become, in the eyes of the Dutch, something of a conduit between the two countries. The Dutch government asks me to attend meetings on relations between the Netherlands and the United States. I am now the director of the John Adams Institute, which is the American cultural center in Amsterdam. In what is almost a surreal case of things coming full circle, my office at the institute is in the West India House, the building where the colony of New Netherland began. Every day now, I park my bicycle alongside the playground where my daughters played those years ago while I marveled at the history that was laid out in stone before me and sit down to work in the same space where seventeenth-century administrators mulled over Peter Stuyvesant's letters about New World Indian skirmishes and slave transactions.

Those letters form part of the corpus of material that the New Netherland Project has devoted itself to translating and publishing. Through that organization, our understanding of our own history, our understanding of ourselves, has begun to change. History is never fixed, of course. It shifts with each generation, for each generation has its own needs, its own perspective. Once, Americans—self-conscious about their mixed society, perhaps with a bit of an inferiority complex vis-à-vis the Old Country, never mind the patriotic bravado—felt the need to extol the purity of their origins. They held up the Puritans and Pilgrims of New England as their progenitors. Times have changed. A mixed society—racially, culturally, religiously mixed—is the essence of modern society. Without being aware of it, the inhabitants of New Netherland helped to spawn something new. We are their heirs, their future. They are our fathers and mothers. I can't think of a grander achievement for a historical venture than to kindle the awareness of

such a familial connection between the present and a forgotten moment of the past. That, to my mind, is the accomplishment of the New Netherland Project. A translation and research project housed in the corner of a library may be a small and modest thing, but its influence, like that of a long-ago colony, can go on and on.